

## Ishmael: Then and Now

The story of Abraham, the great Patriarch of the Jews, has many twists and turns. There is no doubt, as I said two weeks ago, that his faith in God, the faith that made him the father of great nations and the first hero of the three great monotheistic religions, is a compelling example for all of us. But there is also no doubt, as I mentioned, that his faith certainly exhibited gaps, times when he was not content to wait on the Lord, times when his choices seem bizarre and wrong-headed to us. Abraham is proof positive that our Loving Creator is inclined to use very flawed material indeed in the commission of a loving plan; a circumstance which I, at least, find very comforting. But the portion of Abraham's story at which we look today is also proof that, even as God moves Creation towards joyful fulfillment, the poor choices and brokenness of the creatures in God's plan can have sad and even tragic repercussions far beyond the life of the individual. Only the power of God's love can overcome the consequences of human sin.

Two weeks ago, we read how God promised the land of Canaan to Abram and his offspring, and then heard how Abram had nevertheless abandoned the Promised Land at the first sign of trouble to travel to Egypt, where he found trouble of yet another kind. This past Wednesday, those of us who gathered for "Soup, Salad & Soul" read in Genesis 15 that Abram took it upon himself to find a way to fulfill the other part of God's promise, the part about offspring. Since Sarai was barren, Abram adopted an heir, a slave born in his house, Eliezer of Damascus. The faithful Abram sounds as if he has been reading from that pseudo-scriptural book, *First Americans*, which says, "God helps those who help themselves." Clearly the notion was not original to Benjamin Franklin. But we also read in Genesis 15 that God renews the promise of offspring more numerous than the stars and seals the words with a covenant ceremony. Now, says the scripture, Abram "believed the Lord and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness."

Nevertheless, when Sarai, in the very next chapter, presents Abram with a scheme to ensure progeny, Abram jumps at the chance. Sarai offers Abram the services of her slave girl, an Egyptian named Hagar, perhaps acquired during Sarai's brief stay in Pharaoh's harem. Hagar is to be their surrogate, conceiving and giving birth to a child who will then officially be considered Sarai's.

Given the resurgence of surrogacy in our own time, the plan may hardly seem peculiar to us but we must remember the depth of meaning this plan held for Sarai. To be a childless woman in that society was a disgrace. For Sarai to claim the child of her slave, quite an acceptable practice at the time, was the only way she saw to save face in her community, to maintain her dignity as matriarch of the tribe. But things didn't work out quite the way she imagined. When Abram succeeded in impregnating Hagar, Hagar became contemptuous towards her mistress, quite the opposite outcome to what Sarai had imagined. Sarai retaliated, harshly, and we read in Genesis 16 how the pregnant Hagar fled into the desert to escape, presumably heading home toward Egypt. But an angel intercepts her, reveals God's promise for her son and sends her back to Sarai's tents. Ishmael, the angel says, will also be the progenitor of a multitude. His life will not be easy: "He shall be a wild ass of a man, with his hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against him; and he shall live at odds with all his kin." Hagar names the well where she has taken refuge Beer-lahai-roi, "the well of God who sees me," and returns to Sarai. So it is that we find in chapter 21, some years later, that Hagar and Ishmael are still present in the family when Isaac, Abraham and Sarah's long-awaited son, reaches the age of weaning.

## Ishmael: Then and Now

It's unclear in the Hebrew exactly what triggers Sarah's demand for Hagar and Ishmael's expulsion. The word which our NRSV translates as "playing" is uncommon and has the same root as Isaac's name, "to laugh." Several alternate translations have been used; some clearly meant to justify Sarah's reaction. Is Ishmael laughing with his little brother, or at him? Is he mocking the toddler? Is he "Isaac-ing," behaving in a way only befitting the true heir? Or is there an element of danger in the older child's play with the younger? One must engage in a willful reading between the lines of this passage to see anything at all in Sarah's actions other than the most egregious act of a mother trying to eliminate a potential rival to her child. Wanda Holloway, the Texas Cheerleader mom who became famous for trying to arrange a "hit" on the mother of her daughter's rival back in 1991, has nothing on Sarah. In his commentary on this passage, Dennis Bratcher points to the tragedy of Sarah, who had finally been blessed beyond her hopes, striking out in fear rather than extending the state of blessing to another. "This is not a sympathetic portrayal of Sarah," he writes. "While just a few verses earlier she had been the vehicle of God's marvelous new work in the world, she here became vindictive and mean spirited, driven by her own sense of needing to protect what had been given to her as a gift... She responded to (God's) work by trying to possess and control it. Sarah's world could only include this one child, her child and had no room for any others."

