

Open Your Eyes

I mentioned just before I read the text from the Hebrew Scriptures that I prefer that nomenclature rather than the more traditional one of “The Old Testament”. There are some who have made this change due to what is commonly called political correctness. But I think there is a more important reason to consider this change. It is one that does not relate to anything but our own understanding of the character of the God we worship. For much of my life I just made the assumption that we used the term “Old” to refer to that particular portion of God’s self-revelation because it came first, was older so to speak. But we don’t refer to it as the First Testament. Instead, when referring to the two portions of what is really a continuous story, a consistent narrative about the Triune God, we use “Old” and “New”. If we used “First” and “Second”, it would be equally true, but we as Christians would be uncomfortable with that because it would seem to make the revelation received through Jesus not as important. That’s also why using the term “old” is not really a good choice. It has led some to declare that that portion of God’s interaction with humanity is not only less important but has been replaced by the revelation through Jesus. Words matter so much for what nuances they carry that we often don’t even consider. My point with this is not about shifting the balance between what God reveals to us by making one portion more important than the other, but to emphasize what some tend to ignore...it is the same God present in both narratives. It is the same Creator who redeems and sustains this world. What the Scriptures in their entirety reveal is God loves and desires covenant relationship with us whether the revelation occurred before or after Jesus came to dwell among us. The theme which I wish to lift from this text is grace—God’s grace. This text comes from Genesis—very firmly at the beginning of the story. It contains a message which speaks about grace and God’s eternal faithfulness to the promises made to us; even when we doubt and fail to trust in those promises. At first that seems unlikely as this is not a pretty narrative. It certainly doesn’t portray the foundational ancestors Abraham and Sarah in a favorable light. Jill Duffield, editor of the Outlook Presbyterian Magazine stated that she does not like any of the texts the lectionary presents to us for this Sunday. In the Genesis reading Sarah appears petty and jealous and cruel. Abraham comes across as unwilling to stand up for the vulnerable. Despite the fact that God tells Abraham to listen to Sarah it does not present this pillar of the tradition, this man revered for his righteousness in a favorable light. Then what do we make of God’s approval of that request made by Sarah in this narrative. Telling Abraham to listen to Sarah’s request and sending Hagar and Ishmael out of the camp into the wilderness does not inspire a desire to praise and worship the God who endorses this. This reading overflows with character traits one would not want to encourage anyone to emulate—especially not a follower of Jesus and his teaching. A discussion of this text which includes the entire Hagar narrative is found in a book titled “Texts of Terror”.¹ This discussion begins with Sarah’s initiation of the relationship between Abraham and her Egyptian slave. It begins with Sarah and Abraham doubts. Sarah desired a child, and thought that if Hagar conceived the child would be hers—instead Hagar although she had no choice in the matter upon conceiving she began to feel superior to Sarah who could not conceive. Abraham made no objections to this

¹ Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror. Hagar: the Desolation of Rejection*, pg 9-35; Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1984.

