

Sermon
Community United Methodist Church of Coeur d'Alene
Sunday, June 25, 2023
10am

Text: Genesis 21:8-21 (NRSVUE)

Theme: Anything but Ordinary: Hagar & Ishmael Are Cast Away (Well)
[pastoral warning re: rape and abuse]

[prayer]

Tomorrow a small group will gather here at the church to discuss the first few chapters of our summer book study, *Not in God's Name*. The book's author, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, seeks to help us think about and confront religious violence. His premise is that the monotheistic faith of Abraham that modern Jews, Christians, and Muslims have inherited – that is, the belief that there is just one God who controls both light and darkness, good and evil – this monotheistic belief forces us to grapple with the light and the darkness, the good and the evil that exists inside each one of us. Our faith teaches us to conquer the darkness in ourselves instead of conquering our neighbor.¹ Or as Jesus put it, “Do not deceive yourself! First take the log out of your eye, and then you'll see clear enough to take the splinter out of your brother's or sister's eye” (Matt 7:5 CEB).

[pause]

I discovered a log in my eye this week. A feeling associated with an old memory surfaced as I was reading the story of Hagar and Ishmael. It took me some time to put my finger on it, but eventually I was able to give the feeling a name: Disapproval. And this disapproval was directed at Hagar.

Now, I firmly believe, and I hope we can agree, that Hagar is the victim in this story. She is clearly the wronged person. But the message I absorbed as a child in church – whether explicitly or implicitly, I do not know – was that Hagar was not a good person. I was taught that Sarah and Abraham were a righteous couple,

¹ Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in “Not in God's Name: Confronting Religious Violence.” New York: Schocken Books, 2015. Page 64.

whose descendants were the chosen people of God, while Hagar was the ‘other woman’ whose descendants were less righteous.

Never mind that in Genesis 16 Sarah gives Hagar to Abraham and says, “I can’t get pregnant, so here, take my handmaid and sleep with her. Perhaps we can have children by her” (Gen 16:2, paraphrased). The Bible does not give us Hagar’s opinion of this surrogacy arrangement, but we know that Hagar was a slave in Abraham’s household and therefore she was his property, so we can infer that she likely had little choice in the matter. This was not a consensual relationship – by modern legal standards, Abraham rapes Hagar. Of course, our ancestors did not see it that way. We can understand the differences between their moral code and ours and still have compassion for Hagar.

But I was not taught to have compassion for her. I was taught to think of her as a promiscuous woman who, when she got pregnant, proceeded to taunt Sarah about her infertility. In a fit of rage, Sarah went to Abraham. “This is your fault!” she accused. “I let you sleep with this slave woman, but now that she is pregnant, she no longer respects me.” To which Abraham lazily replied, “I really don’t care. Do with her as you wish” (Gen 16:4-6, paraphrased).

So, what did Sarah do? She beat Hagar. Fearing for her life, Hagar ran away into the desert. There an angel of the LORD appeared to her and commanded her to go back to Sarah and put up with Sarah’s mistreatment. The reward for Hagar’s suffering would be the child in her womb. His name would be Ishmael, which means ‘God hears.’ And God would make a great nation of him (Gen 16:6-12).

So, Hagar went back, and she bore a son. Abraham named him Ishmael, just as God foretold. But in today’s Scripture lesson we learn that even after Sarah gave birth to a son of her own, Isaac, she continued to feel threatened by Hagar and Ishmael. Ishmael was Isaac’s half-brother, but Sarah was filled with such maternal jealousy for Isaac that she ordered Abraham to evict Hagar and Ishmael from the household. Abraham was heartsick at the idea of sending his son away. But God told Abraham to obey Sarah’s command. And so, Abraham “got up early in the morning, took some bread and a flask of water, and gave it to Hagar. He put the boy in her shoulder sling and sent her away” (Gen 21:14 CEB).

[pause]

Friends, we can be honest here: This narrative thread is deeply troubling. It is troubling for the manipulative, abusive, and unequal power dynamics that exist between Sarah, Abraham, and Hagar. It is troubling for the cruelty that Hagar and Ishmael, and to some extent, Abraham, are forced to endure. And God's role in all of this is troubling, too. Because if God is a God of compassion and mercy, why didn't He stop Sarah from mistreating Hagar and Ishmael?

