

From Scarcity to Abundance
Genesis 21:8-21

Today our story is about Hagar, the mother of Ishmael, who was the firstborn son of Abraham. We often hear about Abraham and Sarah as our ancestors of faith. And as Christians we tend to focus on the miracle of the birth of Isaac to old parents. There is also the whole focus on the “chosen people of God” being connected to Abraham and Isaac. But today, our text helps us see another aspect of this story of faith. So, let us listen to the story as Hagar would have told it.

Hagar: “If only I could find some water! This dry desert is no place to be without water! That miserable Abraham! I can’t believe he sent me out to the desert with my son with a small supply of water. For years I served him and his family faithfully. They bought me as a slave from Egypt. They made me leave my country to serve them. They even made me carry a son for them when Sarah couldn’t have any children. But when I was no longer needed, Sarah just disposed of me! I was surprised as anyone when she managed to get pregnant at her age. It was still not too bad as long as the miracle baby was a baby, but the day the boy was weaned, the day of the feast, my Ishmael was doing nothing more than having a good time. He was laughing with pleasure at all the fun, when from nowhere Sarah exploded, telling Abraham that he must throw me and my son out into the wilderness. She saw us as some sort of a threat to the exclusive rights of her Isaac. I never said or ever implied that Isaac was not a unique child, who had the clear claim, as child of the woman of the promise, to be Abraham’s heir. But Sarah was, I guess, taking no chances. She wanted us banished from her life forever. Abraham was a rich man. I don’t understand why Sarah was so worried. There was plenty of wealth to share and I had no status and power in that family. I was just a slave. But Abraham did nothing to help. After silently hearing Sarah’s demands for our death, Abraham left us alone. I later learned that he was convinced that God had told him that somehow our Ishmael was going to be the father of a great nation. That, he felt, gave him the right to make his choice, in effect washing his hands of the whole affair! So he threw us out with some food and some water! What did we ever do to deserve such a death? A blazing sun, a dying son, and a desert grave! Ah, God! At least hide from my eyes the death of my child, and let my death be fast after his. My son, my son! Is there a way that we can possibly make it?”

Indeed Hagar does make it. God leads her to find a well of water in the desert and she and her son get to be a great nation. And today, the Muslims of the world claim Ishmael as the ancestor of their faith. So, the story is about God working to heal our world from the injustices committed out of our fear of scarcity. Sarah’s heart was gripped by her fear of scarcity. She was afraid that there would not be enough for her son, Isaac! She did not want to share the wealth. While just a few verses earlier Sarah had been the vehicle of God’s marvelous new work in the world, here she became vindictive and mean spirited, driven by her own sense of needing to protect what had been given to her as a gift. Hagar is treated by Sarah as Sarah herself was treated by Abraham in Egypt. As Sarah was oppressed herself in a society that did not value women, Sarah learned that there were only few resources to share and that life was about getting all that she could get. Her security depended on her son’s future. Abraham was a rich man who would have had enough to provide for all of his children. Yet, Ishmael would have had more power than Isaac because of being the firstborn son.

There is an interesting word play connected to the word “laughter,” which highlights the nature of this conflict. First in the story of Sarah and Abraham we hear about Sarah’s laughter

when the angels told Abraham that Sarah was going to be pregnant and Sarah laughed. Then the son that Abraham and Sarah had was named Isaac, which means “laughter” because of the joy that he brought to them. The third time the word “laughter” appears is when Ishmael was playing with Isaac. So the "laughter" of Sarah that began as doubt and disbelief had been transformed by the miracle child "Laughter" into a joyful confession of faith. Sarah saw that same laughter now as a threat as it "played" out in the interaction between the two children. What had once been a joy was now clouded by human suspicion and jealousy, transforming the innocent play/laughter of children into something sinister and threatening. It was a matter of Sarah's perception of a threat. It was Sarah's fear of not having enough to go around that caused the problem!

