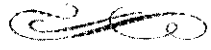
Course Reading

Weems, Renita J. “A Mistress, a Maid, and No Mercy.” From *Just a Sister Away: Understanding the Timeless Connection Between Women of Today and Women in the Bible*, 1-19. New York: Warner, 1988, 2005.

Chapter One

A Mistress, a Maid, and No Mercy

(Hagar and Sarah)



Read: Genesis 16:1–16 and 21:1–21

For black women, the story of Hagar in the Old Testament book of Genesis is a haunting one. It is a story of exploitation and persecution suffered by an Egyptian slave woman at the hands of her Hebrew mistress. Even if it is not our individual story, it is a story we have read in our mothers' eyes those afternoons when we greeted them at the front door after hard days of work as domestics. And if not our mothers' story, then it is certainly most of our grandmothers' story.

For black women, Hagar's story is peculiarly familiar. It is as if we know it by heart.

The easiest thing in the world would be to make a case out of, and concentrate on, the ethnic differences that separate Hagar and Sarai—differences that today would manifest themselves between an African woman and a Hebrew

woman, a woman of color and a white woman, a Third World woman and a First World woman.[1] But it would not be totally fair to make the Old Testament story of Hagar and Sarai carry all the weight of the history of race relationship in the modern world. Yet the similarities between the biblical story and the reality of the relationship across racial lines among women today are undeniable. Like our own situation, the story of the Egyptian Hagar and the Hebrew Sarai encompasses more than ethnic prejudice. Theirs is a story of ethnic prejudice exacerbated by economic and sexual exploitation. Theirs is a story of conflict, women betraying women, mothers conspiring against mothers. Theirs is a story of social rivalry.

Hence, the similarity of our stories, as black and white women in America, to the story of Hagar and Sarai warrants taking the enormous risk of opening up the deep festering wounds between us and beginning to explore our possibilities for divine healing.

The biblical story opens with the spotlight on Abram's barren wife, Sarai (16:1).[2] The first thing we come to know about Sarai, other than her status as Abram's wife, is the stark fact of her barrenness. In ancient times a woman's self-worth and social status pivoted around her family—namely, the

[1]Certainly, ancient people took note of differences in skin color that existed among them (for example, the poet in Song of Solomon 1:4 describes herself as "dark and beautiful," and in Numbers 12:10 Miriam's skin color's changing "white as snow" is something the writer thought worth noting). Differences in skin color are seen as natural (Jeremiah 13:23). There is no evidence that race and color, as we understand them today, especially as a way of stratifying people, prevailed at the time.

[2]The progenitors of Israel are first introduced to us in Genesis 12 as Abram and Sarai and are referred to by those names in Genesis 17, at which time God changes their names to Abraham and Sarah to symbolize their new covenant relationship with Him and to signify the sealing of the covenant with the birth of their own son.

Therefore, all discussion of the events of Genesis 16 will refer to the two by their pre-covenant names, Abram and Sarai. When the story turns to Genesis 17, the discussion will refer to them as Abraham and Sarah.

reputation of her husband and, more important, the number of children she bore, preferably males. Therefore, the first verse of the chapter is especially significant; in the one line Sarai's honor rises and falls: "Now, Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children" (16:1).

As the wife of Abram, who was a socially prominent and successful herdsman, Sarai was a wealthy woman in her community. As wife of the nation's patriarch, she was a woman of immense social and economic standing. But Sarai was barren. And in the culture in which Sarai lived, a woman's womb controlled her destiny.

In a world lacking the technological skills that we in the Western world take for granted; in a world where entire families, communities, and nations could be wiped out by famine, drought, plague, and pestilence without warning; in a world where the average life span of men was forty years and women, thirty years; in such a world, the ability to reproduce and replenish the population was held in high esteem. Thus, despite her marriage to Abram and all social and economic privileges that came with such a union, Sarai's barrenness made her a woman to be scorned.

As is the case with most wealthy women, Sarai possessed a handmaiden. Hagar, the Egyptian slave woman, attended to the personal and domestic needs of her Hebrew mistress. While her mistress was old and had no hope of ever conceiving a child, Hagar was young and fertile. But Hagar was poor. In fact, she was worse than poor: she was a slave. And because she was a slave, Hagar was powerless. The difference between the two women, therefore, went beyond their ethnic identities, beyond their reproductive capabilities. Their disparities were centered in their contrasting economic positions. And economic differences have, on more than one oc-

casion, thwarted coalition and frustrated friendship among women.

