

Facing fear: Genesis 21:8-12; Matthew 10:26-30

A mother and child wander in the unknown—that place where fears overtake us.

by [Melinda Hinnens-Waldie](#) in the [June 5, 2002](#) issue

Sarah, Sarah, how much alike you and I are! A day full of agape love and unabashed joy when we've received the gift of a precious child. Then hours of fear and jealous rage concerning the future of the adored son.

Sarah has been through a lot. Because she is barren, she gives her slave girl, Hagar, to Abraham that an heir might be conceived, and Ishmael is born. Then God gives Sarah and Abraham a son, Isaac. As the Genesis reading begins, Sarah's jealousies have overtaken her. She fears that her slave's child will inherit the patrimony along with Isaac. After all, Ishmael is the oldest son. So Sarah demands that her husband banish Hagar and the child.

Abraham is greatly distressed, for he loves both sons. But he is not consumed by his fear and agony. He seeks God's mercy for his dilemma and is able to hear God's word to him. God assures him that Ishmael will live and become the founder of a great nation. Trusting God, Abraham gives bread and water to Hagar and Ishmael and sends them into the wilderness.

The scene shifts to mother and child wandering in the unknown—that place where fears overtake us and God seems distant or absent. When the water runs out, Hagar places Ishmael in the shade of a bush and cries out to God for mercy. God hears her sobs and delivers a message through an angel who asks Hagar why she is afraid. The angel tells her that she should lift up Ishmael, hold fast to her son and that indeed this child will someday be the patriarch of a wonderful nation. Through God's graciousness, Hagar's "eyes are opened" and she sees a well of water nearby. Ishmael does become the father of a nation, and lo and behold, Abraham becomes the progenitor of both Jews and Arabs.

Fear almost won the day—fear displayed in jealousy, fear for the life of a child, and fear for the future. For the sake of theological debate, let us challenge ourselves with this statement: The opposite of love is fear. When we are afraid, our fear may immobilize us. We become paralyzed, and can easily allow an overarching dependence to control our lives. It is at that point that fear casts out love—both love of God and love of self.

This immobilization of love, this place where fear descends like a cloud of anguish, has happened in my life and in countless others I have known. I recall only too vividly that on the day my husband died, my second grandchild was born. Between tears of deep sorrow and tears of joy, I was at least able to “open my eyes” to this beautiful theology and mark the juxtaposition of life and of death in the everyday.

Then, two days later, I received the phone message that my grandson had stopped breathing and was being rushed to the pediatric specialists. I was torn apart by fear, not only the fear that I might lose a precious one whose life had only begun to enchant me, but fear that I would not be able to handle another loss. I “laid myself down in the shade,” unable to comprehend. Like Sarah I was terrified of the future; like Hagar I was unable to believe that all would be well.

My grandson did live, but I will never forget the hours of dread. I do know that there are many varieties of fear, and that each can banish love from our souls and leave us parched for Christ’s living water. I try to be aware of the faces of fear that creep into my days, and I cherish these passages from scripture, which remind me of my humanity.

In his commentary on these verses, Walter Brueggemann asks us to consider these sons of Abraham in contrast to Jesus’ parable of the lost son. The older son is obedient and merits a fine inheritance. He is like the “elected” son of Hagar, a child “begotten by determination and planning.” The younger son seems to be honored with “life as a gift.” This son is the “treasured” one. In each case we are to understand that God’s love is issued freely. It is not inhibited by barrenness or old age, by monies or secrets or jealousies gone rampant. It is God alone, as we see in the life of Jesus the Son, who can make all things new and shower us with unimaginable love and grace.

John Mogabgab, editor of *Weavings*, relates this contemporary fable: There was a seeker who met Jesus on a lonely road. “Lord,” inquired the pilgrim, “after all the

people had been fed with the bread and fish, you said to your disciples: 'Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost' (John 6:12). What are the fragments that must be gathered up so that nothing will be lost?" Jesus gazed at the wayfarer a long moment and then answered:

The fragments are your fears, which multiply like the loaves and fishes and fill more baskets than you can carry by yourself. These must not be lost. Instead, they must be brought to Me, so that I may bear them with you. In this way, nothing that is part of you will be left unfound.

We are told that perfect love casts out fear, yet our human love will never be free enough of fear to accomplish such an imperative. With Sarah and Hagar, we pray that we might come to a place of selfless love. We seek to understand that God cares "for every hair on our head," for every bone in our body. We place our hands in Christ's hands, with a hope that lifts us up from fears—and pray unceasingly for God's angel to arrive announcing that we must not be afraid.