proposal to obtain an heir of his own as by this time he has voiced doubts about God's fulfilling of the promise that he would have heirs. Even before this passage, after the conception but before the birth of Hagar's child, these esteemed figures have acted in ways that are actually very typically of us—Sarah is jealous and mistreats her servant, Abraham gives her permission to do this and Hagar runs away into the wilderness. There she encounters an angel of the Lord who tells her to return to the camp and submit to Sarah. Genesis 16: 10-11 "The angel of the Lord also said to her 'I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude.' And the angel of the Lord said to her, 'Now you have conceived and shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael, for the Lord has given heed to your affliction.'" The biblical record seems to indicate that Abraham is 86 when Ishmael is born. After his birth, God again promises Abraham that Sarah will be the one to bear him the child of the covenant in Chapter 18. Abraham is 99 at this point and Sarah laughs at this statement. Again time has passed between that passage and today's reading. Sarah herself has conceived and borne a son, the one promised by God for them through the covenant. You would think that after all this time Sarah would be overjoyed that she is no longer childless. She has the healthy child that she has been told will be Abraham's heir and the beginning of the great nation which is to come from Abraham. Yet in this passage, when she sees her son, Isaac, with Hagar's son...she is not at all happy. Instead, she seems jealous and unwilling to trust that it will be as God promised...Isaac will be the heir. Sarah again goes to Abraham with this demand: "Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac." Sarah disassociates herself from them, even though she initiated the action which led to Ishmael's birth; even though Ishmael too is Abraham's son. John Calvin states that we find in scripture two types of knowledge: Knowledge about God. Knowledge about ourselves. So far in this narrative we have seen ample examples which illustrate knowledge about us—the patterns of human behavior that are all too familiar. Patterns of doubt, of jealousy, of trying to take control instead of trusting. Today's passage tells us the even though Sarah has seen proof of God's faithfulness to her and Abraham, she still does not trust in God's promises. If we focus on what the scripture is telling us about us—then it is a difficult text—because it illustrates clearly our flawed human behaviors; our sinfulness; our lack of trust. There is a curriculum designed mainly for children called "Godly Play." It takes a story from scripture and relates it using pieces representing the various elements of the story. At the end of the story, the storyteller asks what are called "I wonder" questions about the events narrated. This text seems to me to call for some "I wonder" questions. For example, "Why is this story found in our scripture at all?" After all, the promise was to Abraham. God told the couple that Sarah was to be the mother of the promised heir. That promise was fulfilled. Why did the story of Hagar get included? Why were stories showing the models of faith in such an unfavorable light preserved? Our translation tells us that Ismael was playing with Isaac, but a closer translation would be that he was mocking Isaac. Is the translator trying to polish the image this story presents of Sarah? At this point, the narrator does not name Hagar or the child—they become the slave woman and the boy. Is this a way to make them less important? They are no longer spoken of as individuals. I believe that the answer to the question of inclusion of this text is what is narrated next. It is in what now happens that we see what the biblical narrative in this text tells us about God. Although Abraham is "distressed" about Sarah's demand about Ismael, he is told by God that a nation will be made of him also. So in verse 14 Abraham gets up early,

takes some bread and a skin of water, gives it to Hagar and sends her and Ismael away. Hagar departs and wanders about in the wilderness called Beer-sheba. She wanders around until the water in the skin is gone. “When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, ‘Do not let me look upon the death of the child.’ And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept.” When Hagar stops and distances herself from her son so she will not have to hear his cries, we are told that the Lord hears. She has wandered around in the wilderness until the water she brought with her is gone. But we have been told that this is a specific place in the wilderness—it has a name: Beer-sheba. In Hebrew, this name designates it as the place of seven wells. Hagar is so wrapped up in her own grief, hopelessness and despair that she does not see the well that is there with the water she needs. Verse 19: “Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink.” The well with water is there—just waiting for Hagar to see it. In a text which follows this one, Abraham is told to take Isaac and sacrifice him. When they are walking toward the designated area, Isaac asks why they have wood and a knife but no animal. Abraham replies that God will provide the lamb. And just as Abraham is told not to sacrifice Isaac after all, he suddenly sees a ram caught in the thicket which is then sacrificed on the altar he has built. After the crucifixion, some of Jesus’ followers are walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus. A stranger joins them and talks with them on the journey, but not until they stop to eat and the bread is broken, do they recognize the risen Lord. We go through life surrounded by God’s grace. We are flawed and disobedient in many ways, just like the figures in the Biblical narrative. But from Genesis throughout Hebrew Scriptures, through the Gospel narratives and the Epistles until the final chapter of Revelation, the message has been about God’s steadfast love and eternal and abundant grace. The Psalms sing of it. In truth, the message, the revelation is not about us. What Scripture reveals is no matter how broken, how disobedient, how sin filled we are, God’s love and forgiveness is there for us. The message is that despite our flaws, God’s love and grace are present with us. Many times our eyes are closed. We become immersed in despair, in grief, in the simple or hectic business of daily life and fail to note the grace provided in our lives. We are being showered by God’s grace. We just look around, open our eyes and recognize it. Thanks be to God for God’s abundant grace. Amen.