

Proper 8/9A
Peace, Seattle
July 2, 2017
Genesis 21:8-21

GOD HEARS, GOD BLESSES

As we shift from the Season of Creation to the Season after Pentecost, there are a few things to keep in mind.

This summer we're using the semi-continuous 1st Testament readings from the Hebrew Scriptures. This series follows the saga of Abraham and Sarah and their descendants from when God first called Abraham in chapter 12, on through the rest of Genesis, and then continues in Exodus, where we pick up the story of Moses, the enslavement of the Hebrew people under Pharaoh, their liberation, the wilderness wanderings, and so on.

This series gives us the opportunity to follow the story line of the patriarchs and matriarchs as it unfolds generation by generation, and to ask what it has to say both about God and about us. Some of my favorite portions of the Bible are included, and while these texts may not serve as grist for the sermon each week, we at least get to keep them simmering on the stove.

Since we've missed the earliest readings, we have some backstory to catch up on.

So as we begin today, here's the Cliff Notes version of what's happened since Abraham and Sarah first received the promise they would have a child and that through him, a great nation would emerge that would bless all families of Earth.

After receiving God's promise in chapter 12 that they would have a son, elderly Abraham and Sarah (who, the story goes, take turns cracking up over the idea this could happen at their age)—naturally wonder exactly how God is going to pull this off. Years pass after that first encounter and nothing happens. Did Abraham hear what God said correctly? They begin to wonder.

God appears again in chapter 15 and reiterates the promise; but still there's no child.

Finally, in chapter 16, the idea enters Sarah's mind that since she's been unable to get pregnant, perhaps God wants the promised child to be born for her by way of Hagar, her slave woman.

Settling on this idea, Sarah tells Abraham to take Hagar as a wife, and he does, and soon Hagar conceives.

You know the saying, A PICTURE'S WORTH A THOUSAND WORDS...

Well, A WELL TIMED "LOOK" CAN BE WORTH TEN THOUSAND!

When Hagar—reveling in her new status as a wife of Abraham—and a pregnant one at that! —looks at Sarah, the feeling she telegraphs is one of contempt.

Sarah, on the receiving end, realizes instantly that this idea of hers was the worst idea ever! Enraged, Sarah lets in to Hagar, who runs to the wilderness seeking refuge from her mistress.

Hagar is met there by an angel of the LORD, who announces a promise about the child she will bear, and tells her to return to Sarah, which she does.

When the child is born, he's named Ishmael, which means: "God will hear."

A name, which we learn later, will prove to be prophetic.

Well, more years pass and Sarah herself finally becomes pregnant and bears a son—and he’s given the name “ISAAC” — laughter.

GOD HAS BROUGHT LAUGHTER FOR ME, says Sarah, EVERYONE WHO HEARS WILL LAUGH WITH ME! WHO WOULD EVER HAVE SAID TO ABRAHAM THAT SARAH WOULD NURSE CHILDREN? YET I HAVE BORNE HIM A SON IN HIS OLD AGE.

A happy ending, right? Not exactly. For when Sarah sees the boys—Ishmael and Isaac—playing together and realizes that Ishmael will inherit from Abraham along with Isaac, she demands that Abraham send Hagar and Ishmael away. **This is where our story picks up today.**

“Sarah does not want to see this son of a slave woman, this reminder of her own long sorrow, to inherit along with her son. Her disdain for Hagar and Ishmael are unequivocal:

“Cast out this slave woman with her son” she tells Abraham, “for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac.”¹

“Abraham doesn’t want to do it. Ishmael is, after all, his son. But God tells Abraham to do what Sarah wants “for through Isaac shall your descendants be named” (21:12). And God reassures Abraham that Ishmael, too, will be the father of a nation.”²

Banished to the wilderness with only bread and water in hand, Hagar and Ishmael become refugees. They wander until their supplies run out. Then, in utter despair, Hagar lays her precious son under a bush and goes a ways off to weep; unwilling to watch her boy, her treasure, die.

It’s then that Hagar is visited by God a second time.

“And God heard the voice of the lad,”— ISHMAEL: “God hears.”

God hears the cries of the outcast and abandoned. God hears and has compassion.³

God tells Hagar not to be afraid: “Though things seem hopeless. Take the child in your arms. I have heard his cries. I will save him and will make of him a great nation.”

God opens Hagar’s eyes to see a well of water nearby. Ishmael survives, and grows up in the wilderness to become the father of a great nation, the Ishmaelites.⁴

Muslim tradition claims Ishmael as the father of Islam.

What might this story teach us this morning? Two things come to mind.