With the scant information contained in the first verse alone, we have all the clues we need to know that this story will probably end in sadness.

Sarai, the barren but wealthy mistress, appealed to her husband, Abram, to go in and have intercourse with her fertile but poor handmaiden, Hagar. The child born to that union would become Sarai's.

Sarai had social standing, as Abram's wife, but she had no respect. She had material abundance, but she was not comforted. She was beautiful, but she was barren, childless, less than a woman in the eyes of her Hebrew community. That which Sarai craved most, her husband's money could not buy her. Only her slave's womb could give it to her. And according to custom, because Hagar was Sarai's property (through Abram, of course), any children Hagar bore would legally belong to Sarai, Sarai set out to obtain her slave.

Notice: The slave Hagar was never asked her opinion.

Without so much as a murmur of protest, Abram complied. Hagar conceived.

To our modern way of thinking, Sarai's act of giving Hagar to her husband, Abram, as a concubine is nothing less than reprehensible. We are offended not only because of our moral and legal customs concerning monogamy and fidelity, we are also offended because of the seeming presumptuousness of it all. The nerve of Sarai exploiting Hagar's body, manipulating Abram, speaking of God!

Yet we must lay aside our cultural biases long enough to consider that Sarai was not the only woman in scripture to convince her husband to get children with another woman. Rachel, too, persuaded her husband, Jacob, to enter into sexual relations with her maid, Bilhah (30:1–24). Not only was concubinage an acceptable custom in this part of the world, it wasn't unusual for a husband to go to a concubine with his wife's blessing. At least for barren women, concubinage functioned in a critical way to provide a (male) heir for the patriarch's land and property holdings. After a patriarch's death, his wives and unmarried daughters automatically became the responsibility of his son to care for.

Providing an heir for her husband's immense property, however, was not Sarai's sole concern. Sarai (as did Rachel, no doubt) had her own reasons for offering her slave to Abram. "Perhaps I will be esteemed through her," she says in 16:2. Through her slave's womb, Sarai sought esteem and honor for herself. However, the tables turned on Sarai: "But when Hagar saw that she had conceived, her mistress's honor was lowered in her eyes" (16:4).

Instead of esteem, Sarai met with contempt in Hagar's eyes. Instead of respect, Sarai was ridiculed. And by her maid, no less!

Whether Hagar's contempt for Sarai was real or imagined on Sarai's part, we can only guess. (After all, the story is told more from Sarai's point of view than Hagar's.) But one thing is certain: Hagar's elevation as Abram's pregnant concubine must have served only to point up Sarai's downfall as the wife who couldn't bear him any children.

As the woman carrying the child of the patriarch of Israel and a respected landowner, the status of the pregnant slave woman in the house of her mistress and master required renegotiation. Before, Hagar had been a defenseless slave. Now, as the pregnant concubine of the prosperous but old Abram, Hagar was protected. She ceased to be Sarai's slave and became Abram's wife.

Perhaps the pregnancy awakened something in the slave woman, something that previously lay dormant.

Perhaps it was Hagar's sense of self-worth.

Perhaps it was her sense of purpose and direction.

Or perhaps, it was the prospect of being loved unconditionally by her child. (Pregnancy has had that effect on more than one woman.)

Whatever the reason, Hagar could no longer see Sarai and her relationship to her mistress in the same way as before, for Hagar was able to give Abram something his wife, Sarai, could not. Consequently, Hagar transformed before her mistress's eyes. Her attitude about herself changed as well. The child growing inside her was proof that she was more than a slave: she was a woman.

Resentful and enraged, Sarai renounced her part in the whole humiliating affair (16:5). She blamed Abram. He, in turn, renounced his authority, role, and interest in the irksome situation and sent Hagar back into the hands of Sarai to be done with as she saw fit. Thus, as quickly as Hagar had been elevated to the position of wife in her mistress's house, she was reduced back to the position of the slave. She, who had been to Abram as a wife through a transfer of power, once again became property—again, without her permission.

Once Sarai's authority over the pregnant slave woman was restored, the barren wife set out to punish the slave woman for humiliating her; she retaliated against Hagar. We can only imagine the tensions that erupted between the two women: Sarai's sense of jealousy and humiliation and Hagar's feeling of betrayal and resentment. As the chief wife in the compound, however, Sarai was the woman with the power, the

power to insult her Egyptian handmaiden and to inflict pain on her.

