

The Dark Tale of the Invisible Woman (2)

2020-10-11 Sunday Sermon

By Major Deborah

I am Hagar, slave to Sarah. You don't have to remember my name – certainly my owners never bothered with it. But I hope you will remember my story, as there is a message of hope in it for you.

For more than 13 years, we had kept a shaky peace, Sarai and I. Do you remember Sarai, my mistress? She was the wife of Abram. For many years she suffered shame and grief because she was unable to bear him children.

The suffering was worse for her because the Lord God had promised – repeatedly – that Abram would be the father of a great nation. It was laughable!

After waiting for many years for God to fulfil this promise, Sarai decided to help God out.

She gave me to Abram as a 2nd wife, a walking womb, really, someone who would bear a child on HER behalf.

But when I became pregnant, she hated me; and she knew that I despised her. So she would find ways to hurt and shame

me – she said and did horrible things – once she even threw scalding water at my legs – she wanted to hurt ME, but not the child I carried.

It got so bad that I ran away into the wilderness. I don't know what I was thinking – away from the safety of Abram's tents I could expect to meet with wild animals, wild weather and even wild Bedouins.

Yet, there in the wilderness, where I was, Abram's God came to me – to ME – a lowly slave, a foreigner, a woman, a runaway.

I had found a spring of water and was resting, trying to get my bearings, when the Angel of the Lord Himself found me and spoke to me.

He promised that I would have many descendants – just as He had promised Abram, and he told me that the son I carried would be like a wild donkey, strong and free.

“You are El Roi, the God who sees me!” I said.

And then God sent me back to Sarai, back to my place as a slave, back to submit to whatever cruelty came my way.

So I went, and when Abram was 86 years of age, our son was born. Abram called him Ishmael, the name that El Roi had told me was to be his name.

He's a marvelous boy. Strong and loud and free. His laugh is magical, and reflects his magnificent deep spirit. He is his father's son, and mine.

Every night, I teach him of Abraham's God, Yahweh, that same God who found me – SAW me – when I was so alone. El Roi – the God who sees me. I teach my boy about this God.

“To whom do we cry, Ishmael?”

“El Roi.”

“Yes, my son. And will He hear our cry?”

“Yes.”

“Do you know what your name means, Ishmael?” “Yes, mama. It means ‘God hears’.”

And so, we kept a shaky peace in the tents of Abram.

Abram and Sarai knew that God had appeared to me, and they knew of His promises about Ishmael. So we lived. It was more or less peaceful between all of us, and everyone doted on my Ishmael. How I loved the sound of his laughter!

When Ishmael was about 13 years old, the Lord Yahweh appeared again to Abraham – he and his wife had been given new names – Sarai is now Sarah.

At this meeting, the Lord renewed the covenant between them. As part of the covenant, A and all of the men of his entourage, Ishmael included, were circumcised.

(It seemed to me kind of dangerous to do it all at once – what if the Abram's settlement was attacked by a band of Bedouins while every single male was weak and hurting?)

Then mysterious visitors came, and **again** promised Abraham and Sarah a son – and this time, they had to laugh, half-sad and half-hysterical – they were both so OLD!

And yet – and yet – Sarah DID get pregnant! It was beyond amazing for us all. About a year later, when Abraham was 100 years old, God finally fulfilled the promise of a son for him and Sarah.

So Isaac is born and there is great joy everywhere... but Ishmael and I wonder what this means for US.

Even with the passage of time, Sarah's hate still stings. The scars run deep. But I'm only a slave.

Abraham, now that he has Isaac, ignores Ishmael and me completely. They've got those new names now, Abraham and Sarah, and they have Isaac, but they are still the same Abram and Sarai. And I am still nothing.

On the day Isaac is weaned, they have a great feast in his honour. He is almost 4 years old; my Ishmael is 17, a fine, tall young man.

I don't know exactly what he was laughing at – it was a party – everyone was SUPPOSED to be happy – but Sarah saw him and thought he was persecuting her little angel, Isaac.

“Get rid of that slave woman and her son” – see? I told you they never remembered my name!

“Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that slave woman's son will NEVER share in the inheritance with MY son, Isaac.”

The icy fist of fear formed in my stomach again – just as it had long ago when I was first carrying Ishmael.

Abraham was upset – he did care for his son Ishmael – but God intervened.

Again, El Roi, the God who sees me, had words of hope for me and my son. "I will make the son of your slave into a nation also, because he is your offspring."

God's Big Plan was all about Isaac and it would be better for everyone if our part of the family – the unofficial part of the family! – left. And so we were sent off.

This was less terrifying for me than you might have thought. I was not a young, pregnant slave girl this time.

This time I had a young man with me, who would look out for me, and this time I wasn't running away, I was being sent away.

We hoped to find a place to settle; we were determined to make a life for ourselves.

Early the next morning Abraham himself gave me bread and water (it doesn't sound like much, I know, but the bread consisted of more than a single loaf –

it was plenty of food to get us where we were going; and the water was enough, too, as long as we didn't get lost.)

