

The Trouble With Shortcuts
Genesis 16: 1-16, I Peter 4:7-11
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights
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Just before I went on Sabbatical last year, I decided that it would be a good idea for me to visit Ed Barie, who at that time was living in a nursing home in Bridgeville, and Frank Pratt, who was staying in West Mifflin. So I drove to Bridgeville. I know how to get there. We had a nice visit. And while I'd been to Frank's place a million times, I'd not driven there from Bridgeville without my map. You know, I bet, that it is possible to get from Bridgeville to West Mifflin. And you know, perhaps, that it's quicker to get from Bridgeville to West Mifflin if you don't come to Crafton Heights first. And you can probably guess that it's even faster if you remember your map. I got so lost! I was cruising through South Park, so close to Frank's place I could almost hear him...but I never got there. Eventually, I gave up on my "short cut" and came home, figuring I'd visit Frank another day.

That's the problem with shortcuts, isn't it? Unless you get lucky, they only work when you're absolutely sure of them. Whether it's a shortcut while you're driving or one on the computer keyboard, each of us can tell a story about a time when we thought we were doing something smart by taking a short cut, only to realize that we set ourselves back, not forward.

Right now I want you to think about a time when you took a shortcut that didn't pay off for you...a time when taking the "easy way" turned out to be a huge mistake. And while you're thinking of that, let's reconsider the story of Genesis 16 – because it's full of people who are taking the wrong turn thinking that it'll get them someplace faster. And as we look at this, consider the fact that there are no clean hands in this story – everyone participates in the cycle.

Sarai gets us started. You'll remember that she is Abram's wife, and that God had promised Abram some years before that he would have a child and become the father of a great nation...except that he and his wife were not getting any younger, and they had been unable to have a child. So at the beginning of our reading for today, Sarai gives up on the promise for herself. She says, in essence, "God can't work through anyone like me. I know, I'll have Abram impregnate my slave girl...and then I'll take the baby as my own. That must be what God had in mind, because he sure isn't going to do anything with me." Sarai's first shortcut in the story is to give up on the promise of God.

Abram, however, is not any better. When Sarai comes up with this plan, does he hold fast to the promise of God? Does he rebuke her for her lack of faith and say it's a silly idea? Not exactly. The text says that after ten years of holding to the promise, Abram bailed out on the promise and conceived a child with Sarai's slave, an Egyptian girl named Hagar.

In a moment, the action is back on Sarai. Her plan has worked. Her husband has conceived a child. She's on the fast-track to motherhood, as long as she can take the baby as her own...but she finds that she cannot. Before the baby is even born – before Hagar is even showing, Sarai finds that she can't bear to look at Hagar. Her response: she gets mad at Abram! And more than that, she brings God into the picture. Not four months after she says to the Lord, "Nice plan, God, but I think I can improve it a little bit," Sarai now cries out in anger to her husband, "May God judge between you and me!" Wow! First, she can't believe in God's promise, but now she wants God on her team.

And once again, Abram is no better. Did you see him in verse 6? He's the one off shrugging his shoulders saying, "Look, do what you want. I'm not involved here." Pardon me? Aren't you Mr. Promise? Abram – can't you find it in you to confront the pain directly? Can't you deal with the

situation with grace? Nope. It's just easier to stick your head into the Canaan Daily Gazette than it is to deal truthfully and openly with the pain that the previous shortcuts have caused.

And here in verse 6 even Hagar gets into the act. To be fair, a slave girl from Egypt is not the first person that we'd expect to be holding on to the promises of God, but what does she do here? She takes her baby and runs for home. She removes herself from Abram, from Sarai, from the promise, and heads back towards Egypt.

So far, Genesis 16 is one long story of people treating each other poorly, of people ignoring the truth and hope of God, and of people denying each other the chance to live in right relationship.

And then God shows up. The angel of the Lord finds Hagar and speaks to her. Think about that for a moment. When God shows up in this part of the story, he doesn't first speak with Sarai, whose impatience got this story started. He doesn't first speak with Abram, who can't be bothered to take a stand for what is right. He reaches out to an unwed pregnant foreigner. Did you hear what Hagar called God? She said, "I will call you El-roi", which means "you are the God who sees." God sees me! I am so lost, so afraid, so messed up – and God came looking for me.

And what does this God who sees say to Hagar? He makes the same promise to her that he does to Abram: "I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted." The difference – and it is a huge difference – is that whereas the child of the promise is a child who will bring blessing and hope to all the families of the earth, the child that Hagar is carrying will bring conflict and tension to the world.

And then something that ought to be surprising happens – something that we might have skipped over in our reading: Hagar does what? She goes home. The baby is born. And what is the baby's name? Ishmael. Who names the baby, according to verse 15? Abram. But to whom did the angel reveal the baby's name? Hagar. So in the intervening months, Abram finds a spine. He believes Hagar. He stands up to Sarai. He takes Hagar's word about what happened in the wilderness and names his son. Is there still tension in the house? You better believe it!

And you know, perhaps, that this is not the last time we hear of the tension between the children of Abram. We read of it later in the book of Genesis. We hear of it later in the Old Testament. And today, we see that though the Muslims, the Jews, and the Christians of the world all trace their ancestry to Abram, the Muslims do so through Ishmael, the son of Hagar, while the Christians and Jews do so through Isaac, the as-yet unborn son of Sarai.

