

A Lectionary 12 6.25.23

Genesis 21:8-21; Matthew 10:24-39

Focus Statement: God is with us and with everyone else

The fun part of this summer in Genesis is we get to really dive into stories that we know but haven't really spent much time with. The hard part of this summer in Genesis is, some of these stories are ugly. Really ugly. We are heading into a two-week section of such stories. This week and next, Abraham and Sarah are going to show us a side of themselves we might not wish to see in the heroes of our faith, and God is going to do some things that are going to look, well, questionable.

Last week we saw God keep the remarkable promise that Sarah would have a son. They named the baby Isaac, which means "play" or "laughter" because, as Sarah said, "God has brought laughter for [her]; and whoever hears will laugh with [her]" in joy of hearing of the birth of their long-awaited child. But there's more to that story. In the twenty-five years and five chapters between God promising a son and God delivering on the promise, Sarah got tired of waiting for a child and decided to give her maidservant Hagar to Abraham for him to have a child with her. There is obviously a lot wrong with this, but just put your modern sensibilities aside for the time being, because that's not the worst part. Hagar conceived, and Sarah immediately became jealous and started to treat Hagar terribly. Hagar ran away, but God came to Hagar, promised her the boy would be taken care of, and told her to return. Hagar did as God said, and Ishmael was born. And for fifteen years, that worked ok. But today we learn that when Sarah saw Ishmael, now probably sixteen or seventeen, playing with her son—and fun fact, playing is a riff on Isaac's name, possibly what triggered Sarah's memory—she suddenly realized, oh no, Abraham has another son, an older son,

who could stand to inherit before her son. So she ordered Abraham to send them both away. An order God seemed to support, and Hagar and Ishmael were cast out into the wilderness without water to die.

This is an ugly story. And without lessening the ugliness of it, the cruelty of Sarah, the weakness of Abraham, the suffering of Hagar and Ishmael, let me try to untwist it just a little bit. Because there is, I think, something hopeful and powerful in this story of suffering and abuse. I don't think this is a story of God allowing Hagar's suffering. I think this is a story of God untangling a mess of our own making, doing the best that could be done to wrest life in the face of death.

First some biblical history for you. The first five books of the Bible, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy are what is known as the Torah, the oldest and most central part of the Jewish faith tradition. Knowledge of one book would indicate knowledge of all five. Exodus, which we'll read in the fall, follows the story of Moses freeing God's people from slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land, a journey that included forty very difficult years of wandering in the wilderness wondering if God had forgotten about them and contemplating if life was better under Pharaoh. Why do I share this fun fact with you? Because there are language similarities in how Sarah demanded Hagar be sent away and how Pharaoh sent the Israelites away, and both Hagar and the Israelites end up in the wilderness feeling abandoned by a God who brings water from the desert to sustain them. This story forced the Israelites, forces us, to identify with Hagar and remember that we

have been the people God has freed, and we have been the people God has needed to free others from. That too is part of our history, part of our story.

There's something else too that I found powerful in this story this week. We just get a taste of Hagar and Ishmael's story, but we know it ended well. We know Ishmael grew up to be a good hunter, we know Hagar found him a wife—which let's pause real quick and notice that there are all kinds of stories of men finding wives for their sons, but this is the only time that a mother finds a wife for her son. We get a glimpse here of how strong, powerful, and independent Hagar became once she was free of Sarah's control. Abraham and Sarah may be unlikely choices for patriarchs, but Hagar is every inch a leader. And the lectionary skips this part, but chapter twenty-five talks about how when Abraham died, Isaac and Ishmael buried him together. Ishmael who, by that time, had twelve sons of his own. God made a promise to Hagar before Ishmael was even born about the sort of man he would be, and even more than Isaac, Hagar got to see the fullness of that promise.

Hagar got to see that promise, but we don't, because Hagar's story is not our story. This story reminds us that we are not God's only story, we cannot know all of God's stories. God is the center of us, but God is also bigger than us. God can center Sarah and Hagar; God can bless both Isaac and Ishmael. God can do things that have nothing to do with us and still be entirely and completely focused on us. God's big enough for that. The blessing of Hagar and Ishmael is a reminder that God's love is not bound or limited to any time or place or people. We are, but God is not.

This story I think also challenges us to be uncomfortable with the way Sarah and Abraham acted, and to ask ourselves hard questions about what sort of behavior we might be willing to look the other way at, that maybe we shouldn't. This, I think, is the point of Jesus' teaching to his disciples when he told them he came not to bring peace but a sword and to set a man against his father and a daughter against her mother. Abraham kept the peace in his household by casting out Hagar, and God made it all work out, but I don't think any of us think a good takeaway is that Abraham and Sarah's actions were ok because God fixed it in the end. We can never know how the story might have been different if Abraham had not gone along with Sarah's request, but we can hear this and ask ourselves what injustices we might be called to speak out against. What trouble might need stirring so that our stories are different, so that our descendants don't look back at us as examples of what not to do, how not to live.

Dear people of God these texts, both of them, all of them, are challenging. They call us to go out of our comfort zones, to examine hard truths about ourselves and our stories, and to recognize that we, all of us, are capable of inflicting real pain. And there's, believe it or not, incredible gift in that. Because, dear people of God, love is being able to tell someone the truth about themselves, the good and the ugly, so that they can grow and change and be better. If we are surrounded by people who just tell us we're great all the time when really we're not, we're never going to learn and be better. And ours is a God who loves us enough to confront us with hard truths. To move us and shape us and change us to go beyond ourselves and become the people God knows us to be. That's what these hard stories do,

they call us out in love to be different, to be better. To not settle for the same but to go beyond and really live in the love of God.

And, and most importantly, these stories remind us that God's presence with us isn't dependent on our growth or change or improvement. God's presence with us is dependent on God being the sort of God who sticks with God's people. Abraham and Sarah made horrible choices, and God stuck with them. Hagar and Ishmael were the victims of those choices, and God stuck with them. Ours is a God who pushes and challenges and calls out and never ever let's go. Thanks be to God. Amen.