

**McCabe United Methodist Church**  
**Behind the Veil: Faith and Adversity (part 2)**  
***(The worst thing is not always the last thing)***  
**Genesis 16:6-15 \* John 14:1: August 5, 2012**  
**Pastor Rick Fossum**

Today, we continue our series called, *Behind the Veil*. It's a series that looks at women of the Bible . . . some of the women are famous and some are not. What lessons can we learn from these women?

Today, we'll be hearing from four women. Three of the women are from the Bible and one isn't. Each woman has their own story to tell. Through these women, I hope God will speak to you.

Most of us have faced tragedies of some kind in our lives, despair, and hard times. Often, these hard times come to us without warning. They just show up and turn our worlds upside down. The women we'll be hearing about today know hard times. They know difficulties.

First, there's Hagar. Hagar was a slave girl living in Egypt. She lived sometime between 2000 B.C. and 1600 B.C. We don't know how Hagar got to be a slave girl. Maybe her parents sold her into slavery to pay off some debt. It happened back in those days. Maybe, she was captured in some battle and was forced into slavery. We don't know. We do know that slaves had little or no rights. They were pieces of property. They did what their masters told them to do. Period.

About this same time, Abram and his wife Sarai (this was before God had changed their names to Abraham and Sarah) moved to Egypt because there was a famine in Canaan. While in Egypt, Hagar the slave girl, was given to Sarai.

Now, this is where the story gets a bit complicated. Earlier in the story, God had promised Sarai that she would have a son. The problem was this: Sarai was old . . . really old! She probably was in her 70s or 80s or maybe even in her nineties at this time and motherhood wasn't exactly knocking on her door.

Now, Sarai wanted a son badly, but she doubted God and God's promise to her. In desperation to have a son, she gave Hagar, her slave girl, to Abram. Her plan was to have Abram sleep with Hagar, get Hagar pregnant, deliver Hagar's baby and then take the baby for herself. It's not how we do things today, is it?

Poor Hagar. She didn't want to sleep with Abram. She didn't want to give birth to a baby that she'd have to give away. But, she was a slave and slaves were often forced to do

things they didn't want to do.

And so it happened, Hagar got pregnant. This is where our scripture reading from Genesis kicks in. Hagar and Sarai, at this time, were not getting along. They were fighting like cats and dogs. Hagar was not a happy camper. She was angry at Sarai for the way she was being treated. And Sarai didn't like Hagar's attitude and she responded by mistreating her even more.

Hagar decided to take her pregnant self and run away. In those days, slaves that ran away from their masters, earned them the death penalty. But, apparently Hagar didn't care. Hagar would rather die than put up with Sarai. She got as far as the Wilderness of Shur. She fell on her hands and knees and she cried out for help.

Can you sense Hagar's desperation? Do you know how she feels? Have you ever been in a place where running away is a better solution than staying where you're at?

The story goes on. It's the God part. God went looking for Hagar and found her. God found Hagar in the middle of the wilderness. Isn't this just like God? When there's no place for us to run . . . when all our options are gone . . . when life is at it's very worst . . . God finds us.

God called Hagar by her name. God said, **"I see you Hagar. I know what you're going through. I know how you're being treated, but I want you to go back. I want you to go back because you're carrying a baby boy. I have plans for him. He'll grow up to be the father of a great nation. By the way, I want you to call your son Ishmael."**

And so Hagar went back to Sarai and Abram and gave birth to Ishmael and Ishmael went on to become the father of the Islam or Muslim nation and Hagar became the queen mother.

It doesn't matter what's going on in your life right now. God sees you and sees what's going on. God hears you. God can help you. With God, the worst things in life are not always the last things. God has the last word.

And then there's Naomi. Naomi's story is a bit like Hagar's story. Naomi means 'joy' in Hebrew. She and her husband lived in Bethlehem. They had two sons. Life was good for them. Then, a famine struck the land and they were forced to move to the country of Moab. In Moab, they found rain for their crops and grass for their cattle. Life was good once again.

