

June 21, 2020
Third Sunday After Pentecost
Fourteenth Sunday of Online Worship
Father's Day

Rev. Jacob Snowden

Genesis 21:8-21
Ps. 86:1-10
Matthew 10:24-39

Wells in the Wilderness

Let us pray:

God, our Father, we come to strange and troubling passages in strange and troubling times. Hear us as we cry to you; open our eyes to what might be life-giving in our own wilderness. Amen.



Hagar in the Desert by Marc Chagall

Today is Fathers' Day, and I think every dad, granddad and father figure should pat himself on the back. Know that by certain marks you are undeniably a better father figure than Father Abraham was. You may have missed a band recital. You might have been late picking up someone from soccer practice. Sure, you might even have thought of sacrificing a child or two, but you probably did not tie one up while on a hike to do it. Additionally, you probably haven't passed your wife off as your sister—twice. That's right; Abraham told Pharaoh and King Abimelech that his wife was his sister (which, incidentally, wasn't entirely untrue according to Genesis 20:12). We are talking a bit about Father Abraham on Father's Day, so I promise I will extend some grace to Abraham a little later.

I'm not sure if this is a well-written sermon, but if you've ever seen Kurt Vonnegut's "Shape of Stories" lecture, then it is well-shaped ... water-well shaped, that is. We fall into a hole, which is bad. Then we get out of the hole; that's good. That's the shape of our story today.

Appropriately in this sermon there are two wells where, at the bottom, we strike life-giving water that can be raised up to help us move forward with confidence, compassion, and hope. I entitled this sermon "Wells in the Wilderness" because opening our eyes to what is life-giving as we face a double pandemic of racial injustice and the Coronavirus is no easy task.

Before we get to confidence, compassion, and hope, we have to fall into the well first. This is to say that I think the sermon gets to an unpleasant place. Whether or not that is valuable is ultimately up to you, but know if things feel dark or uncomfortable, consider if that could be a growing pain that leads to joy, compassion, and hope.

The build-up to today's passage goes something like this:

Abraham and Sarah had been promised by God that they would be the proud parents of a prolific people. Their offspring would outnumber the stars in the sky and the sands in the sea. (Can I get an Amen! for alliteration?)

Abraham and Sarah grew older, and Sarah still had no children; so she offered her slave, Hagar, to Abraham as a surrogate. Sarah sought to build herself up by using Hagar, yet when Hagar conceived, we can read in Genesis 16:4 that Hagar *looked with contempt at her mistress*. Sarah offered a surrogate to build herself up, yet in Hagar's sight Sarah was brought down. The shift in their relationship and power led to Sarah dealing harshly with her servant. Whatever that might mean in practice, structurally it means Sarah reinforced her privilege and prominence over Hagar. So Hagar fled into the wilderness, and by a well in the wilderness an angel of the LORD appeared asking, *where have you come from and where are you going?* What a question.

Then the angel prophesied, saying, *You will give birth to a son and name him Ishmael because the LORD hears your pain.* (Ishmael means "God hears"). Hagar names the Lord in return. *You are El-row-ee, because you are the God who sees.* Hagar returns to Abraham and Sarah, which is where our passage picks up.

A short fast-forward brings us to the text for today, after Sarah has given birth to her own son. You can hear the echoes of Genesis 16.

Listen now for the word of God from Genesis 21, verses 8-21

The child [Isaac] grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. So she said to Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac."

The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. But God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you. As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring."

So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba. When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, "Do not let me look on the death of the child." And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept.

And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him."

Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink. God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

The Word of God for the People of God.
Thanks be to God.

Some parts of the Bible are gritty. Phyllis Trible includes this story as one of her “texts of terror.” I prefer to say it is a terrific text for terrible times. The value of gritty stories, in Trible’s words, is that “if art imitates life, scripture likewise reflects it in both its holiness and horror.” Stories like the one we’ve read help us to trust that God works in our most difficult circumstances because this is not his first rodeo.

What’s the Maryland version of that saying? Not God’s first Crab Feast? That’s not kosher.

Where was I?

A sad story—a text of terror—can be both holy and horrifying, abrasive and cleansing. Think of this as an exfoliating sermon is what I’m saying. If we can try to hold these things together, perhaps we can see suffering and solace as two sides of one coin.

Sarah saw Ishmael playing or laughing with Isaac. Perhaps “playing” meant something like Ishmael was mocking Isaac. That would help us sympathize with Sarah.

Or perhaps Sarah saw something at risk in the boys’ fraternal friendship. “*The son of this slave-woman will not inherit along with my son Isaac,*” Sarah said. Sarah cannot even bring herself to use their names. She dehumanizes and delegitimizes the value of the lives of Hagar and Ishmael. Eerily, all these years later, protests still call for the most basic dignities: say his name--George Floyd.

