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Our Pulpit.

Abraham the Friend of God.

Hagar and Ishmael.

SERMON PREACHED BY

REV. A. J. MOWATT.

In St. Paul's Church Fredericton, March 25th.

"And Hagar bare Abram a son; and
Abram called the name of his son, which
Hagar bare Ishmael."—GEN. XVI. 15.

When God's Book tells the story of
good men's lives, it tells the whole story
not half the story. It does not cover up
their infirmities and extol only their vir-
tues; but it sets them before us as they
are, the weak men they are, the tempt-
able and sometimes contemptible men
they are. I must say for myself that I
am half inclined, in discoursing about
Abraham the friend of God and father
of the faithful, to skip the chapter in
his history that we have come to to-
night. Well, at all events, I would
rather that it was not here, for it lowers
him in our estimation; and if some mere
human biographer had been telling the
story of his life, I do not think it would
have been here, at least in the shape it
is. We want our hero to be a hero all
the way through, a man high above the
weaknesses that characterize other men,
a man who never stoops to what is un-
worthy of him, or does anything discred-
itable or unwise. But not thus was
Abraham, and not thus is any mere man.
Abraham was the chief among ten
thousand, a man whose equal is hard to
find, and yet because he is a man, and
beset with the infirmities of men, we find
him making mistakes and doing wrong,
like ordinary mortals. Let us not ex-
pect too much of men, not even the
heroes of faith and the founders of the
church.

First, Hagar. A new character
comes upon the stage of the life-drama
we are studying, and one who is destined
to play a no unimportant part in the
patriarch's history. This is Hagar, an
Egyptian female slave. When Abra-
ham and Sarah were down in Egypt on
account of the famine, they came to the
possession of Hagar, probably a present
from the king. She would be a little
girl then of say twelve or fourteen years
and so grew up under Sarah's watchful
superintendance, and became a great
favorite with her mistress. Sarah had
every confidence in her, and treated her
more like a daughter or a companion
than a slave. She had taken special
pains to teach her, and thus without
knowing or intending it she had lifted
her up beyond her humble slave-state.
And Sarah, I have no doubt, was proud
of her protegee, and loved her as she
loved herself, for she was worthy of her
love. But now she was woman-grown,
and the question of Hagar's marriage
was thrusting itself before her, for as she
was her property, it was for Sarah to say
what was to be done with her, and how
she was to be disposed of in marriage.
And it can be easily understood how
reluctant her mistress would be to dis-
pose of so promising a young woman to
any of the rough slave hands about her
husband's encampment.

And there was another question ob-
truding itself upon herself and her
husband, the question of the promised
seed. Abraham was now 85 and she
was 75, and as yet their union had been
unblessed with children, and it came to
her that the years had settled the ques-
tion of the seed so far as she was con-
cerned, and settled it against her. You
can understand how slow she would be
to give up the mother-hope; for in those
primitive times it was felt to be a dis-
grace, almost a judgment of heaven, to
be childless. And then, in her case, so
much depended, everything in fact, upon
the promised seed, and the seed was
wanting. Thus it grew upon Sarah, grew
upon her reluctantly, grew upon her as
a most unwelcome thought, that she was
in the way of her husband's success, and
she did not like to feel that she was in
his way in any respect, or to have it
whispered abroad among the people in
most uncomplimentary phrases, as it was
coming to be. Poor Sarah, we can well
believe, had her own anxieties over the
whole question, for she was no ordinary
woman, and she was so troubled and
perplexed that she did not know what
to do. At last it broke like light from
Heaven upon her, that in her handmaid
Hagar there was for her a way out of
the difficulty. Let her be a subordinate
wife. It was not uncommon then. So
Sarah urged it upon her husband until
he yielded, and Hagar, Sarah's Egyptian
hand-maid, was exalted, or otherwise, to
be a secondary wife.