If as a North American black woman I appear, to some, to be reading too much of my own people's brutal history into the biblical story, let it be pointed out that whatever the nature of the punishment Sarai imposed, it was evidently harsh enough to convince the slave woman to run away. What would make an Egyptian slave woman, thousands of miles away from home, choose the harsh, unknown dangers of the wilderness over her pallet in her mistress's tent?

The story of the Egyptian slave and her Hebrew mistress is hauntingly reminiscent of the disturbing accounts of the black slave woman and the white mistress during slavery. Over and over again we have heard tales about the wanton and brutal rape of black women by their white slave masters, compounded by punitive beatings by resentful white wives who penalized the raped slave women for their husbands' lust and savagery.

There are also the pitiful stories of slave women who willingly conceded to their slave masters' sexual advances: first, as a way of protecting their husbands, children, and loved ones from being beaten; second, as a way to keep themselves and those close to them from being sold away; or, third, as the only way of elevating their social rank in order to protect themselves from vicious overseers and mistresses.[3] The painful memory of black and white women under slavery

[3]Some of the more popular and recent collections of slave women's testimonies have been recorded in Bert Lowenberg and Ruth Bogin, *Black Women in Nineteenth-Century American Life* (University Park: Penn State University, 1976), and in Dorothy Sterling, ed., *We Are Your Sisters: Black Women in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: W.W. Norton, Inc., 1984). For an especially poignant fictional account of slavery based on real testimonies, see Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966).

and the web of cruelty that characterized their relations continue to stalk the relationship between black and white women in America. One hundred fifty years outside of slavery is not long enough to abolish the memories and attitudes that slavery has left on our psyches. Unless a miracle occurs, it is sad to say that it will probably take another 150 years to erase the pain and antagonism bred from 250 years of the cruelest brutality one race could inflict upon another—brutality and servitude imposed particularly in the name of God. For complex reasons of their own, memories of slave and slave mistress relations have proven especially hard for black and white women in America to erase from their cultural psyches.

Resentment and distrust linger. For black women in America, there remains the fear that white women, if given the slightest opportunity, will betray their trust and exploit their vulnerability as radically and sexually oppressed women. And with good cause. In many instances, modern history, too, has borne out these suspicions.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, suffragettes, who began their social activism as ardent opponents of slavery and racial prejudice, eventually used racism to secure their right to vote. They pandered to the racist attitudes of white southerners who ardently opposed black enfranchisement, and they extolled the supremacy of white women over black men (and black women).[4]

More recently, white women within the feminist and Christian circles continue to speak as though theirs is the

[4]For a very helpful discussion of the similarities in the racism within the nineteenth-century suffragette movement and that within the modern feminist movement, see Barbara Andolsen's *Daughters of Jefferson, Daughters of Bootblacks: Racism and American Feminism* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986).

universal experience. In doing so, they betray their persistent belief in their superiority and sovereignty over women of other races.

An odious memory comes to mind, one that, I admit, continues to grieve me. I was invited by a group of white Christian women to join them in planning an upcoming national symposium. Because their stated objective was to see that that symposium, unlike previous ones, was multiethnic, they were eager to solicit the input of black women to their otherwise all-white board. At first when asked, I flatly declined. Admittedly, I am immediately suspicious of requests for my services primarily because I am black, and, when I can help it, I try to avoid being the only black in otherwise all-white settings. Both, as I see it, portend danger. However, after much persuasion and insistence that this group's intentions were sincere, I consented.

At the first meeting, everyone was very enthusiastic and solicitous of the other black woman and me. In fact, our suggestion for the theme of the conference was accepted unanimously. The next time the group convened, however, it was a closed session—without either of us having been invited. The group met and never bothered to tell either of its black Christian sisters. For days I walked around hurt and enraged. Again and again, I berated myself for betraying my instinct and allowing myself to be used once again by white women. Every time I saw the announcements for the upcoming symposium with the title I had suggested, I wanted to scream.

But, as I said before, the story of Hagar and Sarai is about more than ethnic prejudice. It is not fair to make the Genesis story carry all the weight of race relations between black women and white women in North America.

In the first place, owning slaves was not unique to ancient Hebrew culture. It was a common practice throughout the ancient world. Later, in the book of Exodus, we discover that the hands of power reversed: Hebrew women became slaves in the hands of Egyptian women. (It would become the responsibility of an Egyptian princess to come to the rescue of a Hebrew slave woman.) In other words, no race or culture has a monopoly on evil. At some point in its history, virtually every culture has, if not instituted slavery, profited from the bartering of human flesh.