In Sarah’s mind, for Isaac to ascend to patriarchy and privilege, nothing, not even the bonds of brotherhood could stand in the way. Carol Ferguson writes:

“For [Sarah], a woman whose own social standing in life relies on adherence to strict economic and cultural hierarchies, to see two boys playing together as joyous equals is a threat. Ishmael, as Abraham’s elder son, traditionally should inherit at least some of Abraham’s wealth and lineage; but Sarah believes that her son Isaac is to receive that inheritance. Therefore, they must remain rivals, and she cannot afford for them to bond.”¹

Here is a story about privilege and what it takes to maintain it. Sarah feels threatened by any semblance of equality or Hagar’s uplift, so she sends her out to the brink of death. Her supremacy demanded Hagar’s suppression, and I wonder if that zero-sum game is a part of the frustration around saying “Black Lives Matter” and “All Lives Matter.”

¹ Carol Ferguson, *Between Text and Sermon: Genesis 21:8-21*. Interpretation: 2018 (72), 198-200.

White Supremacy requires at every turn the suppression of Black Suffering, Black Names, Black Freedoms, and even Black Lives. Inversely, to say clearly and confidently that Black Lives Matter chips away at White Supremacy, not to replace it with Black Supremacy, but to humanize and legitimize Black Lives for the sake of equality and justice. But what do I know? I am but a lowly social ethicist.

In verse 14, Hagar and Ishmael are given a little bread and a little water in contrast to the feast prepared for Isaac's weaning. They go again into the wilderness. Hagar and Ishmael were first thrown aside for one look that questioned Hagar's second-class status, and again for thinking the future might mean equity for both Isaac and Ishmael.

The wilderness scene of Genesis 21 is more wrenching than in Genesis 16. After running out of water, Hagar resigned herself and her son to death. Hagar left Ishmael under a bush because she simply couldn't watch anymore.

She walked away. She lifted her voice and wept.

This is the bottom of our well. Few verses in scripture are as difficult or deep as these last two. And in the difficulty and depth of our times, in the double pandemic of racial injustice and the Coronavirus, perhaps it is worth meditating on.

Take a breath. Things get better from here.

An angel of the LORD comes, opens Hagar's eyes, and where she might see death, instead she sees a well. She takes her son, gives him water that God has opened her eyes to, and we read that Ishmael grew up in the wilderness and became skilled with a bow.

Ishmael has something like an epilogue in Genesis 25. We learn that Ishmael has twelve sons—twelve princes in fact, and that Ishmael comes together with Isaac to bury their father Abraham. They do share a legacy. They hold their father in common.

I find this story fascinating, no matter how gritty it might be. The grit is good. The grit is good because it keeps us from growing too comfortable or complacent with our predominant perceptions of God's work.

I appreciate this quote from Walter Brueggemann: "Hagar functions in the narrative to keep the horizon of Israel open to 'the other' who also has legitimate claims to make on the promises of God. The story of Hagar and Ishmael precludes excessive narrowing of the tradition."²

The narrowing of the tradition Brueggemann refers to is a line of thought that privileges one family or tribe over all others. Within the history of Israel among plenty of other traditions it is not hard to see where being "chosen" or "elect" in the Reformed tradition has meant being "especially privileged." Privileges are far too often monopolized or weaponized against "others," when they can be used to serve and aid.

² Walter Brueggemann, *Intro to the OT*. Louisville: 2003.

Thirty times in scripture we read the phrase, “*The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob*,” potentially narrowing the scope of God’s care to these particular branches of the family tree. But Hagar and Ishmael disrupt this trio a little bit. God hears Ishmael too! This story has the potential to broaden our horizons of those in God’s care, and it opens our eyes to the people we are to care for.

There is a theme throughout Genesis about family feuds. The first story of the first siblings is a story about feeling unaccepted, so Cain slays Abel and asks, “*Am I my brother’s keeper?*” We’ve just read about the separation of Isaac and Ishmael. Isaac’s sons, Jacob and Esau feud to the point that Jacob steals Esau’s blessing and has to flee for his life. Jacob’s son, Joseph is nearly killed by his brothers until in their mercy and greed they sell him into slavery instead.

That lingering question, “Am I my kin’s keeper” I think is answered in the passage Susan read. There is not a sparrow that God takes his eyes off of, and everyone needs to look out for one another.

I love that Ishmael was a good archer, presumably with good eyesight. How broad must his horizon have been? How do we learn to expand ours? Isaac had weak eyes...that was how Jacob fooled him.

Let us pray:

God, open our eyes to all of your children, and all the ways we are called to serve. Hear our prayer that we desire to be stronger together. Help us to keep one another in compassionate care. Amen.