It was done for the best, but the step

was an unwise one. It was neither
more nor less than human prudence, the
wisdom of the world, undertaking to
help out the Lord's promise, and the
Lord's promise is never so lame and
faulty that it needs any such doubtful
expedients to help it out. And yet to-
day as well as in Abraham's day, men
and women, even Christian men and
women, think it is necessary to go out of
the path of duty, and out of the way of
right, to do good sometimes, or what
they call good. But to do evil that good
may come, is not the way to work out
any real good, the good that is of God.
He has His own right methods of work-
ing out His good, and it never helps
nor hastens matters to resort to doubtful
or wrong methods. Sarah did wrong to
do good, and it was not good she did do
but evil, and she suffered for it, and it
turned out to be an unhappy affair for
all concerned. And it is ever so. But
I am anticipating.

Secondly, Home-Jars and Hagar's
Flight. Hagar was a dutiful slave so
long as she was a slave, but when she
woke up to the fact that she was some-
thing more than a slave, she became
insolent towards the mistress to whose
indulgence she owed all she was. And
so there was trouble in Abraham's
home. It had been brewing for some
time in the shape of dark looks and
harsh words; but at last the storm burst,
a bitter blast. Sarah came to her hus-
band full of loud complaints, charging
him with all the trouble. Abraham said
to his wife that Hagar was in her
hand to be treated as she saw fit. 'Be-
hold, thy maid is in thy hand; do to her
that which is good in thine eyes.' It
is open to question whether he did right
to give Sarah in her then mood so much
power. But perhaps his interference
further might only have made matters
worse. Hagar was perhaps more to
blame than Sarah was, and she must be
taught submission, no matter what the
cost. It would not do for the secondary
wife to rule in Abraham's tent, to usurp
the place of the real princess. There
were, you may be sure, faults on both
sides, Sarah to blame as well as Hagar,
but to decide how far each was to blame
and to balance accounts between them,
was more than could be done. And so
Abraham did perhaps the best that
could be done in the circumstances, and
that was to leave Hagar in Sarah's
hands.

And having the power, Sarah exer-
cised it, and made it so hard for Hagar
that she would not submit to it, but
fled. She set out on foot and alone to
make her way to Egypt, her native land,
a most formidable undertaking for any
one to attempt, and especially in her
circumstances. But she pushed on,
widening hour by hour the distance be-
tween herself and her mistress. The
wild passion raging in her drove her far,
far out of her way, and made her ignore
hunger and thirst and weariness. But
this could not go on. We find her by a
well on the way to Shur. She has come
to herself. The tempest of her rage has
subsided, and the good and right within
her, for she is not without her good
qualities, begin to assert themselves. And
now she sees how foolish and wayward
she has been. She has left a good home
for a grim uncertainty. She is making
her way to Egypt, her native land, but
what is there there for her? Who will
befriend and shelter a runaway slave?
Who will believe the story she has to
tell, and do for her as she was done for
in Sarah's tent? And so she sits by the
well bowed down and crushed under
the burden of her grief, and she knows
not what to do, whether to go on or turn
back. She wishes she could die. Oh the
wretched state of mind she is in! Perhaps
she sleeps and dreams.

At all events, an angel finds her by
the well. Even the poor runaway slave
is not without Heaven's care. Angels
are with her, and she does not know it
—when she is wilful and wayward and
wandering. They keep away harm from
her, so that neither the sun by day nor
the moon by night smite her, nor any
wild beast prey upon her, nor evil of any
kind come nigh her. Ah! we know not
how close the angels are to us and how
much they do for us, what dangers they
keep from us or keep us from, and how
they guide our wayward steps back from
the wrong to the right. They find us in
the wildernesses where our sins and
follies have brought us, and they rebuke
our waywardness, condemn our follies,
minister comfort to our sore penitent
hearts, and shew us the good and right
way to take. Thus did the angel to
Hagar, the erring slave-girl. "And the
angel of the Lord found her by a foun-
tain of water in the wilderness, by the
fountain in the way to Shur. And he
said, Hagar, Sarah's hand-maid, whence
comest thou? And whither goest? thou!

