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A Tale of Two Mothers with Lessons for All

Genesis 21:9-10, 17-18, 20-12

I had a little fun this week going on an archeological dig searching for the earliest signs of mothering in the bible. Like the current outlook that artifacts from the dawning of our human ancestors are in the eastern Serengeti plains of the Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania, so too might we think that we could excavate some mothering examples from the Genesis story of Adam and Eve. I was surprised to find that isn't the case. While Eve is credited as the mother of us all, there isn't any record of her interactions with her children. There is no indication of whether she held wonderment at the birth of her two sons, Cain and Abel; no mention of the joys and challenges of motherhood; no description of her reaction when one son is killed and the other is banished...there is nothing at all.

It's only when we get a little further into Genesis that we find our first example of the dynamics between a parent or mother and children. On this Mother's Day or Festival of the Christian Home whether we are parents or not I think we'll find in what we think about today a lesson or two for us all.

A little background is in order. When Sarah and Abraham had trouble trying to have children Sarah suggested that her maid, a young woman named Hagar, step in as a surrogate. And so, with Abraham, Hagar had a son. Sarah became envious complaining to Abraham "she treats me like I'm nothing!" Abraham tells her it's not his problem, "your maid is your business," he says. So Sarah becomes abusive with Hagar and Hagar runs away.

It's one of those scenes of a clash between two mothers that gives both high and low ground when it comes to parenting. Sarah, upset because Hagar's son poked fun at her son, says "Get rid of that woman and her boy!" and Hagar out in the desert wilderness sobbing and saying "I can't watch my son die." Hagar, the minor player takes the high ground. Sarah, the major player takes the low. To my surprise I found myself more sympathetic toward Hagar than to one of the giants of our faith, Sarah. But what she does is so understandable and so typical of what any of us might do today. Consider this comparison.

Aicha el Wafi is the mother of Zacariae Moussaoui. During a visit to the U.S. in March to be present at her son's trial she made a special request before a return to her home in France. She wanted to meet with some of the families of the World Trade Center

victims. Arrangements were made and she came face to face with some at a United Methodist Church about 25 miles from ground zero. El Wafi apologized to them saying she lost her son to an Islamic movement just as others lose their children to drugs or a cult. One woman, Connie Taylor, who lost her 37 year old son on September 11, embraced el Wafi. Just about everyone was weeping one witness observed. Taylor said she thought el Wafi's situation was greater than her own saying, *"She's blaming her own son. That must be horrible."*¹

Compare that with Wednesday's sentencing of Daniel Biechele, the man who ignited the pyrotechnics that led to the deaths of 100 people in a catastrophic nightclub fire in 2003. He received 4 years in prison. In reaction to the verdict a news report put it this way: *"Families of some of the victims gasped and some broke into tears when the sentence was announced. One woman, Patricia Belanger, who lost her daughter, Dina, a waitress at the nightclub, shouted at Mr. Biechele's mother: 'How do you like your son now? Now you're going to feel the pain I feel!'"*²

Like Hagar and Sarah we have different levels of behavior. El Wafi, the mother of a terrorist is weepy, apologetic, and understanding but Patricia Belanger is bent on revenge and suffering. "Now you're going to feel the pain I feel." I suppose it comes down to the fact that when it comes to our children, in their triumphs and defeats our true bedrock nature is revealed. We are exposed as serpents or doves, warmongers or peacemakers, those who nurture or those who abuse. When it comes to our children preserving, protecting, defending, and grieving their well being can bring out the best or the worst in us.

One day when I was eight or nine years old I was playing a game of "catch me if you can" in the neighborhood. An older and much bigger boy riding his bike and just passing by evidently saw what we were up to and grabbed hold of me. "I'm going to hold you down till they get you," he said. Startled, I began to scream and from three houses away my mother popped her head out the back door. When she saw what was happening it was like a tornado hit the ground. She dressed that boy down so hard he never rode down our street again. From my point of view that experience brought out the best in my mother. I knew I'd always have an advocate in my corner.

For the sake of those we love we will go to the extremes and as the story of Hagar and Sarah suggest it may bring out the best or the worst in us.

Another thing that occurred to me through this story is that relationships and in particular mothering or parenting go hand in hand with worry. When you become a parent you ascend to never imagined levels of worry. Sarah worries about her son's inheritance or future. Hagar worries about her son's very survival.

She told Abraham, "Get rid of this slave woman and her son. No child of this slave is going to share inheritance with my son Isaac!"

¹¹The matter gave great pain to Abraham – after all, Ishmael was his son. ¹²But God spoke to Abraham, "Don't feel badly about the boy and your maid. Do whatever Sarah tells you. Your descendants will come through Isaac. ¹³Regarding your maid's son, be assured that I'll also develop a great nation from him – he's your son too."

¹⁴Abraham got up early the next morning, got some food together and a canteen of water for Hagar, put them on her back and sent her away with the child. She wandered off into the desert of Beersheba. ¹⁵When the water was gone, she left the child under a shrub ¹⁶and went off, fifty yards or so. She said, "I can't watch my son die." As she sat, she broke into sobs.

And we worry too over everything from choices our children make to their health, to performance, and well being. It's a constant companion with our love. As the mother of one of our servicemen stationed in Iraq said, "Worry is number one on my planning calendar each day."

But the story reminds us that along with the worry comes something else, something from God. When Hagar, distraught over her situation begins to cry, an angel of the Lord appears saying "Do not be afraid. God is with you and the boy, get up now and hold him tight. I'm going to make of him a great nation." God hears her and she is given hope in the midst of a hopeless situation. I don't want to put a "sugary God will take care of things" twist on this. Hagar gets that assurance but there are no guarantees that that will happen with us.

The lesson...the faith lesson of the story isn't found in what God does, but in what Hagar does. She prays to God and says, "You're the God who sees me!" It serves to dissipate the worry, knowing that we are all seen and held in God's hands. Perhaps that is why we call this day the Festival of the Christian Home. It's a time to remember the wonderful dynamic God brings into our homes. He sees us. Bringing that conviction into our lives and home may help us take the higher ground and calm so much of the worry.

¹ 9/11 Mom Hugs Moussaoui's Mother; AP story 3/14/06.

² Pam Belluck, Defendant in Club Fire Draws 4 year Sentence New York Times May 11, 2006.

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