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First Presbyterian Church
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Genesis 21:8-21

*God of Sarah and Abraham, God of Hagar and Ishmael,
you are always greater than our understanding
and your grace is wider than the boundaries we draw.*

*Open our hearts to hear your Word this day.
Challenge our assumptions, expand our compassion,
and help us see one another through your eyes.
By your Holy Spirit, speak to us, that we may follow wherever your love leads.
Amen.*

“Not Their Best Moment”

Since we’ve been following Abraham and Sarah’s story the past couple of weeks, I’m going to pick up where we left off and preach on the Genesis reading. Plus, who wants to hear from Matthew on Father’ Day with his words:

I have come to set a man against his father,
and a daughter against her mother

Or --

³⁷ “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.

That is not a great Father’s Day passage! Of course, I’m not sure Genesis is much better, once you realize what’s happening in the story. Sorry, Dads. I tried to find something more uplifting and upbeat, but despite what some may think, the Bible is not a model for good-old fashioned family values. And in case you don’t believe me, today’s story from Genesis will prove that true.

I've never preached on this passage from Genesis, so this presented an unusual challenge for me. I've been preaching mostly the lectionary for a good 26 years, which means I've cycled through it about 8 times. But for whatever reason, I've never chosen this passage from Genesis to preach on. So, I'll do my best . . .

First a little backstory. You heard last week that Sarah and Abraham's dream came true, they had a baby boy and named him Isaac. Here's what I didn't tell you, but you may remember from a long ago Bible study. Isaac isn't Abraham's only son. You see, when Sarah wasn't able to conceive, she came up with a plan for Abraham to have a child with her maid servant Hagar. Now, I realize how scandalous this sounds to us today, understandably so. But in Sarah's time and culture it was a logical step to take. But as any observer of human nature might predict, things became a little crowded in Abraham and Sarah's tent. Sarah's jealousy of Hagar and Ishmael, and her disappointment in not being able to conceive, led to her mistreating Hagar – which is actually putting it mildly. Sarah abused Hagar; after Hagar became pregnant by Abraham, Sarah believed that Hagar looked upon her with contempt. So Sarah banished Hagar from their home. But God sent Hagar back to Sarah after telling Hagar that she was going to have a son and should name him Ishmael.

Friends, we cannot speak about Hagar without addressing the obvious, which is how deeply her experience speaks to women's experience of mistreatment and injustice. It's not the Lord's finest moment when God tells Hagar, "Go back to Sarah and submit to your mistress." Granted that instruction came with a promise, that Hagar's offspring will be so numerous that there will be too many to count, but I'm not convinced the promise or gift makes up for the abuse here any more than it would in a contemporary relationship.

All of this has been happening in the background of last week's story and today's story, where we again meet Hagar and a jealous Sarah. As Isaac and Ishmael grow, Sarah's jealousy becomes too much, and Sarah is worried that Ishmael will supplant Isaac. So, Sarah demands (again!) that Abraham send them away, to the desert, which surely means sending them to their deaths. Abraham shows *some*

distress over this, but God tells Abraham to listen to Sarah and do as she commands, and then promises Abraham that he will make a great nation of Ishmael too. Which God does. Muslims trace their lineage to Hagar and Ishmael, whereas Jews trace theirs to Sarah and Isaac.

God's promise must satisfy Abraham, because he sends Hagar and Ishmael packing; out into the desert they go with only bread and a skin of water. Friends, this is a horrible scene, so let's not sugar coat it in order to rush to the good news. Because there is good news here. We'll get to that. But before we do, let's linger in the wilderness for a moment with Hagar and Ishmael. Let's try to understand the depth of what is happening here. Abraham—the father of our faith—sends his own son into the desert with barely enough water for the journey. Abraham, after consenting to Sarah's scheme to traffick Hagar, sends her away with very little provisions, and when those provisions run out and death seems imminent, Hagar weeps and distances herself from her son so she will not have to see him die. We can only guess at the depth of her pain.

But just as Sarah lifted her voice to weep, God hears Ishmael, and God's angel calls Hagar and tells her to not be afraid, because God has heard the boy. So come, lift him up, the angel says, and hold him fast, because God will make a great nation of him. And after that, God opened Hagar's eyes and she saw a well of water and gave the boy a drink. Ishmael lives, Hagar lives – and, everyone lived happily ever after?