Despite the almost certain injustice of the situation, Sarah's anger is more than the father of the two boys can overcome. When we might expect some wisdom and righteousness from the man chosen by God to bless the nations, Abraham shows himself to be, as a Seattle sportswriter recently said of a certain fragile Mariners starter, "pitching without a spine or a gut." Just as he gave Sarai carte blanche to abuse Hagar in chapter 16 ("Your slave-girl is in your power; do to her as you please," he said), now he bows to the demand of his jealous wife to put his first-born son and concubine out into the desert. We can certainly say in Abraham's behalf that God assures him that all will be well for the boy and his mother, but we must nevertheless hold him complicit in Sarah's clear assumption that her horrific order will be carried out, in the terrible act itself and in the consequences of inter-familial enmity that resonate to this very day.

Let's be sure not to downplay this event simply because we may know the end of the story. To thrust a mother and her young son out into the desert with only a loaf of bread and a bag of water, miles from any known oasis or other encampment, is so cruel as to be monstrous. Phyllis Tribble includes this story in her survey of disturbing texts in the Old Testament entitled Texts of Terror. Despite God's earlier promise to her concerning Ishmael, Hagar is clearly convinced that she and her son are facing a terrible, agonizing death from thirst and exposure. But the one whom she recognized as El Roi, "God who Sees," sees her plight again. And just as the angel of the Lord told her to name her son Ishmael, "God Hears Me," so indeed God hears the cries of the boy and miraculously guides them to a well, one that our Islamic brothers and sisters revere to this day.

And therein, of course, lies both the joyful consummation of God's promises to Hagar and to Abraham and the dire consequences of Sarah and Abraham's actions. We can read in Genesis chapter 25 that Ishmael became the father of the Arab tribes, a destiny also attested in the Koran. The Koran and Muslim traditions put a rather different spin on the whole story. The Koran teaches that it was Ishmael, not Isaac, whom God commanded Abraham to sacrifice and then miraculously saved. Unlike the Genesis account, in which Isaac is kept in the dark about his

## Ishmael: Then and Now

father's intentions, the Koran says that Ishmael went along willingly to his anticipated sacrifice. And Muslim tradition rather kindly teaches that it was not Sarah's jealousy that sent Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness but a direct order from God. In Genesis 25 we can also read that Ishmael and Isaac were reconciled, at least for a time. The brothers come together to bury their father when he dies. Verse 11 says, "After the death of Abraham God blessed his son Isaac. And Isaac settled at Beer-lahai-roi." It is the very place where Hagar heard the prophecy of her son's greatness, "the well of the Living One who sees me," and it has led Rabbi Arthur Waskow to speculate on what may have happened between Isaac & Ishmael. He has written the following dialogue for them:

(Ishmael) "All these years, I've missed you. I only came to the Old Man's funeral because I knew you would be here. As for the Old Man, I've feared and hated him. He would have let me die. And the way he treated my mother! "The Egyptian stranger," he called her. For that contempt, God tells me, his offspring - your offspring, brother! - must serve as strangers in the land of Egypt. May it be that from that service you will learn to know the heart of the stranger, as the Old Man never knew my mother's heart!"

(Isaac) "And I've missed you. I could never understand why you were ripped out of my life. I too, feared the Old Man - he would have literally killed me. I missed you - and I blamed you. I always thought he took me to that mountain because he was filled with guilt over exiling you. He thought he had to treat us equally."

(Ishmael) "You blamed me! How amazing! For to tell the truth, I blamed you too. For your sake, your mother said, she had us exiled. All these years, we've turned our fear of the Old Man into distrust of each other. But now, thank God, we've reconnected! I would be honored if you would come to live with me a while."

(Isaac) "That would be a blessing in my life."

If that were truly the end of the story, it would make for a very different world. But Genesis 25:18, in language that echoes the angel's prediction to Hagar, says of Ishmael, "He died in opposition to all his people." Something had happened, between the time that Isaac and Ishmael came together to bury Abraham and Ishmael's own death, to set them at odds again. And so it has gone down through the centuries, with the physical and spiritual descendents of Isaac and the physical and spiritual descendents of Ishmael, sometimes at peace but more often pitted against each other.

So for us, those spiritual descendents of Isaac, what lessons can be drawn from this sad tale of family dysfunction? It may be that some of us can identify with Hagar and with Ishmael. As divorce and remarriage have grown more acceptable and more common in our society, more and more people have dealt with the delicate balancing act that is the blended family. More and more children have found their place in the love and even the household of a parent thrown into question by the introduction of step-parent, step-siblings and half-siblings into their previously secure worlds. Handled without the generous love to which we are enjoined by Christ Jesus, it can be a disorienting, fearful and even dangerous time for any child, regardless of their age, just as it was for Ishmael.

In her book I cited earlier, Texts of Terror, Phyllis Tribble draws the historic and modern parallels to Hagar, the rejected women whose stories we know or may have lived: "the faithful maid exploited, the black woman used by the male and abused by the female of the ruling class, the surrogate mother, the resident alien without legal recourse, ... the pregnant young woman alone,

## Ishmael: Then and Now

the expelled wife, the divorced mother with child, ... and the self-effacing female whose own identity shrinks in service to others.” As much as we may deplore the actions of Sarah and Abraham in this story, there is still no lack of Hagers in our world and they are surely among “the least of these” whom Jesus calls us to serve with compassion.