You see, she is still Sarah's handmaid
not Abraham's wife. Bigamy, polygamy,
concubinage, are of the earth earthy.
And Sarah's maid is not where she
ought to be when she is in the wilder-
ness. She thinks she has a reason. We
all do that when we do a wrong. But
Sarah's harshness is no reason, and
nothing can excuse our wrongdoing. The
angel sent her back to her duty. He
told her to go back and submit herself
meekly to her mistress. And then he
told her of her unborn child. His
name was to be Ishmael, and he was to
be no ordinary man in his time, and he
would be the father of unnumbered
multitudes. "And he shall be as a
wild-ass among men; his hand shall be
against every man, and every man's
hand against him, and he shall dwell in
the presence of all his brethren."

How precious to Hagar was that talk
with the angel out by the well! Who
knows but the angel was the Lord Him-
self? And He found her there in His
loving way, even as in other days He
found another erring one, and taught
her of Himself, His grace and mercy.
Hagar understood now as she never
understood before her place and her
duty. The seeing one had seen her, and
He was her Life. So she called the well
where the angel met and talked with
her: Beer-lahai-roi, the well-of-the-living-
one-who-seeth-me.

And I am addressing some to-night to
whom the Lord has been pleased in a
very special way to reveal Himself even
as He did to Hagar at the well. You
were in deep trouble perhaps. A dark-
ness had come over your life, and you
knew not what to do or where to go.
You had gone astray, turned far away
to the wrong. But the Angel of Light
and Love, the Blessed Seeing One who
sees that He might help and heal the
sad and sinful, the kind Son of God,
followed you into the wilderness where
you had wandered, and He found you
and you Him. Oh what an hour and
place that where the Son of God finds
you as He found Hagar, and as He finds
all who are found! You never want to
forget it; you cannot forget it. You
look back to it through the years, and
over lands and seas where the years have
tossed you, and there is no place to you
like that place, no hour like that hour.
You give it a name, a name that no one
but yourself knows the meaning of, and
from that hour and place your way
shines like the light, and slopes upward
to glory.

Thirdly, Ishmael's Birth and Sub-
sequent Events. Nothing is said of
Hagar's return, and the reception ac-
corded her. But it is clear she did re-
turn, and the Lord would open the way
for her, and she would find Sarah as
glad to welcome her back to her old
place as she was to come back. The
separation may have done good, cleared
the home-atmosphere of its lowering
clouds, and let both know how ill off the
one is without the other. At all events,
we have every reason to believe that the
reconciliation between mistress and maid
was satisfactory to both, and continued
for years unbroken.

In due time Ishmael was born, and
the event was one of great joy. And
the child won his way to all hearts by
his winsome childish ways. Even Sarah
was won, and it came to be tacitly un-
derstood that Hagar's son was to be the
heir. Things seemed to be shaping that
way. Abraham was 86 when Ishmael
was born.

And so the years glide by without
much that is note-worthy to mark them,
years of routine, work and worship,
labor and love, smiles and tears, just such
years as the years usually are in busy
homes and earnest lives. The child
Ishmael grows and grows. He creeps
and climbs. He begins to get up at
things only to fall down again, and thus
he learns his first lessons in life. But
he tries and tries until he succeeds, and
soon he is everywhere, and so often
where his busy fingers and boisterous boy-
ish ways are not wanted. He keeps
Sarah and Hagar busy putting to rights
what he puts wrong. You may be sure
that the wild-ass of a man as he came to
be, in the expressive language of the
angel to his mother, was quite a colt of
a boy. He would be wilful and up-
roarious. He would upset things for
the pure fun of it, and do enough of
mischief-making to give Sarah both a
head-ache and heart-ache many a time.
How often she would exile him from her
neat tent, and threaten him with all
sorts of punishments! But she could
not do without him. He would be pet-
ted and spoiled as the one child in a
home among grown up people is almost
sure to be. And thus Ishmael grew to
be a rude, headstrong boy in his teens, a
boy wanting of regard to any one or any-
thing, destitute of everything like gentle-

ness and love, a tease and worry to all
who had anything to do with him, a boy
that nobody liked but his mother. Still
he was not without promise, and Abra-
ham often took him to the altar, and
kneeling there with him, would pray the
Lord to have mercy upon him, and grant
him to live before Him. "Oh that Ish-
mael might live before thee!"