Then, tragedy struck when Naomi's husband suddenly died. Thankfully, Naomi still had her two sons to take care of her. The two sons married Moab women. Then, tragedy struck again when both sons died. Suddenly, all of Naomi's hopes and dreams vanished with their death. As a woman, she couldn't own property. She had no security. She had no one to take

care of her. Naomi changed her name to ‘*Mara*’ which means ‘*bitter*’ in Hebrew. In that bitterness, she told her two daughters-in-law to go back to their Moab families where they might find another husband.

Ruth, one of the daughters-in-law, refused to leave Naomi. She pledged to take care of her. Listen to these words from Ruth: *"Don't force me to leave you; don't make me go home. Where you go, I go; and where you live, I'll live. Your people are my people, your God is my god; where you die, I'll die, and that's where I'll be buried, so help me God—not even death itself is going to come between us!"* -Ruth 1:16-17 (MSG)

And so Naomi and Ruth moved to Bethlehem. They didn’t have two nickels to rub together. They both prayed. Naomi prayed to find happiness again. Ruth prayed to find a husband.

At this time, Israel had its own version of a welfare system. During the harvest, farmers were required to leave a certain amount of grain around the edges of their fields for the poor and if some grain spilled on the ground, they left it for those who had no grain.

Ruth started gathering this grain and Naomi started playing the role of a match-maker for Ruth. Naomi set her sights on a farmer named Boaz. She gave Ruth advice on how to catch a good Jewish boy like Boaz. Soon, Ruth and Boaz were married. They had a son and they named him Obed. Later, Obed had a son and his name was Jesse. And Jesse had a son and his name was David. David went on to become Israel’s greatest king.

Meanwhile, Naomi changed her name back to ‘*Naomi*’ because now she was ‘*happy*’ again.

Do you see how God works? Again, the worst things in life are not always the last things. God heard the prayers of both Naomi and Ruth. God responded by whispering in Ruth’s ear, “**take care of your mother-in-law.**” And then, God whispered in Naomi’s ear, “**help Ruth find a husband.**”

Ruth was God’s answer to Naomi’s prayer and Naomi was God’s answer to Ruth’s prayer. It’s amazing how it works, isn’t it? God uses people like all of us to be answers to prayer.

Do you hear the voice of God whispering in your ear today? Is there someone who needs what you have to offer? Is there someone who needs you?

Finally, let me tell you about a woman name Bobbi Jo. Bobbi Jo lives in Kansas City. She works with women with addictions of every kind.

This is Bobbi Jo's story. She started drinking at the age of 12. She was an alcoholic by 13. She was homeless living on the street by the age of 18 and a prostitute for the next 14 years. According to Bobbi Jo's record, during those 14 years, she had been beaten up numerous times and raped at least 15 times. She was one of those persons who saw life from the bottom. She would often say, **"I had to drink because I didn't want to face what I was facing."**

When Bobbi Jo was 34, she was arrested and ordered into a detox center. A funny thing happened while she was at this detox center. She found God. When she left the center, she heard God whispering in her ear. **"Bobbi Jo, I want you to help other women who are going through what you've been through."**

About this time, Bobbi Jo's mother died and left her with a small inheritance. She used the money to buy an old, abandoned nursing home in the middle of one of Kansas City's worst neighborhoods and started a ministry called the '*Healing House*'. Today, there's seven *Healing Houses* in the Kansas City area. They serve both women and men who are struggling with addictions of every kind.

God didn't want Bobbi Jo to be addicted to drugs and alcohol. This wasn't God's plan for her. God didn't want her to be a prostitute and live on the streets of Kansas City. God wants something better for all of us. And so God helped Bobbi Jo to turn her pain and suffering into something good. God redeemed her pain and suffering and helped her find a better way to live.

This is what God can do for us. God sees us. God hears us. And God can help us. Always, when we look backwards into our lives, we can see the hand of God. God is with us.

Some of you may be feeling like Hagar this morning or Naomi or Ruth or Bobbi Jo. Some of you may be hurting today or worried or depressed. You need to know this: God sees you. God hears you. And God can help you. You need to remember that the worst things in life are not always the last things. God has the last word.

Today, I'm going to ask Julie to play through one verse of our last hymn. As the hymn is being played, I invite you to ask God for help. Give God your burdens, your pain and your suffering. Pray these words, **"God, will you help me?"**

For those of you without burdens or pain or suffering today, let your prayer be this: **"Please God, use me to help others. Help me to be the answer to someone else's prayer."**