Tempting though it may be to align ourselves with Hagar and Ishmael in this story, we are reminded that it is far more likely for us as 21<sup>st</sup> Century Americans that we actually echo Sarah and Abraham. Rev. Sarah Buteux writes, “You see, the story of Hagar and Ishmael is not a story for everyone. For those of us who feel, like Abraham and Sarah did after the birth of Isaac, that we finally have it altogether, that things are finally as we would have them be, it can be really uncomfortable to come face to face with someone like Hagar, someone who now has less because we finally have more. In that sense our world is teeming with Hagers, women and men who suffer to the point of not being able to sustain their own children, while others profit from their pain and suffering. I shudder to think how much of our country’s wealth is the direct result of the suffering of men and women like Hagar. From the genocide of Native peoples to the enslavement of Africans, to the gross abuses of off shore marketing and the lack of aid afforded those affected by AIDS - millions of nameless, faceless, powerless Hagers have suffered that others might prosper.”

But there are other dangers, greater perhaps than the perpetration of economic injustice, sins against others more terrible than using them as footstools on our way to the American Dream. In accepting the gift of God’s promise embodied in Isaac, then lashing out destructively towards “this slave woman and her son,” whom she does not even deign to name, Sarah commits the ultimate act of selfishness. Because she has received the gracious provision of God, she declares that it is exclusive to her and hers – no one else is worthy of it, no one else may have it. Once we understand ourselves to be the bearers of God’s promise, which we surely are, then the temptation becomes to see ourselves as the only ones so blessed. It is so easy for us to begin to feel that if we are in, then the others must be out. But it is clear from this story that Ishmael and his descendents are every bit as much a part of the plan of God as Isaac and his descendents. It is a reminder to us that we are not God, that we cannot know what part God has for anyone other than ourselves, that we do not get to decide who is blessed and who is cursed.

And if we avoid the self-centered exclusivity of a Sarah, we can still fall into the silent complicity of an Abraham. When otherwise innocent people are being snatched from their homes, held in secret without trial, subjected to brutality, all because of the color of their skin or the origin of their family or the way in which they worship God, it is not the time to be silent. When thousands are slaughtered or left homeless or terrorized by the armed thugs of ruthless dictators, it is not the time to be silent. Those who are suffering, those who are at the bottom of the world’s societies, those who are dying for lack of affordable drugs, they are our neighbors, our brothers and our sisters and Jesus taught that they are our responsibility. Should we shirk our duty, should we be silently complicit in their plight, may God have mercy on us.

Nor can we stay silent when overtures of peace and understanding are made in the inter-familial conflicts that go back for millennia. Many of you are likely aware of the effort by moderate and mainstream Muslim clergy and scholars to bridge the gap exploited by their radical co-religionists. “A Common Word Between Us and You” is a letter published in September 2007

## Ishmael: Then and Now

by 138 Muslim scholars, clerics and intellectuals, addressed to all Christians everywhere. It is, according to its authors, “a starting point for cooperation and worldwide co-ordination, (built) on the *most solid theological ground possible*: the teachings of the Qu’ran and the Prophet, and the commandments described by Jesus Christ in the Bible. Thus despite their differences, Islam and Christianity not only share the same Divine Origin and the same Abrahamic heritage, but the same two *greatest commandments*,” specifically, the love of God and the love of neighbor. There have been several responses to the letter from various Christian leaders, some quite helpful, some less so. If you have not yet read the letter or any of the responses, I urge you to do so (the website address is on the back of your bulletin) and to be prepared for thoughtful, caring dialogue with our Muslim neighbors. Perhaps we can help recreate in Lynnwood that time of peaceful coexistence between Ishmael and Isaac at Beer-lahai-roi.

It is a hard story and a dark story, the story of Hagar and Ishmael. It shows Abraham and Sarah, two of the Bible characters we’ve been taught to revere since childhood, as ambiguous figures at best, if not outright villains. And yet there is light in this darkness – the light of God’s promise and of God’s love. God promised Hagar a future for her son and God was faithful. God told Hagar to name her baby Ishmael, “God Hears Me,” and God did hear the boy and God does hear us. God’s love brought the two estranged brothers together for a time of peace and God’s love can heal the wounds in our lives and bring life back into relationships we thought were dead. By the loving gift of God, we may also see and hear the needs of those around us and act in compassion to them. God’s love became flesh and dwelt among us and now the Spirit of God dwells within us to make us the Body of Christ. Let us heed the mission of Christ and rise up, to bind up the wounds from which our world suffers, to bring light and love to all humankind and to bring peace to God’s creation, beautiful in all its hues and shapes and creeds. Amen.