

“Dearest Hagar”
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus,
concerning Genesis 22:1-14
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco,
on July 2, 2017

Dearest Hagar,

It’s me, Sarah. I know I am probably the last person on earth you want to hear from. Nevertheless I feel compelled to tell you what has happened. Hopefully by the end of this letter, you will see why.

This morning Abraham woke up very early and began to pack as if for a day trip. I rose with him and began to fill the skins with water for him. The early morning sun reminded me of the day we sent you away. I had prepared the water for you just as I did for Abraham, only I remained hidden in the tent when he put it on your shoulders and cast you out. I wanted you gone, but I didn’t want to be the one who did it, so I sent Abraham to dismiss you.

I had very little empathy for the fact that I was asking him to send away his son. In my eyes, *Isaac* was his son and he needed no other. I felt no sympathy for the years he’d spent with Ishmael, teaching him how to care for the livestock and manage our affairs. Instead I felt disdain and the distinct fear that Ishmael might steal some of Abraham’s time—or worse, his inheritance—away from Isaac, the one and only rightful heir in my opinion. As a mother I felt fiercely protective. As a wife, I felt jealous.

It’s been years now since all that happened, and to be frank, I scarcely ever think of you. Abraham does, and he thinks especially of Ishmael. He doesn’t say so, on account of me, but I can tell when the two of you are in his thoughts. I, however, have refused to remember you. I have banished you from my mind as well as my home.

But this morning, when I was reminded of the morning you left, it all came rushing back and I was flooded with memory as well as a strange sense of foreboding, and I was unable to ignore either one. Abraham wouldn’t tell me where he was going, but there was the same silent grief and torment in his eyes as on the day he said goodbye to Ishmael. As he packed his things, I could tell he was preparing for a sacrifice, but when I asked him about it, he wouldn’t answer. I’d only seen such gravity on his face once before, and I wondered if perhaps the sacrifice had something to do with repenting for his rejection of Ishmael. I quietly tried to help him pack, but he shoved me away and yelled at me to leave him be. I was shocked by his outburst, but when I looked at his face, there were tears in his eyes, not rage. I backed away and gave him space.

A little bit later I was in the tent mending garments when Abraham walked in to tell me he was leaving. I nodded my goodbye. “I’m taking Isaac with me,” he added. “I’ll be back by dusk.” At his words, my heart nearly left my chest. I was surprised to learn Isaac was going—Abraham hadn’t mentioned it before—but that didn’t explain the rising panic. My chest began to tighten and my breathing grew shallow. It was such an irrational reaction that I stuffed it down and pretended I was fine.

Abraham left and I remained in the tent trying to calm my breathing and soften the inexplicable anxiety. A long time passed, and suddenly I realized I hadn't said goodbye to Isaac. I experienced a piercing urge to chase after them so I could hug his neck, but it was only a day trip and they were long gone by now. I forced my legs to stay put and reminded myself they would be home by dusk.

I was useless the rest of the morning. I couldn't focus on anything. I was irritable with all the servants and by mid-morning I had a pounding headache. I hadn't experienced this sort of physical ache for my son since the day I began to wean him and the milk in me kept painfully demanding that I feed him. I remember how Abraham threw a great feast on the day Isaac was weaned to celebrate his growth, and though I outwardly played along, on the inside I was more funeral than party. This morning with my now half-grown son off on a day trip with his father, I experienced such agony—like a mother with swollen breasts and no baby.

For some strange reason, I started to think about Ishmael when he was Isaac's age now, how his voice was beginning to deepen, but when he was happy, his voice would crack in this adorable way and we would all smile, even me. To tell you the truth, in that moment, I missed him. I missed Ishmael, which is not something I ever thought I would say.

It surprised me, and I swung my thoughts back to Isaac. "He'll be back by dusk," I repeated to myself yet again, only when I said it, a pain shot through my head. The migraine was getting worse. I tried to close my eyes and sleep, but suddenly I gasped and shot straight up in bed, remembering what Abraham had said: "Isaac is going with me. I'll be back by dusk," not "*We will be back,*" and in an instant I just knew. I don't know how I knew because who would ever suspect such a thing, but I knew now that Abraham was planning to sacrifice our only son. I remembered now that Abraham had packed all the equipment for a sacrifice, but I hadn't seen him choose an animal. I remembered the torment in his eyes. I remembered his unusual secrecy about it all and the way he snapped at me and tried to prevent me from helping him as if he wanted me to have no part in it.

Without another thought I tore out of the tent and began to run. I had to catch them. I had to. I had to stop Abraham. It occurred to me I didn't even know which way they went. Frantic, I spun around in circles, trying to decide. My heart was pounding in my chest. They had been gone for hours by now. I couldn't catch up with them even if I did know which way they went, but I refused to let myself acknowledge it. He wasn't dead yet—I could feel it—and God knows I had to try.

I picked a direction and sprinted. I hollered as I ran, "Abraham! Isaac! Ab-ra-ham!!!" I screamed. Alarmed, the servants rushed after me and tried to stop me, but I pushed them away and kept running. Eventually they gave up and let me run. "Abraham!!" I yelled in rage. "Isaac!" I sobbed. There was no answer.

