Text: Genesis 16.1-14

The complex and very human interactions between Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar make for an uncomfortable story. All of the characters appear so unattractive that we wonder—not for the last time!—whether God really knew what he was doing when he chose this family through which to do his mysterious work in the world. Hagar, proud and sassy; Sarah, jealous and cruel; Abraham, pliant and cowardly—none of them in this story inspire much confidence.

We probably feel least sympathetic toward Hagar, no doubt because we know how the story turns out, and perhaps because we read back into it the conflicts between Isaac and Ishmael that continue to this day. Then there's the difficulty with St. Paul's allegorizing Hagar and Sarah, and painting Hagar with rather unflattering meaning. Even Chris Browne's comic strip "Hagar the Horrible" sets us up to think poorly of Sarah's servant girl.

But Luther suggests that, despite Paul's treatment of Hagar, she "should be counted among the saintly women." What is it about Hagar that could possibly be seen as saintly? I'll suggest three things—one I

want to develop in some detail, the other two simply to sketch very briefly.

First, then, Hagar is a saintly woman because she learns the virtue of submission. "Return to your mistress, and submit to her." Now that raises all kinds of red flags for us, doesn't it? "Submission" is such an unpopular concept in our culture, and it carries a heavy aroma of gender inequality, or perhaps, if we think more broadly, of Islamic fundamentalism. Yet it is a word and a concept that we cannot easily escape. The word itself isn't that common in Scripture, but the concept is, and when it appears it generally leaves little room for compromise: Psalm 81, "Israel would not submit to me, so I gave them over to their stubborn hearts." Romans 8, "The mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God's law." James 4, "Submit yourselves therefore to God."

Now as long as we talk rather abstractly about submitting to God, we feel OK about this. It's even a good Lutheran concept: "My conscience is captive to the Word of God." But here, in Genesis 16, in the first appearance of the word in scripture, the advice to Hagar is,

"Submit yourself to your mistress." And that's the rub, isn't it? Submitting to God is a grand thing! It is something we're eager to do, something that makes perfect sense to us. Submitting to another person, and especially to one who has mistreated us, is a different kettle of fish.

The reality, though, is that submission to God often gets worked out in the context of much more mundane submissions. "Submit to your mistress," the angel says. "Slaves, be obedient to your masters," Paul echoes—and, of course, "Wives, be subject to your husbands"; and then, "Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ." "Obey your leaders and submit to them." Submitting to God very often means submitting to other people, and this is what causes us to chafe and resist. Hagar is being advised to go back to an unfair, uncomfortable, unfulfilling situation and to submit. We hear it, and we almost want to shout out to her, "No, run! Run! Don't go back there!"

But the truth is that submitting to her mistress is submitting to God. The Reformers saw this clearly. Luther puts it in the context of vocation. God has called Hagar to her situation. She is an Egyptian maid, and her calling is to serve her mistress. The vocation is from God;

resisting it is resisting God. Calvin comes to the same conclusion, but from a different direction. For him, as always, it is a question of providence. Hagar's plight, he says, is God's doing. She is called "to acknowledge the providence of God," to recognize that human affairs "are under divine government."

So perhaps with the Reformers we could see submission from a different perspective. Submission means accepting joyfully and gratefully the loving and gracious direction of God. It means abandoning the tendency of our sinful natures to exhibit a "wild and intractable temper" (Calvin's words about Hagar!) and bringing our impulses, our desires, our wants, our perceived needs, under the taming hand of God. Submission is to pray, "Not my will, but thine be done," and to mean it; and to pray, further, that God's good and gracious will might be done also in me. That, of course, is the prayer of the saints. That submission—to her mistress, yes, but in fact to God—that submission is what defines Hagar as a saintly woman.

There are two others things which I will sketch briefly. Hagar is a saintly woman because she hears the promise. "Submission" is a harsh

proposal to her, but it is followed immediately by a much more gracious word: “Now you have conceived and shall bear a son . . .” “This is an extraordinary promise,” Luther marvels. “By it the terrified Hagar is again encouraged. For these are the divine successions: comfort follows affliction, hope follows despair, and life follows death.” By hearing and believing this comforting promise, Hagar’s submission takes on a whole new quality for her. She experiences it differently. It is, Luther suggests, the experience of law and gospel: submission is a word of law, “horns from the face of Moses”—yet also a ray of unbearable light which is about to reveal the gospel, the promise. Submission looks dreary and punishing; but in fact that is only the surface. Behind it is the glorious grace of God. Hagar hears this; all the saints hear it, as well.

