

“The Story of Hagar and Ishmael”

Sunday, June 22, 2008—Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Genesis 21:8-21

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Last week we heard the story of the miraculous birth of Isaac to Abraham and Sarah, but this morning we backtrack a little to learn about Abraham’s first son, Ishmael. He’s probably less familiar to most of us than Isaac. Ishmael’s story tends to get short shrift in Sunday School, if indeed it gets taught at all—it has its X-rated elements, long deemed unsuitable for children. Now that I have your full attention, you’ll remember that God had promised Abraham and Sarah that they would produce a great nation of many descendants, but the birth of their son Isaac turned out to be twenty five years in the future. As is often the way with people, Sarah got tired of waiting and decided to take control of the situation herself. The ancient world offered an alternative for women unable to conceive. Sarah suggests to Abraham that he spend the night with Hagar, her Egyptian servant girl. If Hagar produces a child, it will be considered Sarah’s child. Problem solved, or so Sarah thought. Of course, things were not so simple. As soon as Hagar’s pregnancy becomes apparent, Sarah’s jealousy begins to foment. Conveniently forgetting that she herself encouraged the event that led to Hagar’s pregnancy, she blames Abraham for taking her up on the offer.

“You should have known I didn’t really mean it,” I imagine her telling Abraham. “She’s been dissing me since the minute you got her pregnant, and you’ve done absolutely nothing to stop it.”

Abraham, I’m sure, was perplexed at what the big deal was. “Sarah, this was all your idea to begin with. I’m sick and tired of all the whining and complaining around here. I need some peace and quiet. She’s your servant girl, you deal with it,” he tells Sarah, “and please, don’t tell me what you did.” Well, that’s all Sarah needs to hear—she becomes the queen of mean. “Hagar, get up and do your chores. Don’t tell me you don’t feel well, you’re just being lazy. Get the laundry finished or you’ll be sorry.” “Feeling a little fat and unattractive today, Hagar? Get busy, it’ll take your mind off your looks.”

Finally, Sarah’s abuse takes its toll. Hagar runs away, into the desert. There God visits her, tells her to return to Sarah, and makes her a promise. Hagar will give birth to Ishmael. God will make her the mother of multitudes.

In due course, as you know, Sarah also gives birth to Abraham’s child, Isaac. But God’s gift of a long-awaited son did nothing to calm Sarah’s jealousy and dislike of Hagar. If anything, the bad blood between the two of them increased. Every time Sarah set eyes on little Ishmael, she could feel the sour seeds of rage beginning to burn in the pit of her stomach. Now a mother herself, she has a new reason to be jealous. She wants her Isaac to rule the roost. He is, after all, the special child of God’s covenant. God’s chosen one should not suffer the indignity of having to compete with a slave-girl’s child for his father’s inheritance, for his father’s affection. Eventually Sarah’s feelings bubble over like a giant volcano eruption, spewing burning lava everywhere. “Abraham,” she announces, “get that woman and her son out of here. I mean it. I’ve had it with both of them, they need to go.”

In what is certainly not his finest moment, Abraham agrees. And so Hagar and Ishmael are sent off into the desert, with only a small quantity of bread and water to sustain them. It amounts to a death sentence. When their meager supplies run out, they face agonizing death by dehydration in the relentless desert heat. Hagar sits down a distance from her child, not wanting to watch him die.

This could easily be the sad the end of the story, but it is not. God intervenes on behalf of Hagar and Ishmael. And Hagar hears the voice of God, saying: fear not, Hagar, God will take care of you and your son. Echoing the covenant with Abraham, God says God will make a great nation of Ishmael, too. Hagar's eyes are opened, she sees a well of water. The two drink from it, their lives are spared. And Hagar and Ishmael go on to live rich lives, blessed and cared for by God.

Now on the one hand, this story certainly presents a discouraging, if not downright shameful picture of human beings behaving badly. God makes a plan, human beings first get impatient with the plan, then try to undo the plan altogether by taking matters into their own hands. God gives a miraculous gift, and people treat God's gift as a justification for oppressing, controlling, abandoning, and ultimately killing each other. God commissions people to bless each other, and people are endlessly ingenious in figuring out new ways to curse each other. God gives life, while human beings keep finding cruel ways to impose death.