In the second place, the story of Hagar and Sarai is about the economic stratification of women as much as it is about the ethnic discrimination of one woman against another. Translated into today's language, Hagar was a domestic; Sarai was her employer.

Certainly there is nothing inherently ignoble about being a maid, or anything inherently honorable about being an employer of a maid. Neither needs to apologize or boast. Circumstances and lifestyles have a lot to say about the choices we make. Women who have been in the position to do so have sought to help the other women in maintaining the physical upkeep of their households. Women who have had to do so have long hired themselves out for the one line of work many have known since childhood. The problem is with the attitudes that too often accompany the choices.

Within a capitalistic society such as our own, disparate economic relationships among women can distort perspectives of reality. Among the "haves" it breeds a false sense of superiority. Among the "have-nots" it breeds an irrepressible sense of inferiority. Wherever human worth and dignity are measured by purchasing power, there is always the problem of class prejudice.

In the instance of Hagar and Sarai, the owner took advantage of her economic leverage over the Egyptian slave woman. She exploited the slave woman's body for her own personal ambitions. But in trying to provide a son for her husband and secure respect herself, Sarai almost lost a slave. And that would never do.

When she saw that her scheme had backfired, Sarai tried to save face and regain her (false sense of) superiority over Hagar. She tried to humiliate the slave woman and thereby remind Hagar that it was she, Sarai, who had power—not Hagar. In doing so, Sarai grasped desperately for the little power her husband had restored to her hands, even if that power extended only to a slave.

Taking advantage of Hagar's slave woman status, exploiting the fact that the woman who tended to her house was vocationally limited and her financial options virtually nonexistent, Sarai took advantage of her status over Hagar. She knew the way to enslave the slave—all over again—was to humiliate her, to destroy her (newfound) sense of self-worth, to dehumanize her.

It works every time.

Not all women in America have had the means, temperament, or need to employ the service of a domestic. Neither have most women ever deliberately exploited another woman economically. But practically all of us in capitalistic America have found ourselves in situations where we have been grievously reminded of the inequality among people in general, and women specifically.

I am the daughter and granddaughter of domestics, and the great-granddaughter of a slave. Yet through freak circumstances and the grace of God, I am an educated and employed black woman upon whom, from time to time,

capitalism confers opportunities to exploit other women—both black and white. My potential victims are those who are neither educated nor employed.

I am painfully aware of this when I step across the floor recently mopped by the black maid in the office building where I am late for an executive meeting. This fact becomes glaringly evident when I eat out at a restaurant, and the white waitress who is the age of my mother calls me "Ma'am." And I am reminded of my privileges when, while sitting at a desk in my hotel putting the final touches on a speech for an organization of Christian women, the Latina maid tiptoes in to replace my soiled linen and to make my bed.

None of us is safe from the ravages of a society that makes room for only a chosen few and keeps at bay the vast majority. For those of us who are educated and employed, there is always the potential to be a Sarai; and, lamentably, there are far too many opportunities in a capitalist society for her to surface. Yet most of us are just a paycheck away from being a Hagar.

The tragedy of it all is that, in actuality, this is neither Hagar's nor Sarai's story. It was never meant to be. It is Abram's story. The episode concerning Hagar and Sarai is only part of a larger drama about the promises of God to God's elected servant, Abram. Hagar and Sarai are introduced only insofar as the roles they play in being used by God to demonstrate the faithfulness of the divine promise to Abram: the promise that God would grant to Abram a legitimate heir who would, in turn, be a blessing to the nations (12:1–3; 17:1–4).

As Abram's wife, Sarai proved to be unfaithful and too impatient to trust God's promise to her husband. She lost sight of who she was in relation to the sovereign word of God, and

in so doing, she lost sight of reality itself. Sarai forgot that in a patriarchal society she and her female slave, Hagar, had more in common as women than that which divided them as Hebrew mistress and Egyptian slave woman. In fact, the only thing that separated the two women were a couple of cattle and some sheep (which in today's language translates to a paycheck and a diploma). What bound them as women in Abram's house—their fate as women in a society that seemed to reward only men—also brought them back together.