It is easy for us to judge Sarah and say, “How could she be so cruel?” Yet the truth is that what Sarah did is something that is very common to our human experience. Throughout history, people have fought wars over resources, and even committed crimes because of their fears or needs. And it all depends on our worldview. Two weeks ago I heard Sister Sharon Goodremote of Catholic Charities of Buffalo share about the difference between two worldviews. The first is about fear, isolation and scarcity. This is when we live in a mentality of fear: the threat of those who are different from us, the threat of terrorism, the threat of economic disaster, the threat of natural disaster, and so on. And as a result of this fear, we see ourselves as separate from others. Our isolation becomes our protection. And then competition becomes rampant. Survival of the fittest mentality becomes the driving force of our economy. The world's resources are seen as a pie and we all have to fight for the biggest slice. Today, most of our lives are lived out of this worldview of fear, isolation and scarcity. In this worldview, our minds are constantly exposed to the message of there is *'not enough'*, which is daily reinforced by mass media, advertising and political propaganda. The definition of economics *“is the study of human choice behavior and how it effects the production, distribution, and consumption of scarce resources.”* We are trained from a young age that we need to compete. And if you don't believe that there isn't enough, just look at those 1 to 2 billion people on this planet who are unfortunate enough to be forced to live on a dollar or less a day ... We can see that our fear is based on the fact that others are always competing for resources and if we don't do the same, we will be left out. A couple of years ago, I heard a Chinese environmentalist speak about her country's move towards more consumerism. For centuries, they lived in a balance between needs and harmony, but now with globalization, they seem to be forgetting about harmony. They are focusing more on consuming. The problem with this worldview is that it will never lead us to true peace and prosperity.

The alternative worldview that God offers us according to our Bible story for today and according to what Sister Sharon shared is that of a world of care, community and abundance. God does not favor one group of people over another. Even though Abraham was the father of the chosen people, God saved and redeemed Hagar, the Egyptian who was of a different faith. God sees the potential in life that all people will have enough. In God's infinite wisdom, there is more than enough in the world for all of us to meet our basic needs!

We live in a worldview that is more like Sarah's filled with fear, isolation and scarcity. But the invitation of the Spirit is for care, community and abundance. There was enough for Sarah to share, but she was so consumed by her fear. There is enough for us to share but we are afraid to do that. We have to reorient ourselves to God's abundance. Do you believe that we have enough food for the whole world to eat? Our world has enough food to feed 7 billion people, yet we only have 6 billion people on earth. Each day more than 854 million people in the world go hungry. In the United States, 11.7 million children live in households where people have to skip meals or eat less to make ends meet. That means one in ten households in the U.S. are living with

hunger or are at risk of hunger. The United Nations Development Program estimates that the basic health and nutrition needs of the world's poorest people could be met for an additional \$13 billion a year. Animal lovers in the United States and Europe spend more than that on pet food each year! What makes the difference between millions of hungry people and a world where all are fed? Only a change in priorities. Only the will to end hunger. Only the will to care and believe that our attitudes make a difference!

So the worldview we choose makes all the difference in how we act in the world. The worldview of our country makes all the difference. Stephen Covey, the author of "*The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*," wrote that "People with a scarcity mentality tend to see everything in terms of win-lose. There is only so much; and if someone else has it, that means there will be less for me. The more principle-centered we become, the more we develop an abundance mentality, the more we are genuinely happy for the successes, well-being, achievements, recognition, and good fortune of other people. We believe their success adds to...rather than detracts from...our lives."

A great example of operating from a worldview that is about care, community and abundance comes from Belo Horizonte, a city of over 2 million in southeastern Brazil, where access to adequate quantity and quality of food has become a right of citizenship. This initiative stems from a simple, yet revolutionary, idea—that hunger is not caused by scarcity. Rather, hunger is caused by a lack of access to food, usually associated with poverty. Before the program began in 1993, one-fifth of the city's youngest children suffered from malnourishment. Today, while infant mortality rates as a whole have fallen by only 7 percent in Brazil, those rates have decreased by 41 percent in Belo Horizonte. "Food is not a material commodity," argues Adriana Aranha, director of Belo Horizonte's Hunger Program. "It is as essential as the air we need to breathe. If people don't eat they don't live." Belo Horizonte's programs, which cost the city less than 1 percent of its budget, take a multi-pronged approach. By cutting out the middlemen and linking producers directly with consumers, small farmers earn higher prices while urban customers get good quality at a lower price. The city offers farmers prime retail locations at cut-rate costs, with the agreement that the produce will be sold at half the retail price. Using its power as an institutional buyer, the government purchases directly from area farmers and distributes the food offering affordable meals to more than 5,000 people a day. In addition, the program offers information to the public on nutrition and pricing. Twice a week, the city publishes the price of 45 basic food and household items available at 40 different supermarkets. "I knew we had so much hunger in the world," said Aranha. "But what is so upsetting, what I didn't know when I started this, is it's so easy. It's so easy to end it."

May the Holy Spirit always reorient our hearts and minds to live and see the world as a place of care, community and abundance.