

Naming God- Broken Covenants

Summit September 28, 2014

“It’s not fair!” Becca got to _____” . Well, yeah, Becca said, but you _____” and on and on. Finally, I pulled the car over to the side of the road and looked at my two sassy teenage daughters in the back seat. “**Life is not fair**”, I said , and, “You’ll get over it.” And they did.

We live in a world where fairness is seen as the top priority. But kids are smart and they can see this and will use it. When children think that life has to be fair, they learn to demand, to be entitled and how to sue. They may grow up and see that the rich and the wicked have more than they do and “that’s not fair”. This faulty truism- that fairness and equality is a must-will cause them to be discontent, then to doubt, and they will begin to rationalize that disobedience and unfaithfulness is OK. After all, they deserve this. Even worse than this, though, children who grow up with everything they could ever want gradually develop an inability to rejoice in the happiness of others!

The scripture for today is full of unfairness. It’s a hard story to read- here is Abraham, the founder of our faith, kicking out his first-born son, and this

wasn't in a city. There were no other tribes around. In this nomadic culture, the tribe moved from place to place and they stuck together, protecting one another. Hagar does not have a voice. She is from Egyptian descent, a refugee, a slave of the Israelite Sarah. Ethnic hatred and racism flourished then- as it sadly still does in our day. When Sarah gets the bright idea of taking this covenant thing into her own hands, Hagar has no say in the matter. And then when she does get pregnant, it is Sarah and Abraham's son, not hers. When she gets an attitude and Sarah has her sent away into the desert before Ishmael's birth, she is finally convinced to come back to the abuse only by God's messenger and a promise that her son will be the father of a great nation someday....

Years later, she and her son walk out into that desert AGAIN, deserted by the man who took her and used her as a surrogate mother. By rights, by fairness, her son, Ishmael, the oldest, should have had all of the inheritance, as was the Jewish law. By fairness, Sarah, not her, should be punished for abuse. Her little son was teasing Isaac, yes, (Galatians 4: 29), but for Sarah to insist on both of them being banished just because of a childhood spat. And to be sentenced to death in a desert – to watch her son about the age of

Coby die from thirst right in front of her---what kind of God was this? It was with this in her head that she lifted her head?

This seems so unfair, and it was!

As I read this story in the original Hebrew translation, it reads that it is the voice of Ishmael that God hears crying, not Hagar's. But he also hears her wails and he calls her by name. She is Not a voiceless slave with no rights to God. He knows her and he is about to open her eyes to something that was there all along. She just did not see it- an underground well that provides water to revive her son. And by the way, Hagar refers to her son as her child, since in the Hebrew culture, even teenagers were still considered children. Isaac, whose weaning party caused the whole banishment in the first place, was probably between two and three, since boys were nursed for a long time in this ancient nomadic culture.

So there she was, an arrow's length away from the child, who she lays underneath a bush, crying from thirst. And God hears. A messenger tells her to look for water right in front of her, something she didn't earlier see. And what does God do? He makes a new covenant with her! In a time when the harsh reality of no longer having Abraham to protect her and having her son

die in front of her, God hears her cries. He knows her name. And he helps her to survive in a desert she would not have chosen. God does not just look on Hagar, God SEES her. Seeing matters.

God knew Hagar and had called out to HER when she was sent into the desert the first time, pregnant with Abraham's child and banished by her jealous mistress, Sarah. After hearing from God to go back to this terrible situation, she does exactly that, enabled by God. Upon receiving a covenant promise from the God (only woman in the Bible to receive a promise from God of descendants.), she then names God- El- Roi: "El" meaning God and Roi meaning "who sees". I find this remarkable that this slave girl has the courage and confidence to talk back to God and to even name him, this in a culture who still to this day does not like to say the word "YAHWEH" and who for generations spelled it without any of the vowels present because it was supposed to be unprounceable!

What can we learn from this troubling story of Hagar and Ishmael? For me, it is this: God blesses, not **because** of broken covenants, but **in spite of** them. God uses everything, even our deserts and our wildernesses to bring good. Abraham, often touted as the founder of our Christian faith, was a

very imperfect man. And yet, God used him in mighty ways and in Hebrews he is referred to in the Hall of Faith. And life was not altogether fair for Abraham either. He died not seeing his descendants become as numerous as the sand on the shore. And yet he had faith that God would keep his covenant. Sarah, too, was far from perfect. Blessed with great beauty, she probably suffered from low self-esteem in a culture where a woman was worth her womb, where power was with the patriarchal husband.

In this fallen world, sometimes promises and covenants are broken. As followers of Christ, perhaps the hardest thing to endure sometimes is a broken relationship. The pain of having to figure out life in a new way, an unexpected way makes us cry out in agony, in misery, but...we get over it. And if we trust God and don't allow our hearts to grow hard with bitterness, we are given a new vision, much like Hagar was. We see how life can be full and happy in new ways, that an alternate reality brings when God is in the picture.

We begin to live the four principles of living, as oft recited in the Rossiter household:

1. Life is not fair. (If you expect fairness, you will be sorely disappointed)

2. Most of your problem-not all- are your own fault.
3. Change your life. This is the hardest. We all get into patterns of living that are hard to get out of. And
4. Enjoy it. Life is short.

Father Thomas Keating, a wonderful modern-day Christian leader, said,

“God will bring people and events into our lives, and whatever we may think about them, they are designed for the evolution of His life in us.”

Often, in our distracted world, it is in our wildernesses that God can find us, where God can get our attention! Hagar is changed-transformed by her encounter with God *in the desert*. When has *your* life been altered by a God-encounter? Or, do you get stuck.... casting people out, like Sarah? Who have we driven out? Have *you* found the Divine Presence in the wilderness of life? How have you named God as a result? “God SEES me! I SAW God and lived!” was Hagar’s response. Before Hagar is given a new vision, she names her wilderness by crying out. Have you named your wilderness? Have you cried from the bottom of your heart to Yahweh? (And always remember that in times when it hurts too much to even pray or to read the Bible, that this community will hold you in your wilderness until you find the underground spring, until you find your way out.

My personal Hagar moment came in Liberia in the middle of the night, under a mosquito net in a dream- a euphoric moment with the presence of God and recognizing it as God-changed the course of my life. After my dream of preaching to many people in a joy that is indescribable, I woke up, instantly alert, asking “What WAS THAT ?” I crawled out from under that mosquito net, ran to the kitchen, grabbing my Bible on the way. God was still present and so I questioned Him: What just happened? What does this dream mean?” I opened my Bible to Luke 1, the birth of Christ, and I suddenly realized that I was being called by God to share the Gospel, to be a speaker for the Kingdom! Even though I shall never forget that moment in 2006, it took six more years for my transformation and new course to be completed. The transformation came by increments, it was not a “Saul conversion.” And I have named my God תִּקְוָה – Tikvah (Teek-VAH), HOPE.

How grateful I am that God hears my cries when I cannot see the way ahead, when I have made a drastic mistake, when there seems no way out. Only God can bring clarity and hope to messiness. Only God can take a traumatic situation and bring good out of it, but that requires the willing heart of the person involved. He can work with us when we cry out to him. Our heart

cries *are heard and heeded* by our loving Savior God. “How Great Thou art!”