

## **Introduction to Advent:**

On April 12, 1955, Jonas Salk announced the cure for polio. The following day, he received this letter:

Dear Dr. Salk,

Not the least among the many honors a grateful world bestows upon you are the blessings of a million mothers to whom your discovery means freedom from a most tragic fear. When I realize that my young daughter and another child as yet unborn will never suffer from polio, I am more grateful than words can express to you and to all the others who have made this possible.

Most Sincerely,  
Joanna H. Shurbet

Mothers protect us. And as Mrs. Shurbet's letter demonstrates, a mother's task is one that is not without anxiety. Mothers entrust their whole being into ensuring a bright future for their children. Their task requires love and patience, and most especially faith – faith in a God of possibilities.

It's fitting then, that the most pivotal stories of our faith all begin with mothers. Nurturing mothers ensure that Israel's leaders will grow into the potential God has for them.

It's fitting also, that Advent is a season of preparation. We're making ready for the coming of the Christ Child, for God's presence among us. In a very real sense, we are preparing a nursery for Christ, just as an expecting mother begins nesting for her newborn.

This Advent season, we invite you to join us as we share the stories of mothers who have made the coming season possible. Hagar and Sarah gave birth to Ishmael and Isaac, the fathers of our faith. Jochebed and Miriam and Pharaoh's daughter nurtured and protected Moses. Hannah gave her son Samuel back to God. And Mary and Elizabeth, raised Jesus and John, two men who would remind us that God's Kingdom had come near.

We invite you to hear the voices of our mothers. Dream with them. Hope with them. Worry with them. Pray with them. Delight with them. Experience God's presence with them. Their story is our story.

### **Hagar and Sarah, 11/29/2015**

#### **Genesis 16:1-15**

#### **Hagar's Voice**

Tillie Duncan

I wonder...Does God EVER act as expected?

Today we have the story of two women, one the wife of a rich man; the other, an Egyptian slave. It is Hagar, the slave, who is the first woman to have a theophany ; i. e. she experienced a manifestation of God. She is the first to have a birth annunciation: "You shall have a son and shall name him Ishmael." And she is the only person to name God: El-Roi, the God who sees me. In other naming stories, God names God's name. God works in unexpected ways and with unexpected people~

Let Hagar tell her story as she remembers it: Can you see her? Will you hear her?

I recollect in tranquility the events of my life which were not tranquil at all. I remember myself as a young girl with smooth olive skin and glossy black hair curling down my back. I was part of the folk who lived in Pharaoh's palace.

One day I was rounded up with several other young men and women along with numerous herds of cattle, camels, donkeys, a part of the bride-price for a woman named Sarah who had caught the eye of Pharaoh. She was said to be the sister of the wandering tribal leader Abraham. An extraordinary thing happened on the night Sarah was taken into the palace. The Pharaoh and all around him became seriously ill. Through a message from God Pharaoh learned that Sarah was wife rather than sister. Angry that lives had been put in danger from this deception, Pharaoh summoned Abraham, returned Sarah to him and told him to leave Egypt. Which he did, in haste, along with all that he had accumulated from the bride-price.

I remember being in awe of a God who would protect a mere woman. A woman who couldn't give her husband a son! So Sarah whose servant I had become gave me to Abraham to be a wife to him in hopes that I would prove to be a surrogate mother. I was a very good wife and became pregnant right away. And who was that sorry woman to still claim to be the primary wife and expect to call my child her own?! I was very proud and let her know who was the superior woman!

At her complaining, Abraham put me back in Sarah's control. She treated me so horribly that I ran away into the desert.

Confronted by God who told me that I would have a son and that my descendants would number beyond counting, I called him The God who Sees, and at God's insistence returned to the enclave of Abraham and Sarah.

My baby was born – so precious. I held him close, counted his fingers and his toes, caressed his head as I capped it with my hand. I called him Ishmael (God hears) as God had instructed.

Only a few years of contentment before Sarah herself became pregnant. Impossible I thought, but Isaac was born. What would become of my son, Abraham's first born. By all rights Ishmael should be the one to inherit.

So jealous was Sarah and so determined that Isaac would take Ishmael's place, we were sent out into the desert to die.

And we almost did! I couldn't bear to watch as my son suffered from thirst, but God heard his cries and provided water for us. We were saved from death and reminded of God's promise that Ishmael would be the progenitor of multitudes.

We finally settled in the desert of Paran, and I found a wife for Ishmael in Egypt. God's promise began to be fulfilled.