And then, as if that weren’t enough, there is a third thing. Hagar is given this wonderful insight: “So she named the Lord who spoke to her, ‘You are El-roi,’” the God who sees. Heretofore God has been hidden from Hagar; if she has thought of him at all, she has no doubt dismissed him as the God of her mistress and master, uninterested in her and predisposed against her. But now that is changed. Now *she* sees that *God*

sees—which is to say, really, that she sees God. “Hagar,” says Calvin, “who before had appeared to herself to be carried away by chance, through the desert; now perceives and acknowledges that human affairs are under divine government. And whoever is persuaded that he is looked upon by God, must of necessity walk as in God’s sight.” Luther, even more strikingly: “ ‘Ah,’ says Hagar, ‘I did not think that God was concerned about me, and I assumed that I was seeing God from behind . . . that is, I assumed that God had turned away from me. But now I realize that the back which He showed me is His face. . . I know that He loves me and that He cares for me.’” And those words, says blessed Martin, are “the universal hymn of all the godly.” Hagar, yes, is a saintly woman.

Let me share a personal sense of this. The last couple of years, I’ve been experiencing some vocational angst—not angst about my ordination, but about my current call. I’ve been there twenty years, and sometimes it feels like a lifetime. I’ve got a PhD in hand, and really would like to teach. For many months I had the unmistakable

impression: God is preparing me for something new. But none of the interesting possibilities of "new" came to fruition.

And then last summer it became apparent that a change had to be made with regard to the living situation of my wife's parents. It didn't take too much analysis to realize that the best choice was for them to move to our community. Knowing my restlessness, they were a little uneasy about that. But it became clear to me: this is what God intends for me right now: to stay put, and to help them face the changes that come when you're in your mid-80's. It's not what I dreamed about, or hoped for, or anticipated, or thought I wanted. But it is what God intends. God has given me the opportunity and the blessing to live out the 4th commandment—an opportunity I didn't really have in the same sense with my own parents. God is good.

What I discover is that in submitting to the needs of my family; in accepting that this is, at this moment, part of my vocation; in acknowledging that even my paltry earthly affairs are "under God's government"; in this there is great peace and joy. Submitting becomes the opening for hearing the promise of God in a new and vibrant way,

and it allows one to acknowledge the God who sees, which is indeed to see God's face.

Of course submitting to the needs of one's family is not much of a stretch; it isn't always easy to do it, but we generally know it's the right thing. What makes Hagar saintly is her willingness to submit even to injustice. She had every right to run away, every right to be angry, every right to regard her mistress and master with disdain. Granted, her own contempt for Sarah is what led to her downfall; still, who can defend Sarah's treatment of her maid? Hagar should not have to submit to such injustice!

And yet submitting to injustice is precisely the way of the cross. We call "Lord" the one who was oppressed and afflicted, yet who opened not his mouth. We worship one who spoke those uncomfortable words about turning the other cheek, and going the second mile. We moderns are more enthusiastic about prophets who demand justice and righteousness, and of course they, too, are part of the story.—but only part of it. We are grateful for Amos and his witness, but he is not the incarnate God. The incarnate God is the one who suffers injustice,

submits to the cruelty and contempt of the world, and accepts death on a cross. Oh, and he's also the one who says, "Come, follow me."

It can be writ larger, of course, this submitting. As we struggle with that manifestation of the church which is a very human and fallible institution, we are often tempted to flee to the desert. I confess that there's some tendency toward that in my signing the Rule of the Society, and probably in yours, too. But it seems to me that the Rule rightly understood is less an act of fleeing to the desert than an act of returning and submitting. It is, that is to say, a movement of obedience—not to some abstract and individualized view of God, but to the very concrete situation to which God calls us. It is submitting to discipline; it is submitting to one another; it is submitting to the church as we experience it—the church which, for all its faults and weaknesses, its disunity and flirtations with heresy, is nonetheless the Body of Christ. Perhaps it is not unlike Hagar submitting to Sarah—and, we must presume, to Abraham—two very human people who didn't always act wisely or justly or humbly, but who still, with all their faults, embodied the promise of God.

And so if we would learn from Hagar, the saintly woman, we must understand that sometimes we are called by God to difficult situations. We are called to submit to unreasonable people. We are called to submit to distasteful circumstances. We are called, yes, to submit to injustice against ourselves. This may not be forever, of course. Hagar will indeed one day leave the house of Abraham, and leave it under the guiding hand of God. But not now; not yet. For now, this moment, she—and we—are called to submit—and invited to see, in all of this, the face of God. We are invited to embrace a promise that lies behind what may appear to be a frowning providence. In embracing that promise—in hearing Christ's word for us—in taking up our cross and following him—we indeed pass from death to life.

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