Thirteen years pass away. Abraham
is ninety-nine, and the older he grows
every year seems to count for so much
more than once. During those thirteen
years he kept the fire on his altar ever
burning, but we can understand how old
and cold the word of promise would
come to be after a while. Still his faith
waits on and on, hoping and hoping, be-
lieving and believing. But these years
of silence, no voice from heaven to break
the monotony of them, no visions in the
night, and the sun of his life slowly
westering;—oh how hard it must have
been to be all a man ought to be! He
begins to feel after a while that there is
no God, or if there is, that He does not
care for him, and so devotion slowly
dies. But Abraham believes on, and
worships on. But the silence of years is
again broken. The listening ear of faith
is the only ear that hears it, that catches
the sweet music of it.

You say, my hearer, that there is no
voice from heaven for you. But perhaps
you do not listen for it in the still hours.
You do not go apart to pray and med-
itate. You hear only the din of toil,
the heavy clank of machinery, the noisy
chattering of trade, the chit-chat of par-
lors or streets, and so there is no still
voice for you. Ah! listen as Abraham
listened, and you will hear. Keep your
ear open all the time towards Heaven,
and down to your soul will come ring-
ing the music of God's voice. "And
when Abraham was ninety years old and
nine, the Lord appeared to Abram, and
said unto him, I am the Almighty God;
walk before me, and be thou perfect,
and I will make my covenant between
me and thee, and will multiply thee ex-
ceedingly."

You see, he had been sinning again,
turning aside from the right to seek the
promise and the seed, and how he had
failed. Oh the bitterness of his ill-star-
red marriage with Hagar! So soon after
he had done it, he saw his mistake and
folly; but what was done could not be
undone. He did what he could; he left
Hagar to be Sarah's maid, no longer his
wife. And now you see him prostrate
in the dust, feeling that his sin, his im-
perfectness, is so much in the way of the
blessing. "And Abram fell on his face;
and God talked with him." He pardon-
ed him again as he had done so often,
and renewed the promise to him. Then
he changed his name from Abram to
Abraham, great father to father of na-
tions. Then he gave him the covenant
of circumcision. Also he changed Sara-
h's name from Sarai to Sarah, and
promised her a son in her old age. Abra-
ham laughed at the idea of the aged
Sarah and himself having a son, laugh-
ed not incredulously, but rather because
the thought of it was pleasant to him.
And yet he could hardly believe it after
all the disappointments of the years past.
The news seemed too good to be true.
And then Ishmael was now in the way,
and he felt as it would not do to ignore
his claims. "Oh that Ishmael might
live before thee! But he was not the
promised seed. Sarah's son, not Hagar's,
was to be the heir.

Ah! learn here, how useless it is to
force matters, to go against God in the
working out of His purposes of grace and
mercy. Ishmael has the start of the heir
some fourteen years, but with such a
start even he cannot catch up with the
promise. You say of your eldest boy,
"This is the heir! This is the boy who is
to do so much for the family, and make
a name for himself in the world!" But
he may be wanting of all that a true heir
need to have, wanting of push and
piety, wanting of appreciation of what it
is to be the heir. It is no use thrusting
the plough-handles into a boy's hands whose
head is in the clouds, who dreams and
dreams of power. Let him have a chance to
work out his dreams. And indeed he does
not need to have much of a chance. He
will find his way to what he wants to be,
and you cannot easily hold him back,
for he hears the voice of God calling him.

A word more. Young people, never do
anything wrong or mean, or doubtful, to
win your way in the world. Your wrong
will rebound against you some day, and
your heart will bleed for the wrong you
did. Wait on the Lord's promise coming
about in his way, the way of righteous-
ness, for it will come, and it will be
all the sweeter to you when it comes. God's
eye is upon you, and he will bless you;
he will see that you get the promise.

But mistakes are made, serious life-mis-
takes. Even the Abrahams and Sarahs make
mistakes. And because we have made mis-
takes and done wrong, let us not cease to
hope. Let us humble ourselves at the feet
of Jesus, and he will lift us up, and shew
us how to redeem the past, and find the
true good.