It hurts, though, to be treated like a nobody – slave that I am – and my son, once the hope and pride of Abraham, is being sent away like a criminal.

I fight the tears.

“To whom do we cry?”

“El Roi.”

“And will He hear us?”

“Yes.”

I hoist the supplies on to my shoulder – what?! – you thought the strong young MAN would carry water?! Not in OUR part of the world!

Then we wander off into the desert of Beersheba, hoping to find the settlement to which Abraham has sent us for now. But we miss the landmark.

“To whom do we cry?”

“El Roi.”

“And will He hear us?”

“Yes.”

We walk for two days. The water is gone, so is the bread. There is no water, no food, no hope.

I cry out to El Roi from deep down where no sound can escape. There is no response. There are no clouds. The sky wears a vacant apathetic look. The heavens are silent.

I had offered Ishmael the last of the water, but he said he wasn't thirsty and insisted I have those few drops.

Now, he is dry-mouthed and dizzy. He doesn't walk straight, and when he speaks, he sounds bewildered.

Ishmael faints several times; he's dehydrated—he'll not last another night. I can't understand why Yahweh would promise me a child only to make me watch him suffer and die.

I lay him under a scraggly shrub and walk away in the white-hot sun...I can't watch him die, but oh, dear God, I can't leave him. Maybe we'll both die tonight. Together, and alone.

"El Roi, do you SEE me? Do You see US?"

I cannot watch him die... I begin to sob. And I drop to the ground, weeping.

"To whom do we cry, mother?" Is it Ishmael's voice I hear, or a dream?

“El Roi, my son.”

“And will He hear us?” [pause]

“I don’t know...”

Suddenly, I am not alone! The angel of God speaks to me! I hear again that voice from Heaven.

“What is the matter Hagar? (He knows my name! He always calls me by my name!) “Do not be afraid.”

God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. “Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation.”

God heard my son crying – I didn’t hear, I was too far away, and crying too loudly myself – right there where he was lying. As he lies THERE. Where he is.

As he lies there...where he is. I look and see the well, not far from where Ishmael is lying. How had I missed it?

Believe me, I run with all my strength to bring him water. A long, cool drink and the sparkle comes back to his eyes.

“To whom do we cry, Ishmael?”

“El Roi, mother.”

“And will He hear us?”

His fierce eyes answer even before his lips can form the words, "Yes, mother. Yahweh hears us wherever we are."

God was with my boy as he grew up. We lived in the desert. He became an archer and I found a wife for him in Egypt, where I was born.

So this is the Dark Tale of the Invisible Woman. Though Abraham and Sarah didn't 'see' her, God El Roi DOES.

Today, God, the God who sees you and me, El Roi, sees you WHERE YOU ARE – in your loneliness, pain, grief.

And besides us, He sees, and His heart breaks for, the thousands of children and women and men who are trafficked every day.

He sees thousands of forced labourers in China, assembling our computers and cell phones.

He sees hundreds of thousands of little girls mining mica in India. According to the International Labor Organization, mining is one of the worst forms of child labor. Yet, children in Jharkhand, India are forced to work in mines every day. Mica is a highly sought after mineral, commonly used in cosmetics, hair

care, construction, roofing, hardware, home appliances, arts and crafts, aerospace, automotive and oil.

Yet merely \$50 provides a year of education and ensures children are sitting inside classrooms instead of working in mines.

The American Humane Association has trademarked the “No Animals Were Harmed” ® disclaimer, and yet, no such tagline exists for cruelty to people.

But the Lord, El Roi, SEES when people are treated cruelly; He sees the sex-slaves, the indentured labourers, and the child-workers.

Why do we care so much more about the inhumane treatment of animals than of fellow human beings?

We, the consumers, are the catalysts for change. Whatever we demand businesses will supply. So let's demand equal rights for all people, let's be exceedingly conscious consumers and let's help put an end to slave labour once and for all.

I've told you about this before, but let me remind you once again that we can buy Fair Trade coffee, tea and chocolate. You can also buy FT sugar and bananas. And there are FT clothes available downtown in Vancouver.

When we choose FT goods, it means that the workers who produce these goods get paid fairly and have decent working conditions. It means they don't have to sell their daughters as 'nannies' or 'dancers' – who end up prostituted. Parents don't have to see their little ones working in mica mines; instead they can provide for their own families, and send the kids to school.

Do you believe that companies should be socially responsible? Would you be willing to pay somewhat more for a product produced by a company committed to offering decent working conditions? Would you be willing to forsake your favorite brand in favor of a brand that actively works to address the issues of forced labor and child labor? Many people would probably instantly and spontaneously answer yes to these questions.

However, if you are among those answering yes, consider how often you in practice chose to buy a more expensive product because it is a product produced by a company committed to social responsibility? How often have you in reality chosen to buy a less familiar brand in order to support a company actively fighting the crimes of involuntary labor and under aged labor?

Ways to stop Human Trafficking include becoming wise consumers, writing letters, and keeping ourselves educated, even

though it means we are then often exposed to Dark Tales of Invisible Women and Children.

We are The Salvation Army. It's our mandate to rescue the perishing.