First, Sarah’s reaction to the very events she herself had set in motion affirms that relational dynamics like envy, jealousy, rivalry, and self-centeredness, were as much a part of what it means to be human four millennia ago as they are today.

Life is complicated. Life is messy. And in our striving to figure out our families, our careers, and “God’s will for our lives,” we often times make it messier still. We don’t see—or can’t see—how the path we’re charting for ourselves will lead us further away from the hope-filled life we long for.

¹ Portions of this section are excerpted from the commentary on the text by Kathryn M. Schifferdecker of Luther Seminary, found on the Working Preacher website. http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3259

² Ibid. The roles of Ishmael and Isaac and largely reversed in the Quranic tradition. Here’s an article exploring the different approaches taken by the Hebrew Scriptures and the Quran: <https://kulna.wordpress.com/2010/03/29/conflicting-narratives-a-comparative-analysis-of-ishmael-in-the-bible-and-quran/>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

And along the way, in trying to sort through or unravel decisions or actions which we regret, we may find ourselves seeking to BANISH those things—and in some cases, those people—who remind us of our mistakes, of how foolish, or shortsighted our decisions were; or how lacking in faith.

Was this the not-so-hidden dynamic behind Sarah's actions against Hagar and Ishmael?

It's easier and less painful, we figure, to blame others for our errors, missteps, poor decisions, and the like, rather than to look honestly in the mirror of our own fractured selves. But, truth be told, playing the blame game only moves us further away from the life for which we long.

The fundamental question behind this story and really all the stories of the scripture is: Where do you put your trust?

Even when we know what the answer should be, acting on it is hardly automatic! Thanks be to God we have a Lord who won't give up on us and our struggle easily! God's grace abounds even when our failures catch up to us. Buried with Christ in baptism, we walk toward the new life Christ offers, even if the old self must be drowned time and time again.

The second lesson I draw from today's story has to do with how God deals with Hagar and Ishmael. **God will not let them die.** These two, who through circumstances not of their own choosing had become refugees, are not forgotten by God.

AND GOD WAS WITH THE BOY; reads verse 20. **God is with this outcast son of Abraham. And God is with his mother, too, an Egyptian slave woman exiled by the father of her child.**

Reading Hagar's story carefully, we note that she sees God not once, but twice, and even names God. This is a privilege not many have, not many even of the chosen people.⁵

God's choosing of one particular people, and one particular line of that [people] is a scandalous matter for many. The scandal of election is difficult for we who value fairness and egalitarianism. And yet, that seems to be how God works in Genesis and in the rest of the Old Testament.

The chosen people are called to high standards and to difficult trials. They are blessed in order to be a blessing. They are to be a "priestly kingdom" and a "holy nation." It's not an easy thing to be chosen, according to the biblical witness. It is both a privilege, and a great responsibility.⁶

But, as Kathryn M. Schifferdecker points out, we must also note that election, according to this story, does not entitle one to exclusive claim on God's care or on God's presence.⁷

GOD HEARS ISHMAEL. God cares about and provides for this son of Abraham, too. God was with the boy.

It is easy to overlook this story of Ishmael, set as it is between the story of Isaac's miraculous birth and his (near) sacrifice. Yet, it's worth considering what this story tells us about God's care and providence: **We cannot limit God's mercy. God hears the cry of the abandoned. God hears the cry of the outcast, and God saves.**

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

Ours is a world in which it is becoming harder and harder to imagine that both children of Abraham can be blessed by God. A world in which Muslim, Jew, and Christian can coexist.

When Jesus sends the 12 apostles on a missionary journey, he tells them that the experience of WELCOME is fundamental to receiving what God has to offer. To look to others for welcome is to look beyond the surface markers that seem to dominate today's either/or, good/evil, dualistic mindset.

To welcome others—even with something as simple as a cup of cold water—is to welcome the God who hears, who has compassion, and who saves.

For some of us, BEING WELCOMING is easier than BEING WELCOMED.
Putting ourselves at the mercy of others feels risky; we don't know where it will lead.

But this exercise in vulnerability is precisely the experience Jesus invites these “sent ones” to have. It's part and parcel of how they—how we—learn to put our trust in a God who reveals himself in the most unexpected places, and asks us to dwell there with him.

Let us pray...

God our Provider, you come into our unfinished lives promising blessings beyond our hope, and a life in community beyond our ken. Be with all your children who are cast offs, forced to wander and suffer abuse as they seek new places to call home. Hear their prayers as you heard the prayer of Hagar and the cries of Ishmael, and bring them relief. Fill each one of us in this great country with compassion so that, by your Spirit, we may welcome and share the joy of fellowship, and the gifts of life which sustain us all. Grant this through your Son Jesus Christ our Savior.
Amen