Sort of. We read in our closing verse that Hagar found Ishmael an Egyptian wife, and we know that a major world religion did come from Ishmael and Hagar; that God's covenant with Hagar did come to fruition. So yes, the good news here is that God can be trusted to provide; because God did not abandon Hagar or Ishmael like Sarah and Abraham did. No matter what happens, God abides. This is good news!

Now friends, you've known me long enough to know I'm not going to let us off the hook that easily. So let's not sentimentalize it too much, OK? Because while the story does affirm that God picks us up in the midst of abandonment, abuse, and oppression, it's about more than that. It's also about the theological belief that

God does that even when the world tells themselves that such abuse is God's will. And we're living with a decent amount of that today, when supposed Christians are convinced that cruelty and contempt are OK; that in the name of God, you can stop loving your neighbor and start hating your enemy. That is not the truth.

This story from Genesis, and so many others in the Bible, fly in the face of that. God makes a covenant with Hagar, *an outsider*. God's unwillingness to give up on Hagar and Ishmael has implications for our present moment – for the way we think about and interact with people of other faiths, especially Muslims. I heard a Biblical scholar say about this story that it shows us that God is bigger than we can imagine, and can and does love us beyond what we may think is acceptable. That indeed, God has other stories that didn't make the pages of the Bible. Now, we may not want to believe that. But God is so big, so much bigger than we can imagine, do we really think a book of this size captures *everything* about God? Or do we need a bigger Bible?

Let's consider this, too: what does it look like when Christians lead with God's grace and truth, and the assumption that there is something of God's justice and beauty to be found in Hagar and Ishmael's descendants as well as anyone else -- because, while God's people may punish and exile them, God does not.

The larger claim in this story is that God refuses to let Sarah's hatred determine the limits of God's grace. God refuses to let Abraham and Sarah decide who belongs. Sarah may have decided Hagar and Ishmael are expendable, inconvenient, or threatening. But God says otherwise. Instead, God creates a future for the very people the covenant family has rejected.

Because if we're honest, every generation has its Hagar and Ishmael. Every generation has people we quietly decide are outside God's concern. People who don't belong. People we fear. People we'd rather not have as neighbors, or even fellow children of God.

Which brings this ancient story uncomfortably close to home.

Over the last few weeks, our own Lt. Governor has said Americans need "permission to hate again" and specifically singled out Islam as deserving of that

hatred. It is a remarkable statement to make in light of Genesis 21, where God hears the cries of Hagar and Ishmael and blesses the very people Sarah wanted to cast out.

But, this is not a sermon about politics. It's a sermon about Scripture, and the God revealed in Scripture, whose grace continually exceeds the limits we try to place on it. Today's story reminds us of something we dare not forget.

The descendants of Hagar and Ishmael became the people from whom Muslims trace their spiritual ancestry. Jews look to Sarah and Isaac. Christians claim both as part of our story through Abraham.

Which means the very people Sarah wanted gone are not forgotten by God. They're blessed by God. And the family tree is larger than Sarah imagined and Abraham, too. (let's not let him off the hook, here!) And the family tree is definitely larger than we can imagine. So, before we decide who is beyond God's love, Genesis 21 interrupts our train of thought.

So, here's my challenge to all of us today. Can we take our lead from this story? And going a step further, can we take our lead from Abraham's two sons? Because this isn't the last we hear of Ishmael in the Bible. He appears again when Abraham died in chapter 25. "When Abraham breathed his last and died at a good old age, an old man full of years, and he was gathered to his people, his sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him . . ."

****Maybe *that's*** the final word of this story. Two sons. Two brothers. Standing side by side at their father's grave, no longer rivals. Yes, they are descendants of two mothers whose relationship was marked by fear and jealousy. But that does not define them. Together they honor the father they shared.

Perhaps that is God's hope for us as well.

That we would stop deciding who belongs and who doesn't.

That we would refuse the easy invitation to fear or hate those who are different from us.

That we would remember that God's family tree has always been larger than our imaginations.

And that whenever we are tempted to draw a circle around God's love, God keeps making the circle bigger.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Sources:

www.workingpreacher.org

Feasting on the Word, Year, commentary on Genesis 21

Center for Excellence in Preaching, commentary on Genesis 21