I screamed and ran for as long as I could until my lungs demanded that I rest and I fell to my knees in the desert sand and wept. The sand clung to my sweaty skin like ashes and my hair stuck to my face as I swayed on my knees and moaned. I beat my breasts in mourning; I tore my

clothes. I cried out to God and I shook my fist at the heavens. “Why, God, why?” My voice grew hoarse from yelling and I was dehydrated from running in the hot sun, but I didn’t care. What did water matter if I didn’t have my son? If he should die, my life would end.

Without warning, in the middle of my grief, I thought of Ishmael again. I specifically remembered the sound of his laugh, hearty and full, and against all odds, I smiled at the memory. I wiped the tears and snot from my face, I paused from my own agony, and I remembered Ishmael. And I remembered you, Hagar. I wondered what it was like for you, wandering in the wilderness without direction after we kicked you out. For perhaps the first time, I wondered how *you felt*. I’m ashamed to say there were times I hoped you and Ishmael had died out there in the wilderness, but as I sat there in grief over Isaac, I hoped with all my heart that you lived and that Ishmael lived. I hope you never had to see him suffer. No mother should lose her child to an untimely death, and I cannot believe I put you through that risk.

Hagar, I know my words probably mean very little to you now, but I am so sorry. No righteous person would ever threaten the life of a child. What I did to you was evil, and I greatly regret it.

I’ve heard rumors over the years that you made it safely through the wilderness and even that in the hour of dire need, God provided. Isn’t that just like God, to take care of things when humans act like idiots and screw things up, like I did? I began to wish God would be merciful to me and my son as God was with you and yours, but I knew I did not deserve it—not after all I have done.

Dusk was beginning to arrive, so I picked myself up off my knees and began to trudge home. It was a calm night with a gentle breeze and it all felt so surreal. When I arrived at camp, Abraham was already back. When I entered the tent, he looked as old and as tired as I had ever seen him. He looked up at me and my disheveled appearance and torn clothing, and I could tell he knew that I knew.

“Isaac is asleep in the other tent,” he whispered.

“What?” I said, nearly breathless.

Abraham closed his eyes, scrunched his face up tight and tears began to flow down his wrinkled cheeks. Tears to match his instantly sprung up in my own eyes. “He’s home. He’s safe,” Abraham managed to say between sobs.

“H . . . How?”

Abraham shook his head, almost in disbelief. “There was a ram.” He left out a giant breath and cried even harder. “Thank God there was a ram.”

I clutched my heart as the tears and snot flowed freely down my face. “But . . . but why?” I demanded. “Why? Why did you take him there? Who are you?”

Abraham couldn't speak. I waited impatiently. "I don't know, Sarah. I don't know. I thought . . . I thought God was testing my faith. I thought it was a test . . ."

"Don't you think we've been tested enough?" I screamed, utterly incredulous.

"I know," said Abraham, "I know. Maybe it wasn't a test. Maybe I went crazy. After all these years of guilt, I thought perhaps this was my punishment for sending away Ishmael. After that, who am I to be worthy of a son?" He was crying so hard he could barely get the words out. "I don't know how to explain it, Sarah. It all feels like a big, terrible mistake. All I know is that an angel of the Lord stopped me, and God provided a ram, and our son is alive."

I shook my head in disdain. "I am so relieved that Isaac is alive, but I will never forgive you for this, Abraham. Children are *not* dumping grounds for your unresolved feelings and frustrations, and they certainly aren't disposable." I walked out in disgust. Then I crept into Isaac's tent to kiss him goodnight and found I couldn't bear to leave him alone so I curled up next to his sleeping body and held him close. A long while later I heard Abraham enter the tent to check on us, and when he joined me beside Isaac for some reason I didn't try to stop him. I just let it be. Eventually the two of them were snoring in rhythm, keeping me awake, but I didn't care. Snoring meant breathing, and breathing meant living. I couldn't have been more grateful to hear Isaac snore.

Hagar, I don't expect you will ever forgive me for what I did, and I'm not asking you to. I hope God will forgive me and I will work on forgiving myself, and that will have to be enough. I am only writing because what I did to you was terrible and I can see that now.

I had gone running into the wilderness to confront Abraham for his stupidity and misguidedness. I had no idea I would end up confronting myself. I went out to the wilderness to save Isaac. I could never have predicted that God would save me. Truth be told, I didn't even know I needed saving. I was part of God's chosen family, after all. It hadn't occurred to me that I might be wrong, dead wrong, about you. It hadn't occurred to me that you were family too, even though our sons shared so much in common. It hadn't occurred to me that you and I had anything in common. It hadn't, frankly, occurred to me that you were human too.

On this, the day of my awakening, I write to you, my sister, to make amends.

May the Lord bless you and keep you, dear Hagar, and may the Lord bless and keep your son. May God's face shine upon you and be gracious to you. May the Lord lift up his countenance and grant you peace.

With sincere love and deep regret,

Sarah