

Genesis 16, 1-16
„A mistress, a maid, and no mercy“
Sermon

Sisters and brothers,

A group of church women met two weeks or so ago to begin a book Bible study.

We are reading a book called “Just a sister away”, and we are exploring biblical women’s stories.

The first two women we came across on that Thursday evening were Sara and Hagar.

Sara is well known.

She is Abraham’s wife.

But who has ever heard of Hagar?

So for today I have chosen this hardly known story from the Old Testament. I would like to remind you of a very special figure who appears throughout the stories concerning Sara and Abram.

Hagar.

And I would like to try to show, how we today can be sisters and brothers of Hagar and of each other.

When I first came across Hagar’s story of exploitation and discrimination, I wished that it was not printed in my Bible. But even if it could not be read there, it is a story we can read in the eyes of so many people who throughout history have suffered from ethnic differences, unjust political systems, misuse of power, poverty, oppression, and dependence.

The biblical story opens with the spotlight on Abram’s wife Sara who cannot have a child.

One verse with which Sara’s honor rises and falls: as the wife of Abram, who is a socially prominent and successful herdsman, Sara was a wealthy woman, a Hebrew mistress with good social and economic standing...

But: in the culture in which Sara lived, a woman’s fertility was her destiny. Despite her marriage to Abraham and all social and economic privileges, Sara – having no children – was a woman to be scorned.

As is the case with most wealthy women, Sara possessed a maid. Hagar – the Egyptian slave woman who attended to the personal and domestic needs of her Hebrew mistress.

Sara was old and had no hope of ever conceiving a child.

Hagar was young and fertile – and poor. In fact, she was worse than poor: she was a slave: powerless, - a possession...

Sara, the barren but wealthy mistress, suggested to her husband Abram to go and try to have a child with her maid.

It would be Sara's child, because Hagar was Sara's property: and what belonged to Hagar actually belonged to Sara.

Sara had social standing, but she had no respect. She had material abundance, but she was not comforted. She was beautiful but childless...

That which Sara longed for most, her husband's money could not buy her. Only her slave's womb could give it to her.

What the Lord had kept from Sara, Sara tried to obtain through her slave. The slave Hagar was never asked her opinion...

Through her slave Sara sought esteem and honor for herself.

But instead of esteem Sara received contempt. Instead of respect Sara was ridiculed – by her maid.

Whether Hagar's contempt for Sara was real or imagined on Sara's part, I can only guess. But one thing is certain: Hagar's elevation as Abram's pregnant concubine showed Sara's downfall as the wife who could bear him no children.

The status of the pregnant slave woman in the house of her mistress and master changed. The defenceless slave turned into a protected wife.

And perhaps the pregnancy awakened something in the slave woman: something like a sense of self-worth, a sense of purpose and direction.

Whatever...

Hagar was able to give the old man Abram something his wife Sara could not. And so Hagar changed in Sara's eyes. And her attitude toward herself changed: the child growing inside her was proof that she was more than a slave – she was a woman.

Enraged, Sara renounced her part in the whole humiliating affair and blamed Abram.

He, in turn, renounced his authority, role and interest in the situation and gave Hagar back into the hands of Sara...

It is terrible to read and imagine what happened, when the Bible simply reports: „**Sara dealt harshly with her...**“ (v 6)

Exactly the same word and phrase is used in the Old Testament, when many years later, the people of Israel are oppressed by their Egyptian masters.

Humiliated and fearing for herself and her child's life Hagar ran away. (v 6)

The story of Hagar and Sara is about more than ethnic prejudice; it is also about economic discrimination of women and their minor status in a society of male power.

When Sara realized that her plan would not work, she tried to save face and regain her superiority over Hagar. Sara grasped desperately for the little power her husband had restored to her hands.

The oppressed possessing woman oppresses the non-possessing...
desperately hoping for a slight advantage to gain.

Instead of realizing the common suffering in two women's lives in a world dominated by men, the one with little power tries to destroy the totally powerless.

Because honestly: the only things which separated the two women were a couple of cattle and some sheepskins – which today might be a paycheck and a diploma...

That makes me ashamed and embarrassed... hesitatingly imagining what could have happened, if female solidarity had been lived and friendship dared.

Sara could have lost a slave and gained a sister...

But – back to the text:

The tragedy of it all is that this is neither Hagar's nor Sara's story. It was never meant to be.

It is Abram's story. The part concerning Hagar and Sara is only part of a larger drama about the promises of God to God's elected servant Abram. Hagar and Sara are introduced only in so far as they are necessary for the story of fulfilling God's promises to Abram.

Today we have learned to see the women...