Now, let me pause here and ask you if you remember watching a television show and the weathermen got us all excited because there was a snow storm on the way...and crawling across the screen in bright letters were the words "winter storm warning"? OK, at this point in the sermon the words "sermon oversimplification warning" should be scrolling across the pulpit. I'm about to ask a question that may seem incredibly oversimplistic and unreasonable...But I'm going to ask it anyway.

Could it be that a part of what we see in the world today is a continuation of the same old, same old sins and shortcuts that are outlined for us in Genesis sixteen?

Think about the situation in Palestine right now. On the one hand, you've got a number of people of deep faith – Islamic faith – who are saying, "Look – if I can't have the blessing, then nobody can have the blessing!" and just as Hagar took Ishmael and ran away into the desert, so some in the Middle East are responding to the grace of a promise with suicide attacks and terrorism.

On the other hand, there are a number of people of deep faith – in this case, some Jews and some Christians – who are saying to the Hagers and Ishmaels of the world, "Look, pagan, you are not

a true child of the faith. You are not welcome. You are not equal.” And so, just as Sarai drove Hagar into the desert presumably to die, so these people in the Middle East are building walls across family farms and fighting rock-throwing teenagers with M-16’s.

And if you had a third hand, you could see a number of people of deep faith, including many Christians, who say, “What’s the difference? They’ve been hating each other for a million years. Let ‘em kill each other...” Like Abram, these people find it easier to throw up their hands and refuse to get involved because it’s just so darned messy.

As I said – oversimplification alert. No question. But I want you to think for a moment about the fact that the situation in the Middle East is one that is pregnant with sin and brokenness on all sides. Nobody’s hands are clean. Why? Because we like to take short-cuts. It’s just so hard to do the hard work of listening to, trusting, working for the welfare of one that you perceive to be the enemy.

So what am I asking you to do? What are the implications for us in this morning’s text? Let me first assert that there are geopolitical ramifications here. That is, I believe that this text does speak clearly to the ongoing conflict in Palestine. What we do, and what others do, as nations, as cultures – well, it’s just huge. It matters.

But in saying that, I don’t want to minimize the importance of a personal application. Because frankly, if you and I spend all our time looking for shortcuts and the easy way out of every situation, then we won’t even notice when the governments of the world are doing this.

That’s why I love the New Testament reading from First Peter. Peter senses that times are tough, and they are going to get tougher. What is a disciple to do when things are hard? There are four clear imperatives for God’s people listed here: discipline yourselves in prayer, love one another, be hospitable to those around you, and serve one another.

“Oh, come on, Rev.,” I can hear you say. “That’s too easy for you to read Peter saying that to us. I mean, Peter was a disciple. He knew Jesus. He saw Jesus. He didn’t face the kind of life that I face every day.”

Maybe. But like Abram, Sarai, and Hagar, Peter was a man of shortcuts. Here he is, sitting in prison, preparing to die, and somehow hoping that the people who follow him in the faith will be better at keeping the promise than he was. Think for a moment about what you know about Peter.

Here’s a man who writes, urging and begging his friends to be alert and disciplined in prayer. Do you think that Peter remembers a time in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus had asked someone to stay awake and pray? A time when someone fell asleep instead of waiting with and watching with Jesus? Who was that? Peter.

Peter says to his friends, “love one another – constantly, love one another.” Do you think that Peter remembers a time when some followers of Jesus were walking on the road and arguing about which of them was a better disciple, a better follower of Jesus? A time characterized by pride and selfishness? Who was on the road that day? Peter.

“Be hospitable to one another without complaining,” Peter writes. Be hospitable. Be open. Be free. Be welcoming. I wonder if as he writes this he’s remembering the days when some of the disciples were chasing kids away from Jesus because they didn’t matter at all...or the times when the disciples were mad at Jesus for “wasting” his time on Canaanite women or prostitutes or other losers. Who was the number one disciple in charge of keeping other people out? Peter.

And Peter says that each of us is to serve the other with whatever gift we've received. I remember a time when a disciple of Jesus was taking a nap on the upstairs roof of his house and some men came from a gentile Roman soldier named Cornelius asking if that disciple could come and visit. It took a vision from God to get this follower of Jesus interested in going to sit with the Roman and be blessed by him. Who was that follower of Jesus? Peter.

I hope you see what I am getting at here – Peter knows shortcuts. Peter knows from personal experience that it's really easy to miss out on God's best because it just looks too complicated or involved. The question is, can we hear him? Can we heed his warnings and seek to apply his antidotes?

I know that you may feel like Abram this morning. You are waiting for God to show up in your life, and have been waiting for this so-called promise to be a reality in your world, and it just seems like it's an impossibly long time.

I know that you may feel like Sarai this morning, hearing about the promise over and over again, but wondering in your heart if maybe the promise isn't really for someone else, not you. Maybe you're looking at the other people in this room and thinking, "Sure, God could do something in their lives, but not mine..."

And I know that some of you may feel like Hagar today, not even caring to listen about a promise that you are sure is irrelevant to your life because you are sure that God can't even see you. You don't even matter to God, you think. You are outside the promise.

The reality is that God is on the lookout. We are here to serve and worship the God who is called "El-roi" – the God who sees. And God is keeping his promises in and through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. In Jesus, God is blessing the families of the earth. In your discipline, your love, your hospitality, and your service, you are the means by which God is announcing that promise to the world. Even as you wait for the fullness of the promise in your own life, let me join Peter in urging you to be faithful to these ways of seeking God. Let me urge you to resist shortcuts and bring yourself to God every day, and to ask God to use your prayers, love, hospitality, and service to change the world and unveil the promise in your life and in the lives of those around you. Amen.