The greatest theological minds have not been able to provide a satisfactory answer to that question, so I am not going to presume to try in this sermon. If we pay attention to Scripture, though, we will notice that Scripture does not deign to answer this question, either. All the authors of Genesis state is that God chose to establish His covenant with Isaac, not Ishmael (Gen 17:15-22). By some providential insight that we are not meant to understand, God chose Isaac for one purpose and Ishmael for another. God chose...and Sarah, Abraham, Hagar, Ishmael, and Isaac all had their different roles to play. Sarah's decision to evict Hagar and Ishmael is in line with the historical and theological reality that was ordained by God's choice. Abraham's sons had to go their separate ways to fulfill God's purposes for them. Now, did Sarah need to treat Hagar and Ishmael so harshly? No. Why didn't God do something about that? I don't know, but I wish He had. I think we can be brave and vulnerable enough to say just that. Because God and this beautiful, complex, sometimes heartbreaking thing we call faith are big enough to embrace the mess of our stories and tenderly hold the questions that hurt the most.

[pause]

But I also think the messiness of this story is precisely how it is redeemed. The Abrahamic narratives we are studying this summer are full of people who embody both light and darkness, good and evil. Sarah, whose name means 'princess,' embodies some of the worst stereotypes of royalty: Jealousy, petulance, abuse of power. But she is also faithful and longsuffering. Abraham is frequently indecisive and on more than one occasion he chooses his survival over the wellbeing of others. But he is also called 'Friend of God' for his steadfast faith in God's promises (Isa 41:8). And somewhere, somehow in the messy middle of these two people is God. God does not change or erase Sarah and Abraham's character flaws. But God does make a way through them. God chooses to work God's purposes through messy, imperfect, sinful people.

This does not excuse Sarah or Abraham's behavior. In this story, they are an example of how the people of God *should not* act. But they are also a reminder that when we fail to act in love, when our bad choices and attitudes and behaviors lead to harmful consequences for other people, we are not beyond the circle of God's grace. And neither are the people that we hurt.

In both of Hagar's wilderness experiences, God shows up for her. When she runs away from Sarah's abuse, God's messenger appears to encourage her not to be afraid to go back to her mistress. I imagine this was not an easy word for Hagar to trust. Imagine the courage it took for her to turn around, to go back and carry her pregnancy to term in the face of Sarah's jealousy and Abraham's ambivalence. But that is what she did. She drew strength from her experience of God in the wilderness. Hagar is the only person in the Bible to name God. She names God El-Roi, which means 'The God who sees' (Gen 16:13). Hagar returns to Abraham's household with the assurance that God has seen her suffering and God will redeem it through Ishmael.

Many years later, when Abraham evicts Hagar and Ishmael back into the wilderness, God shows up for Hagar again. God hears Ishmael's anguished cries for water and Hagar's desperate, pleading lament for her child. God's messenger speaks to her once more: "Hagar! What's wrong? Do not be afraid. God has heard the boy's cries. Get up, pick up the boy, and take him by the hand because I will make of him a great nation" (Gen 21:17-18 CEB). And out of the shimmering desert heat emerges a well of water. Hagar and Ishmael refresh themselves at the well and then they journey into the future that God has prepared for them, confident in the assurance that God has heard them.

[pause]

Even though Hagar's abuse and suffering should fill us with anger – and even though God does not do for her exactly as we would – her story reminds us of the overarching narrative of God among God's people: God shows up. The how and when of God's appearance may be a surprise, but we don't get to dictate those details. We are commanded instead to entrust the wellbeing of our souls to the God who sees and hears our suffering – the same God who sent His son to die on a cross to redeem the sin and suffering of His people. God will do more than just

see and hear our suffering; God will provide the sustenance we need and redeem our suffering, too.

Let us also be reminded that those who have inherited the covenant God made with Abraham and Isaac are called to live within the terms of that covenant. And the terms are that we have been set aside as God's chosen people not for our own blessing, but for the blessing of the world. So often our compassion only extends to the people who look and believe as we do. But did God value Ishmael's life less than Isaac's just because Ishmael was not the child of God's covenant? No! God's promise is for the other, too. God's saving acts are not confined to our tribe alone. As people of Abraham's covenant, we are called to lift up all people, regardless of their beliefs, so that the wells of life are available to them, too.

In her artist's statement, Lauren Wright Pittman writes, "Hagar is an icon of strength and sustenance in those dry desert places...Her eyes are saturated and full, holding the grace that God so freely offered her, the grace that humanity withheld from her."²

This week, may you see and receive the grace that God is offering you in your desert places. And then may you turn around and offer that same grace to your neighbor as a blessing poured out upon the world.

Amen.

² Artist's statement for "Clear Vision" by Lauren Wright Pittman. Graphic image inspired by Genesis 21:8-21. A Sanctified Art, LLC. sanctifiedart.org.