If we are committed to the whole truth, we cannot dismiss Hagar's participation in this story. Notice her pathetic sense of herself. In many ways, by acting as a passive victim throughout, she participated in her own exploitation. We admire her for her courage in getting out of her abusive relationship with Sarai (16:6). But we are disappointed that in the end she did not have the wherewithal to remain gone. Hagar did not even have the strength to define herself.

Upon finding Hagar at a spring in the wilderness (16:7), the angel of the Lord asked the runaway slave the unavoidable question: "Hagar, maid of Sarai, where have you come from; and where are you going?" (16:8). Hagar was not only broken, she was empty as well, too empty to seize her future. From whence she had come, she was all too aware. "I am fleeing from my mistress . . ." she responded.

Where she was headed, unfortunately, Hagar could not answer. She could not answer because, although she had run away, she still understood herself to be a slave. And to a slave, life without a mistress is inconceivable.

Hagar's body was free, but her mind remained in bonds. What Sarai thought of Hagar had become what Hagar thought of herself: she was property.

Could it be that the angel had no other choice but to send

the runaway slave back to the reality in which she defined herself? The Egyptian woman was part free and part slave. She had fled, signaling her desire to be free, yet she returned to her mistress' house because she continued to see herself as a slave. Therefore, the angel commanded her: "Return to your mistress and submit to her" (16:9).

Hagar's blessing was within her reach, but beyond her grasp.

When we meet the two women again in Genesis 21, Hagar has given birth to Abraham's slave child, Ishmael. She has resumed her servitude in that household. Sarah, in spite of herself, has conceived and given birth at last to a son of her own—Isaac, the legitimate heir of Abraham—just as God had promised. However, the friction between the two women has not lessened; it has only heightened.

This time, threatened by the relationship developing between the two lads and fearful that the slave woman's son might upstage her son's inheritance, Sarah convinces her husband to evict the slave woman and Ishmael. Reluctantly, Abraham complies. Setting a pouch of water and some morsels of bread upon Hagar's shoulders, Abraham sends the woman and their child away to make their way the best way they can.

Before, Hagar left voluntarily. This time, she is banished by her son's father. Once more she finds herself in the wilderness alone, destitute—only this time with a hungry, crying child to care for. But God finds her where she is and opens her eyes.

Yet before God interceded on the slave woman's behalf, there was a woman who could have made a difference in Hagar's situation. One word from Sarah that morning as

Abraham was giving Hagar and Ishmael provisions could have made a difference in Hagar's story.

Even though Sarah might sorely have regretted her husband's previous relationship with Hagar and resented the child born out of that union, and even though she might have been sorry for her part in the entire sordid affair, Sarah nevertheless could have spoken a word to remind her husband that his responsibility to the Egyptian woman and their child went beyond water and a few morsels of bread.

We must remember this story for its piercing portrayal of one woman's exploitation of another woman.

Quite frankly, the kinds of atrocities some mothers have committed against other mothers and their children continue to stun me. I am often amazed at the extent to which otherwise intelligent, otherwise moral women (and men) will renounce intelligence and morality to protect some perceived right they feel their children have in relation to other mothers' children.

I am reminded of the sight of scowling, rabid mothers picketing and yelling vile insults at innocent schoolchildren whose only offense is that they have been infected with the AIDS virus and want to continue to go to school. Then, there is the sight of white mothers from Little Rock, Chicago, and Boston snarling and hurling obscenities at innocent black children en route to schools they have been forced by the courts to desegregate. What is there about these children that these women hate so much? What kind of fear is this that explodes into madness? I doubt whether the day will ever come when I am no longer appalled by human evil.

Perhaps, on the other hand, Sarah was right. Perhaps it was best for everyone involved for the slave woman and her child to leave Sarah's house. (Sometimes we need a shove—

even from our enemies—to make us stand on our own two feet.) But there is a difference between a shove and a kick. Surely Hagar deserved more than morsels from her former mistress, and even more from her son's father. Sarah, despite her disdain for the situation, could have come to the slave woman's defense. She could have encouraged her husband to make better provisions for at least his son.

Instead, Sarah thought of her own security and that of her son, Isaac. God had shown mercy to Sarah by granting her a child from her own womb. But Sarah was not willing, in turn, to show mercy to a woman whose back was up against the wall.

Sarah had used Hagar for her own purpose, but she would not condescend to speak up on behalf of the evicted woman in her hour of abandonment.

Had Sarah forgotten so quickly what it felt like to be rejected and scorned?