The good news: none of this stops God's work. No matter how badly we mess up, God seems to find a way. The covenants are fulfilled. Of course, how God goes about it can seem a little peculiar. Why, for example, does God convince Abraham to go along with Sarah's dreadful plan to send Hagar and Ishmael off to the desert, only to intervene later to prevent their deaths? Wouldn't it have made more sense to whisper in Abraham's ear: Sarah's plan is a bad one, Abe, you need to put a stop to it before things go too far. I think we make a mistake if we are too quick to offer facile explanations. The truth is, there is always more to God than we can understand. Sometimes we need to live with the ambiguity of God, and stop trying to make God simple. It's enough to know that God doesn't give up on us, and that the accomplishment of God's purposes does not depend on our ability to be nice all the time. That's very good news we can gladly hear.

But there is another aspect of this story I want to talk about this morning. You know that both Jews and Christians claim Abraham, Sarah and Isaac as our ancestors in faith. Both Jews and Christians believe we have inherited God's promises to Abraham. These promises are central to both faith traditions.

But this morning we learn there is another side of God's family tree, the Abraham-Hagar-Ishmael side. And over a billion Muslims world wide also trace their ancestry back to Abraham via Ishmael. Muslims claim God's promises to Hagar and Ishmael, promises almost identical to those claimed by Christians and Jews. I will make you a great nation. I will be your God. Muslims regard Abraham, who turned away from the idol worship of his ancestors to worship one God, as the first Muslim. He is also considered one of God's great prophets, perhaps not quite on a par with Mohammed, but close. The Koran, Islam's holy book, includes many references to Abraham's life that are also recorded in the Hebrew Bible, and many religious rituals practiced by Muslims are linked to Abraham.

All of which leads us to conclude that Christians, Jews, and Muslims worship the same God. The God known as Yahweh in the Hebrew Bible, the God of the New Testament whom we know in Jesus Christ, the God whom Muslims call Allah are one and the same. And God has promised to bless and protect both sides of the family tree.

Of course it is human nature to want to claim God's blessings and promises for ourselves and others like us. It is human nature to create insiders and outsiders, and to treat the outsiders as though they were excluded from the circle of God's love. We saw it happen with Sarah. She wants to hoard God's promises and blessings for herself and for her son. She wants to do away with the outsiders, Hagar and Ishmael, so Sarah's side of the family tree can reign supreme, secure that in the knowledge that they alone are truly God's favorites. God put the kibosh on that idea, but we're still struggling to accept the

fact that God loves and cares for both sides of the family tree. We're still struggling with the notion that God cares not just for us, but for all those we would prefer to cast out and keep at a distance—whether they are desperate, homeless single mothers, for whom Hagar is the Bible's first representative, or whether they are Muslims.

Anti-Muslim sentiment is growing in our country today. Almost 2 out of 5 Americans admit to harboring at least some anti-Muslim prejudice, and close to 40% of us say we wouldn't want a Muslim for a neighbor. Harassment of Muslims at work and in public places is an unpleasant reality, fueled by ignorance about Islam, by post-9/11 fears, and by media accounts that encourage us to believe that Islam is synonymous with terrorism. Islam surely has its extremists, but so do Judaism and Christianity. Terrorists do not represent Islam any more than those who murder abortion doctors represent Christianity. Nevertheless, recent research tells us that approximately one in four Americans believes that Islam is a religion of hatred and violence, that Muslims teach their children to hate unbelievers, and that Muslims value life less than other people. A recent ABC News Primetime hidden camera investigation showed a sales clerk refusing to serve a Muslim woman wearing the traditional Islamic head covering. One customer who observed the incident said, "If I was running the place, I'd do the same thing."

As followers of Jesus Christ, we follow a different way, and our calling is to show the way of Jesus Christ to the world. There is no more urgent task for us in the twenty-first century than to figure out how we are going to live at peace and share our ever-shrinking world with our brothers and sisters who call God by a different name. God made it clear four thousand years ago that casting them out was not God's plan.

The Genesis account of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar and Ishmael tells us that Jews, Christians, and Muslims all came from the same family. We share a spiritual ancestor, Abraham. We share many of the same sacred stories, although we sometimes interpret them differently. We share the same God, who has promised to bless us all, to make us great, and to be our God, forever and ever, world without end.

In the desert, God opened Hagar's eyes, enabling her to see a well of life-giving water. She and Ishmael drank deeply. The water saved their lives.

May God give us all the gift of new vision, new perspective with which to see our neighbors. May we go from here to live that vision, and to share it with the world.

Thanks be to God. Amen.