We admire Hagar for her courage in getting out of the abusive relationship with Sara.

And we are disappointed that in the end she did not remain in freedom and out of the exploiting structures.

Maybe that happened because Hagar has not yet had enough strength to define herself.

When the angel of the Lord found Hagar at a spring in the wilderness, he asked the runaway slave:

„Hagar, maid of Sara, where have you come from; and where are you going?“ (v 8)

Hagar seems broken and empty as well – too empty to see a future...

Still she knew too well where she had come from:

„I am fleeing from my mistress...“ (v 8)

But where she was heading to unfortunately Hagar could not answer.

Although she had run away, she still understood herself to be a slave. „My mistress“, she says – and cannot describe a life of self-determination and freedom.

And then

„The angel of the Lord said to her: Return to your mistress and submit to her“.

(v 9)

I find these verses hardly bearable.

She is sent back into oppression and slavery.

What an angel is that doing such a thing?

Renita Weems, a black American, a theology professor specialized on the Old Testament, writes, what I – being a white woman living in a first world country - do hardly dare to suggest:

„A slave“, she writes, „without a mistress is first of all lost. Hagar’s body was free, but her mind remained in bonds. What Sara thought of Hagar had become what Hagar thought of herself; she was property.“

„Could it be“, Renita Weems, who knows slavery as part of her family’s history asks, „that the angel had no other choice, but to send the runaway slave back to the reality in which she had defined herself?

The Egyptian woman was part free and part slave. She had fled, showing her desire to be free, but then had to return to her mistress’s house because she continued to see herself as a slave. Therefore the angel commanded her to return to her mistress and submit to her...“

There might be much truth about it.

But still – I nearly freeze, when I imagine God’s angel sending a slave back into slavery... the God of love and liberation commanding submission and captivity?

¹⁰ The angel of the LORD also said to her, “I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude.” ¹¹ And the angel of the LORD said to her,

**“Now you have conceived and shall bear a son;
you shall call him Ishmael,**

...

¹³ So she named the LORD who spoke to her, “You are El-roi”; for she said, “Have I really seen God and remained alive after seeing him?” ¹⁴ Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; it lies between Kadesh and Bered.

¹⁵ Hagar bore Abram a son; and Abram named his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. ¹⁶ Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.

Hagar's blessing was within reach but still beyond the possibilities of her reality.

The only comforting thing is, that Hagar is promised a future and freedom and a great people for her son.

She learns the name of her child, and she realizes that she has a special relationship with her God. She gives God a name. She is the first person in the Bible to name God, believe it or not. For a moment Hagar is a woman talking theology... Isn't that a divine moment in a life of frustration and exploitation...

Then Hagar returns, and it is not her but Abram who is to give the child his name.

Here the Hagar of the Bible disappears and turns up again for the last time five chapters later.

In Genesis 21 Hagar had given birth to Abram's slave child.

Sara, meanwhile, had conceived and given birth to Isaac. This time, threatened by the relationship developing between the two boys and fearful about her son's inheritance, Sara convinced her husband to evict the slave woman and her son.

Before Hagar had left voluntarily...

This time she was banished by her own son's father.

How cruel can one be?

Once more Hagar found herself in the wilderness alone – only this time with a hungry, crying child to care for. But they were free...

God found her where she was and opened her eyes.

But back to Sara:

Why had Sara not said one word?

It could have changed everything in Hagar's life...

Why had Abram not realized that his responsibility to the mother of his child went beyond water and a few crumbs of bread which he gave them on their way?

A mistress, a maid – and no mercy...

We cannot deny the sorrow in this story, the painful lesson about how people are able to treat each other...

I suppose, the story of Hagar and Sara touches us in many different ways.

And at the same time in all our lives, whether we are black or white or privileged or not, we are at times Hagar's daughters and sons.

When our backs are up against the wall;

when we feel abandoned, abused, betrayed and banished;

when we find ourselves in need of another person's help...

somebody who could „sister“ us and not exploit us...

somebody who is willing to respect people's differences but who also loves to live in community with them all – as God's big, worldwide family.

Today we can overcome the injustice of the biblical story by sistering and brothering each other.

...by supporting each other beyond all differences.

We can overcome boundaries, as Jesus and the Samaritan women did.

We can join together.

We can make each other strong.

We can walk with each other our diverse paths of life and faith.

We can help each other to face changes and challenges.

We can experience the strength that can only be discovered in community.

We can support each other in our mutual efforts toward independence, liberation and justice...

...if only we live with each other in solidarity and not in competition.

I would so much like

to see Sara
teach Hagar
how to laugh

and Hagar
teach Sara
how to see...

maybe
they are waiting for us
to begin.

Amen.