Not only would she not help Hagar, but Sarah also conspired against the Egyptian woman. She preferred to let a few morsels replace genuine mercy.

Can we deny the sorrow in this story? Can we afford to ignore the lessons of this kind of pain? The answer to both questions is a resounding no. The story of Hagar and Sarah touches us in the many places we hide, places that are often held up for public view. It is a story that exposes the many hidden scars and ugly memories of the history of the relationship between ethnic memories and Anglo women in America.

But the story is not limited to the races. It goes beyond race and speaks to the class stratification that divides women: the so-called professional women versus the so-called nonprofessional women, the female young urban professional (Yuppie) versus the female factory worker, the black urban professional (Buppie) versus the store clerk.

Hagar and Sarah's story searches out our unconfessed sins of arrogance and low self-esteem, presumptuousness and passiveness, jealousy and faithfulness, and our conspiracies to get others to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. Like an endless row of braids, the plot weaves the strand of so many women's lives together. And Hagar's life becomes the braids of the oppressed and rejected women—from the exploited maid and the welfare mother, to the single mother and the pregnant girlfriend.

Moreover, if we can step outside the painful memories that haunt us in our relationship racially as black and white women, and economically as stratified women, we might find another story, one equally familiar, one equally haunting. We will recognize it by its basic story line: two women's involvement with the same man.

Hagar and Sarah's story is also the story of "the other woman" by whom a man has children. In many cases this woman is the most abused, neglected, and maligned woman of us all. We, like Sarah, think if we can ignore her children, we can also ignore her.

At some time in all our lives, whether we are black or white, we are all Hagar's daughters. When our backs are up against a wall; when we feel abandoned, abused, betrayed, and banished; when we find ourselves in need of another woman's help (a friend, neighbor, colleague, relative, stranger, another man's wife); we, like Hagar, are in need of a woman who will "sister" us, not exploit us.

In those times we are frequently just a sister away from our healing. We need a woman, a sister, who will see in our destitution a jagged image of what one day could be her own story. We need a sister who will respond with mercy. We need a sister whose genuine mercy—not pity, which is

episodic, random, and moody—is steadfast, consistent, and free.

Betrayal. Exploitation. Denial. Resentment. Suspicion. Distrust. Anger. Silence. How do we get past these memories? How do we reach beyond the enormous gulf of distrust on both our parts and forge friendship and coalitions?

It will not be easy.

In fact, it will be very difficult.

It will require a deliberate effort on our part to listen when it is easier to dismiss.

At times, it will mean that we must be as willing to confront and confess the evil in us, as a community of women, as we are to point to evil in the world.

It will require a resolve to work with one another both in spite of and because of the pain.

It will require a willingness to respect the genuine differences in one another and to see them as the strength of our coalition, not the bane of our existence.

As black and white women in America, as Israeli and Palestinian women, as white South African and black South African women, as Asian and European women, as the wives of terrorists and the wives of victims of terrorists, working for righteousness in splendid isolation from one another is a luxury we cannot afford.

Injustice in our land relies upon the perpetual alienation of women from one another and upon relentless hostility among women. Indeed, our estrangement from one another continues to compromise the integrity of our witness as God-fearing women.

The futures of our families depend upon our ability to bridge over the memories of our scars.

The future of our people depends upon our willingness to tunnel through the tragedies of our past encounters.

The future of our world depends upon our resolve to walk headlong into that which makes us different as diverse tribes of a vast world and to march straight into that which binds us as people of God.

If we don't, who will?

Finally, out in the wilderness, overcome with grief, the bitter, distraught, banished Egyptian slave woman set her child down and went off a short distance to weep alone.

She could not bear to watch her son suffer.

This time, instead of an angel, the Lord appeared.

It was not the mother's weeping that caused the Lord to speak. Rather, it was the child Ishmael's tears that moved the Lord to intervene on behalf of the mother, Hagar: "But the Lord heard the voice of the lad" (21:17).

Just as Ishmael must have wept for the senselessness of Hagar's, Sarah's, and Abraham's ways, maybe it will take our children's weeping on our behalf—or children's weeping for the sins and prejudices and stubbornness of us their mothers and fathers—to convince God to intervene on our behalf. Perhaps as a global community we will be saved—if we are to be saved at all—because of the little children whose innocent tears will bring heaven to its knees.

Though their tears have not always moved us, hopefully they will move God.

God have mercy upon us.