**Service 1 based on the stories of Sarah and Hagar (by Margaret Roe)**

**Welcome**

**Call to worship**

We come together to worship God, to listen to his word and to learn from Him. Today we look at the stories of two of the women in book of Genesis and what we can learn from their stories.

**Hymn StF 91 The God of Abraham praise** **or 24 Come, now is the time to worship** or another hymn/song of praise or gathering

**Prayer of Praise from Word in the World (or other prayer of praise)**

Gracious God,

ever faithful, ever true,

our words of praise are inadequate.

How can we speak of you in your greatness?

Silence alone seems fitting

to reflect the wonder and awe

of your unending presence.

*Silence*

But we break the silence for we must speak.

We must tell out our love for you.

We must search for words

that somehow declare you are our God:

Father, Son and Spirit;

words that somehow say

we are your people, and we praise you.

Loving God,

in silence and in speaking,

our hearts lift to offer worship,

for you are the light of creation's dawn,

you are the very breath of our lives;

you are the promise of renewal;

you are the offer of forgiveness;

you are the flame of inspiration;

you are the wind of challenging change.

You are our God, we are your people.

We worship you. Amen.

**Prayer of Confession (**or another prayer of confession)

Loving God, as we come to you,

We are aware of our own failings.

We do not always listen when you call us to do new things or go to new places.

We are reluctant to move out of our comfort zone.

Forgive us and give us the strength and courage we need to move on to new phases in our life.

We are sometimes jealous when others have things we would like or can do things that we can’t.

Forgive us and help us to accept who we are and what we can do.

We are sometimes impatient when things don’t turn out the way we would like or promises seem to take a long time to be fulfilled.

Forgive us and grant us the patience we need to accept what the future holds for us.

In Jesus' name we pray. **Amen.**

**The early matriarchs**

If you were asked to name some of the characters in Genesis – you would probably come up with names like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph.

But what about the women? Can you name them? You’ve probably heard of Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Leah but they don’t readily come to mind. And you may not have heard of Hagar, Deborah, Bilhah and Zilpah. What about their stories? Were they just docile wives or slaves, doing what their husbands or owners expected of them or did they have independent minds, taking the initiative themselves?

After our next hymn we are going to hear the stories of Sarah and Hagar.

**Hymn StF 476 One more step along the world I go**

We first hear a familiar story.

**Bible reading - Genesis 12:1-9**

**Comment**

I’m sure many of you have had to move from time to time, maybe just to a bigger or smaller house as family circumstances have changed. Or perhaps to a new town or even country for work. Not only is it a big upheaval but there are new surroundings to get used to, new people to get to know, maybe a new lifestyle. It may have been our choice or we may not have had much say in the matter. We may have had anxieties about what the future in a new place would hold. As Christians have we felt confident that God will go with us and be with us in that move?

So what did Sarah think when Abraham told her they were to move?

Perhaps this was her response.

**Sarah – The Unexpected Move**

It’s hard to be uprooted at my age.

“Pack your bags” he had said.

“Why, where are we going?”

“I don’t know”, he replied. “Just pack your bags.”

Well I know women must obey their husbands but this was too much.

“How long are we going for?” I asked.

“What do you mean we’re moving?”

I thought we had settled here. All our family are here.

I know many of the people around us are nomadic but I thought we were different.

We have made our money and have settled down.

Why should we get up and move on at this time in our lives?

I was sixty-six and Abraham seventy-five.

What did he mean that God told him to? Who is this God?

Our gods belong here in this place.

But not this one, apparently.

He has told Abraham that he is going to take him to a land that he will show him and give that land to our descendants.

Our descendants!

At our age!

We gave up hope long ago of having children.

What’s the use in having land if we have no sons to pass it on to?

I have no desire to move.

But as his wife I have no choice.

It will not be easy.

We have many possessions and animals.

At least we have servants, too.

They will do the packing and the carrying.

But I don’t want to leave what has been my home for so long.

I don’t know what the future will hold for us.

And yet, I feel confident that this God who has told Abraham to go will be with us.

**Comment**

And so they came to Canaan. The passage in Genesis speaks of Abraham becoming the father of a great nation and the meditation suggests Sarah’s doubts about this.

We pick up the story ten years later, but this time we hear not Sarah’s story but her that of her maid Hagar.

**The Surrogate Mother – Hagar**

I am a slave. And slaves have no rights.

I was a maid to Sarah, Abraham’s wife,

so I had a better life than many slaves.

He was rich and there were many servants and slaves.

I didn’t have to do hard, manual work.

Sarah was not a harsh or cruel mistress.

I had food to eat and a comfortable place to sleep.

But I was at Sarah’s beck and call,

to do whatever she wanted, whenever she wanted.

My life was not my own.

I was unlikely to have the opportunity to marry.

I became Sarah’s maid many years ago when they moved down to Egypt during a famine.

But it was not long before we all moved back to Canaan.

It was hard to leave my homeland.

