

An Encounter with God in the Desert
Sermon for the 3rd Sunday of Easter (Misericordias Domini)
Sermon Text: Genesis 16:1-16



Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar. ²And Sarai said to Abram, "Behold now, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children. Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her." And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. ³So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her servant, and gave her to Abram her husband as a wife. ⁴And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. ⁵And Sarai said to Abram, "May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my servant to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the LORD judge between you and me!" ⁶But Abram said to Sarai, "Behold, your servant is in your power; do to her as you please." Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her. ⁷The angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. ⁸And he said, "Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?" She said, "I am fleeing from my mistress Sarai." ⁹The angel of the LORD said to her, "Return to your mistress and submit to her." ¹⁰The angel of the LORD also said to her, "I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude." ¹¹And the angel of the LORD said to her, "Behold, you are pregnant and shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael, because the LORD has listened to your affliction. ¹²He shall be a wild donkey of a man, his hand against everyone and everyone's hand against him, and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen." ¹³So she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, "You are a God of seeing," for she said, "Truly here I have seen Him who looks after me." ¹⁴Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; it lies between Kadesh and Bered. ¹⁵And Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram called the name of his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. ¹⁶Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram.

To begin with, the story of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar stands in stark contrast to every idea we have of how a Christian marriage should be. To better understand the story, we need to pause for a moment. Abraham and Sarah had received a promise from God that they would have a child. But God's plan doesn't match up with their ideas. The years go by and both Abraham and Sarah get older, perhaps we should say they get even older because they were already old at the time the promise was first made. At some point, Sarah resorted to an emergency solution, a Plan B so to speak, to help God's plan along a little. Sarah had a slave named Hagar. In those days, slaves were possessions and therefore, Hagar was without rights. She had no right to refuse what her masters asked of her, nor did she have any right to her own son, whom she would bear. Hagar's son would naturally be the property of Abraham and Sarah. He was simply an emergency solution and Hagar was the instrument to fulfill this plan. No one asked Hagar her opinion or about the emotions she had about her mistress' Plan B. One day, the slave Hagar received the order that "as of now, you are the concubine of your mistress' husband." At first, Sarah's emergency solution seemed to work out because Hagar became pregnant. Yet as you can see, the complicated blended family wasn't without relationship problems. A conflict arose between Sarah and Hagar. Like many conflicts, this conflict between Sarah and Hagar was also about power. Sarah, as mistress, had the rod of power and authority in her hand. But because Hagar was young, healthy, and also pregnant, this power structure in the family was turned upside down. Suddenly, the slave Hagar had something that old Sarah didn't have. And she made it known by acting accordingly towards Sarah. The end of the story is that the emergency solution of Abraham and Sarah became a real emergency because Hagar fled into the desert under life-threatening conditions while Sarah and Abraham continued to remain childless. The emergency solution did not work out.

Even though this story from the Old Testament may appear strange to us, it is nevertheless familiar because plays for power shape our interpersonal relationships even today. Especially in the tightest family circles, conflicts often are rooted in unresolved power relationships. Ultimately, we all strive for more influence and a better position in society, especially when it comes to uninhibited manipulation, exploitation, or oppression of others; the fear of losing power and influence is often somewhere in the background. Of course, there are many that fall by the wayside along this path.

There is also the horrible possibility that we could fall to the bottom from the very top. At the very top of the ladder, we find people who admire, praise, and approve of us. At the bottom of the ladder, the opposite is true. If a person needs help or is generally dependent on others, it disgusts us. We think it embarrassing or are afraid of being infected by the failure of others. That's why we generally avoid such people who are failures or in need. And yet these times in which we fail or are helpless also are a part of life. Every one of us has his or her own experiences like Hagar in the desert. We all know the feeling of being abandoned and misunderstood by others. We then feel that we have no prospects and no hope for the future. Whether we want it or not, at some point we find ourselves in such helpless situations. One sign of this is that we then remain alone. Sometimes we would prefer to hide our failures from others in such situations. And so we carry our "desert feelings" around with us for years. Everything appears to be fine from the outside, but on the inside, everything is desolate and empty.

The wonderful thing about today's Bible story is that God doesn't leave us alone. Despite Abraham and Sarah's terrible family dynamic, God was never far away. Abraham and Sarah had thought of an emergency solution to get what they thought was their right. Yet their emergency solution was not a solution but only plunged their family into even deeper need. But God was and is right there where the need is the greatest. God appeared in the desert where the need was greatest, exactly where Hagar waited without hope for death. This fact, that she experienced God so close to her in her deepest need, changed her life. From then on, she would say: "*You are a God of seeing!*" When Hagar realized that God saw her in her distress, she didn't think that He saw her from a distance with indifference, but that God looked upon her with His great kindness, love, and mercy. At the same time, His gaze also brought help and salvation. That's why she called the place where she met God, the well of 'Him who looks after me.'

The story of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar shows us a family in crisis in which each person thought only of their own interests and wanted to get their own way. Among us and in our own life stories, there are enough examples of how we ruin our lives through such power struggles. "Man is a wolf to man" wrote the Roman poet Plautus, 250 years before Christ. If I use my common sense, I immediately realize that we humans need a God who sees us with His helping, saving gaze.

If God is one who sees us, then that means that He wants to be right where these hurts are. That was and is a characteristic of our Lord Jesus, namely that He has mercy on the weak and oppressed. That's why Jesus is our Good Shepherd. That's why Jesus literally announces it to all of our hurts: "I am the Good Shepherd!" This call of our Lord Jesus is timely and necessary. We don't need an emergency solution or a Plan B, but someone who not only sees us in our need and helps us through it. We really need Jesus! We need a shepherd who doesn't want to abuse or manipulate us for his own purposes, but one to whom we can trust our desert feelings and needs. When Jesus Christ says: "I am the Good Shepherd," He's the only one who can truly say this. Because He made us, He knows exactly what we need the most. He knows us like nobody else knows us, He sees us like nobody else sees us. He is not only familiar with our personal fate, but also knows the depth of our sins. The wonderful thing is that He doesn't just know us from the fortress of His eternal majesty and just wants to touch us with gloves on from afar. No, He also wants to be very close to us, to be where we are abandoned. It's important to Him to be close to us, especially where we are most in need. Therefore, where Jesus meets us is not neutral territory. It is a war zone. It is the place where Satan is on the prowl, and it is a place of desert wasteland and where death and hopelessness are at home. It is hostile territory. And that's why we know that the price for our Lord Jesus to meet us there in the desert was high. Jesus had to meet us in the depths. That's exactly why He had to pour out His life for us. And now, Jesus wants nothing more than that we know Him as our Good Shepherd in our desert trials. That's why He loudly and clearly proclaims to all of us: "I am the Good Shepherd. I know My own and My own know Me." (John 10:14) With prayer and tears, we want nothing and no one else but this Lord Jesus. Amen.