Hagar's adventure with God, the God who sees and the God who hears, would be paralleled in later accounts of the Hebrew Bible. When the Israelites were oppressed as slaves in Egypt, God saw their plight and heard their groans, and sat about rectifying their situation. Not that the

Israelites always appreciated their journey to the promised land; it was not what they had expected of a rescue.

God sees and hears us today. What we can expect from this one who sees and hears is – as always, the unexpected.

### **Sarah's Voice**

Bob Stillerman

I suppose I grew weary of systems based on one-ness. Why could there only be one? One nation that God had chosen. One leader. One wife. One mother. One son. You were either chosen or you weren't, as if God's covenant was akin to choosing players on a playground, and the leftovers discarded or ignored.

I was a grown woman, seasoned even – And my husband Abram was seventy-five. We were herders, and we were prosperous. But God spoke to my husband, and said, "Go to the land that I will show you, and I will make of you a great nation." So off we went.

We became refugees and wanderers. God sent us to more places than we could count, and still God, said, "Keep faith. I will make of you a great nation." Months turned into years and years turned into decades. It felt like God was sending us on a wild goose chase.

What kind of nation would come out of two senior citizens with no established residence, no family, no roots, no future to speak of? But as we aged, God provided. Our lands and belongings grew, and God protected us. But one thing was missing – we had no children, no offspring to create this nation God told us of.

Not only was I barren – a shame that dogged my pride throughout adulthood – but I was well-past child-bearing age. I couldn't even hang on to the hope of a child. And in my world, that was an awful feeling. My whole sense of self-worth, my whole sense of dignity was attached to one purpose: motherhood. There goes that one-ness again.

Being eighty-years old, I offered my servant Hagar to my husband as a surrogate mother. It seemed logical. But when Ishmael, her son, (HER SON!), was born, my shame increased. Hagar could do what I could not. Her presence reminded me of my inadequacy, and her son reminded me of what should have been mine. For in this world, there can only be one chosen wife, and one chosen son. And so I was mean to Hagar; I beat her, I loathed her, I resented her for having what I could not have, for doing what I could not do.

Ten years, later on my ninetieth birthday, God made me laugh. God said I would bear a son. Two-and-a-half decades of promise finally fulfilled. But the joy that my son Isaac brought me came with anxiety. For in my world, there can only be one. One chosen son, one person who receives inheritance, one person who will receive God's promised blessing. And when I looked upon Ishmael playing with my son, I thought, "There can only be one!" This child cannot take from my son, what his mother took from me!" And so I had them banished. There can only be one.

Fast forward to today. I lived a good life. I was one-hundred-twenty-seven when I died. And because I was chosen, Abraham buried me a place called Hebron. If you visit modern-day Hebron, you can find a

monument that marks this spot: It is the tomb of Israel's matriarchs and patriarchs. Over one half of it stands a mosque, on the other a synagogue. Inside of the Ibrahimi Mosque, Israeli soldiers litter Abraham's tomb with cigarette wrappers and Coca-Cola cans. On the opposing side of the tomb, Jewish men and women participate in Sabbath services. Outside the mosque, dozens of Palestinian Children beg tourists (if they are lucky enough to see any) to buy something, anything from the shops of their parents. And there are soldiers everywhere – a stern reminder of the violence that plagues the region. In 1994, a Jewish colonist carried a bomb into the mosque, killing twenty-nine worshipers. When tour groups come to this spot, someone always asks, "Why isn't Rachel buried here?" Somebody always replies, "She's buried near Bethlehem. Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Leah, and Rebekah are all here." But none of them ever has the good sense to ask about Hagar. Where is she? There is no marker, but she is here.

Hagar is among the poor and forgotten of Hebron who cry out for justice in their city. And she is among the poor and forgotten in your city, the ones who also cry out for God's justice.

I have grown weary of the system of one-ness. A system that tells me Hagar cannot be my sister, and that Isaac and Ishmael cannot be brothers. I have grown weary of systems that proclaim chosen and discarded.

And so I pray, O Come, O Come Emanuel. And when you come, bring with you a world of forgiveness, of co-existence, of enough-ness. O Come, O Come Emanuel.

**Words of Unity:**

**Hagar:** Lord, hear my prayer! Give my child a future. Give my child a world of peace.

**Sarah:** Lord, hear my prayer! Give my child a future. Give my child a world of peace.

**All:** Lord, hear our prayer! Let our children grow. Let our children live in peace. Let our children know God's love.