But God had promised the land of Canaan to Abraham and told him that he would be the father of a great nation.

But ten years later he and Sarah were still childless.

They were getting anxious about this unfulfilled promise.

Sarah was well past the age for bearing children.

Instead of taking another wife which most other wealthy men would have done, I was to sleep with Abraham in the hope that I might bear a child for him.

The child would not be considered mine, it would be thought of as Sarah’s.

I would have no influence on his life once he was weaned.

I had no choice in the matter.

A few weeks later I discovered that I was pregnant.

How can you say how you feel in those circumstances?

I was happy to be bearing a child but sad knowing it would not be mine.

And what about Sarah?

How did she feel?

I’m sure she had mixed up feelings too.

Probably she was jealous.

I’m not sure, why, because I was not in a position to usurp her.

And I could see how much Abraham loved her.

She accused me of gloating and despising her.

Perhaps she was right.

It was a good feeling to have something that she did not.

She complained to Abraham about my behaviour but he refused to do anything.

And so she started to ill-treat me.

She was very careful. She did nothing that might harm the baby.

But she made my life a misery.

So much so that I ran away.

I fled to the desert and eventually came across a spring where I could drink and rest.

And then I had this weird experience.

An angel appeared to me.

At least I think it was an angel.

He knew who I was.

He gave me a message from God.

I began to think that it was God himself.

“The God who sees me” I called him.

He told me to return to Sarah and submit to her.

That would not be easy.

Would she treat me even worse now that I had run away?

But the angel also made me a promise.

I would have a son.

There would be too many descendants to count.

He would be a wild donkey of a man.

He would live in hostility toward his brothers.

Did that mean Abraham would have more sons?

Anyway, I went back.

I had no choice really.

There was no way I could survive in the desert with a baby.

And my son was born.

It was Abraham who called him Ishmael

But it seemed right, it means “God hears”.

God, whom I had met in the desert, had heard me and protected me.

**Comment**

And you thought surrogate motherhood was something new. Surrogate motherhood is now accessible in ways not thought of in the time of Sarah and Hagar. Hagar had no choice over what happened to her body. Those who offer themselves for surrogacy today make a deliberate choice. But even so they are not always aware of the emotions and feelings and the psychological issues that may arise in carrying a baby for someone else for nine months. And giving up the child after they have carried them for that time.

It can’t have been easy for Hagar.

**Hymn StF 41 Blessed be the name of the Lord or**

**StF 104 God moves in a mysterious way**

**Comment**

But that wasn’t the end of the story. Many years later, Sarah and Abraham are well past the age for bearing children, and that promise of descendants had not been fulfilled. I am sure there were times when they doubted whether the promise would ever be fulfilled. Sarah had got to the point of waiting for so long for a child of her own who would inherit God’s promise that she had given up hope and wouldn’t believe it when she heard the promise again.

**Bible Reading Genesis 18:1-15**

**The Long Awaited Son – Sarah**

Have you ever made a fool of yourself and been embarrassed?

I’m sure you have.

Well I did once.

Except I was embarrassed first and then made an even bigger fool of myself.

One day some visitors came.

They were strangers but seemed to have come with a purpose.

There were three of them, but at times it seemed as though there was only one and that it was God himself who was speaking.

As usual we offered them hospitality – fresh water and a meal.

I was curious.

As a woman, it was unthinkable that I should join the company.

But I positioned myself in the entrance to the tent, out of sight, trying to pick up snippets of the conversation.

“Where is your wife, Sarah?” one of them asked.

How did he know my name?

This was very puzzling.

“I will return next year and your wife will have a son.”

Well I could not control myself.

I burst out laughing.

At my age? He must be joking.

When my gales of laughter had subsided, I heard him ask “why did Sarah laugh?”

And I realised that my laughter had been heard.

Did they know what I was thinking?

I was so embarrassed.

Something compelled me to come out of the tent.

They must have known I had heard the conversation.

I felt such a fool.

And yet I made an even bigger fool of myself.

I actually said “I didn’t laugh”.

How could I have been so silly?

They knew as well I did that I had laughed.

But I was scared.

I didn’t think what I was saying.

But he repeated the promise that I was to have a son about this time next year.

Did he know something about God’s promise?

For a long time that promise had worried me.

A promise that this land would be given to Abraham’s descendants.

How were we to have descendants when we were both so old?

But that promise had been repeated several times.

Surely there was no hope of fulfilling it at my advanced age?

But somehow the words of these men rang true.

Well the year has passed.

And I have a son.

We named him Isaac.

It means “he laughs”.

A reminder of my foolishness and embarrassment.

But more significantly, God has indeed brought laughter to me in my old age.

All who heard about it laughed and rejoiced with me.

God may seem slow to fulfil his promises.

But he does not let us down.

And I’m sure that he laughs with us at our foolishness.

And so Isaac was born. The promised child who would be the father of a great nation and inherit Abraham’s lands and wealth.

**Comment**

We can imagine Sarah’s joy at finally having a child of her own. Did she trust that God would fulfil his promise after all those years? Or did she have doubts?

But where does that put Hagar and Ishmael?

The biblical story gets a little confusing here. At various points we told Abraham’s age. He was 75 when they travel from Haran to Canaan, 86 when Ishmael was born and 100 when Isaac was born.

But the final story of Hagar and Ishmael we are going to hear gives the impression that Ishmael is a toddler. The reflection that follows the reading is consistent with the dates, making him a stroppy teenager.

**Bible Reading Genesis 21:8-21**

**Hagar – Rejection**

My son, Ishmael, grew up in Sarah’s household.

Because I was still her maid I saw a lot of him.

But I couldn’t help wondering what his future would be.

Was he really going to inherit all of Abraham’s wealth and land?

But when Ishmael was thirteen, the unthinkable happened.

Sarah became pregnant.

You can imagine how I felt,

helping her through her pregnancy

and then with her young son, Isaac,

knowing that he would inherit

what I had come to think of as my son’s rights.

I had been secretly hoping that it would be a girl.

But that was not to be.

What was to become of Ishmael now?

There was a great celebration on the day that Isaac was weaned.

Ishmael felt a little awkward and out of place as fourteen year olds can do.

I saw him playing with Isaac.

Was he teasing him or worse still bullying him?

I could see Sarah looking at me in an odd sort of way.

As if she could at last have her revenge.

The next day Abraham came to see me.

It was obvious that it was a reluctant task for him.

I think he had become fond of me after Ishmael had been born.

He told me that Sarah had insisted that Ishmael and I should be sent away.

But he also said that God had confirmed this for him and

had told him that although Isaac would inherit the promise,

my son would also be the father of a great nation.

He gave me food and water for my journey and we went on our way.

Where could we go?

I wandered in the desert but after a couple of days our supplies had run out.

Ishmael sat down under a bush and refused to go any further.

I walked a little way and then I too sat down, within sight of him.

I began to cry, and I heard the voice of an angel again.

I didn’t see him this time but it was just as real.

He told me to get Ishmael up and that he would be made into a great nation.

The same words that Abraham had said.

Surely the promise must be true.

It was as I walked over to Ishmael that I noticed the well.

God had also supplied our needs.

I filled the water skin so that we could both drink.

And we went on our way, soon meeting up with other travellers.

So what became of us?

We remained living in a tent in the desert,

and Ishmael grew up to be a skilled hunter.

Eventually I found him a wife from my homeland of Egypt.

He had a large family but sure enough the angel’s other words also came true.

Because he had grown up in the desert he was quite a wild man.

He loved to fight.

His sons and their families settled near the border with Egypt.

But he and his sons lived in enmity with all the other clans and tribes around, and particularly those descended from Isaac.

**Comment**

Tradition has it that the hostility between Isaac’s descendants and Ishmael’s has continued through the centuries to the present-day conflicts between Jew and Arab. It’s not quite as straightforward as that as there were many other tribes descended from the various relatives of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. But some of these Old Testament stories give us an insight into the conflicts between tribes which continue today.

And we must remember, too, that even though God’s promise was fulfilled through Isaac, God provided for Hagar and Ishmael and took care of them. As he does for all people across the world, whatever their faith.

**Hymn StF 470 Lord for the years**

**Prayers of Intercession**

Thank you, Lord, that you are a loving and faithful God who fulfils his promises.

You never let us down.

Thank you that you are always with us, even when we feel lonely or anxious.

Help us to feel your love surrounding us.

Help us to know that you never let us down.

Take away our worries and fears about the future.

And so we pray for others.

We pray for those who have had to leave their homes and settle in a new place.

For those who have left home and family to settle in a new place for work.

For those who have been forced to leave their homes because of war, political unrest, persecution, flood, drought or famine.

*Mention any particular places currently in the news*

We pray that they find shelter, security and a welcome in the places they go to.

Lord in your mercy

**Hear our prayer**

We pray for women who can’t have children or have been waiting a long time in the hope of bearing a child. For those making decisions about surrogacy or artificial insemination.

We pray that they may be comforted and guided in decisions that are made.

Lord in your mercy

**Hear our prayer**

We pray for those who are waiting for promises to be fulfilled and pray that you will grant them patience. We pray that they may have the reassurance that all things work for good for those who love the Lord.

Lord in your mercy

**Hear our prayer**

We pray for situations in our world and country which need our prayers today.

*Mention any particular places currently in the news.*

Lord in your mercy

**Hear our prayer**

We pray for those we know and love who need our prayers today, the sick, the lonely the anxious and fearful.

*Either mention any by name or allow a time of silence.*

Lord in your mercy

**Hear our prayer**

Loving God, we thank you that you answer our prayers which we ask in the name of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

**The Lord’s Prayer**

**Offertory**

**Hymn 465 Guide me O thou great Jehovah**

**Blessing** – The blessing of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit be with you all evermore. Amen.

**or say the grace together – The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.**