

June 21, 2020

'Laughter' & 'I Have Heard'

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Genesis 21:5-21

Last Sunday, we shared the story of Sarah and Abraham and their laughter at God's promise that despite their age, they would have a child who would assure that their descendants would be as many as the stars in the sky. Today, as promised, we will explore the story of Hagar and Ismael, through whom would come more descendants of Abraham, a nation also blessed by God. The story of Hagar and Ishmael is not familiar to many people. Yet it is an important part of our faith history, flaws and all. And it is relevant to issues in our world right now!

Why have we virtually ignored this story in our Bible? Abraham and Sarah are two of our favorite people of the Bible. We look up to them as our ancestor in faith. When Sarah and Abraham exile Hagar and Ishmael [son of Hagar and Abraham,] we begin to see character flaws in our faith heroes.

Although we know that Sarah was not always a perfect saint, and Abraham himself was not perfect...still...we prefer not to be reminded of their flaws. After all, it reminds us that we have as well! You and I are the faith descendants of Abraham and Sarah! Somehow, Hagar and Ishmael's story threatens us, makes us feel uncomfortable.

Although their story may not be central to ours, to hundreds of millions of people, Ishmael and Hagar are central figures. These hundreds of millions of people are, of course, Muslims....of the Islamic faith. Jewish people, Christians and Muslims are descendants of Abraham, Sarah, Hager, Ismael and Isaac -all are a part of the family of Abraham.

In the Holy Book of Islam, the Qur'an, Ishmael is a prophet. "And make mention in the scripture of Ishmael. Lo! He was a keeper of his promise, and he was a messenger, a Prophet. He enjoined upon his people worship and almsgiving, and was acceptable in the sight of the Lord." (Qur'an 19:54-55)

But let's return to the story of the Abrahamic family!

Last week's story ended with laughter and a promise. But Sarah and Abraham still did not conceive a child. They again, begin to doubt God's extravagant promise! Now Sarah, Abraham's wife, had borne him no children. But she had a dark-skinned Egyptian slave named Hagar. Hagar is from Egypt and her name has the same Hebrew spelling as the word *ha-ger*, the stranger or foreigner or the Other.

Sarah said to Abram, "God has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my slave; perhaps I can build a family through her." Abraham agreed to what Sarai said. ³ So after Abraham had been living in Canaan ten years, Sarah his wife took her Egyptian slave Hagar and gave her to her husband. He slept with Hagar, and she conceived a son named Ishmael, which means literally, 'I [God] have heard.'

According to their cultural understanding, Hagar's child was also legally Sarah's child.

Years later, God's promise to Sarah and Abraham does come true! Sarah gives birth to Isaac (which indeed does mean 'laughter!'.)

So, today's story begins with a blended family!

In Genesis 21 when Isaac is born, what is the scene? There is a feast to celebrate the birth of Isaac. Sarah and Isaac are at the center of the celebration. There is amazement that Sarah, at her advanced age, could get pregnant and have a son.

What is happening with Hagar and Ishmael? Ishmael had been the heir to Abraham, but now what will happen? Isaac is a threat to Ishmael. Abraham now has two sons and how will his inheritance be divided? Ishmael is also a threat to Isaac and when Sarah sees Ishmael mocking her son, she reacts. She tells Abraham, "Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that woman's son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac." Ishmael is "that woman's son," not Hagar's son, not your heir, but that woman's son. As far as Sarah is concerned, Hagar and Ishmael do not exist.

Where are the characters in this scene focused? Sarah is fiercely protective of Isaac. Hagar is just as fiercely protective of Ishmael. Who is Abraham focused on?

When Sarah came to him and told him, “Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that woman’s son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac,” what did Abraham think?”

The matter distressed Abraham greatly because it concerned his son. Which son? Ishmael or Isaac? Abraham was focused on Ishmael, who had been his son for fourteen years. Sarah told him to get rid of his son whom he loved. Ishmael is the much loved son of Abraham whom God blessed.

So Abraham gave control of Hagar to Sarah. 6 “Your slave is in your hands,” Abram said. “Do with her whatever you think best.” Hagar was used and discarded. She was shamed and rejected. She felt invisible, marginalized and unwanted. Hagar was in emotional pain and because of this she was making a difficult journey.

God had a plan for Isaac, but he also had a plan for Ishmael and God’s plan for Ishmael was to bless him Sarah is feeling guilty and threatened. She ordered Hagar to bear Ismael, but now Ishmael threatens Isaac’s place and birthright!

Sarah’s concerns mirror the concerns of many people who marginalize groups of people all through history. Sarah is threatened by Hagar and Ishmael. She does not want them to be equal to herself and Isaac. Sarah wishes to retain her and Isaac’s position of privilege in their society. She does not wish that her son Isaac be deprived of his inheritance as Abraham’s son. She believes it best to cast Hagar and Ishmael out into the wilderness, even to death.

Bigotry and oppression, among other factors, rear their heads when people are anxious, threatened (often economically,) when people feel a threat to their privileged position in their society. In complicated ways, the privileged wish to point a finger at, cast out, get rid of the people they perceive as the threat.

It reminds me of the deaths of millions of Jews and other marginalized people during WWII, including gays and Gypsies. It reminds me of our own Native American’s genocide and oppression. It reminds me of the treatment of the LGBTQ Community. It reminds me of the murder of Floyd George and so many African Americans now and in our history!

Just days ago, in our own Vilas County, a man was spotted walking his dog on Highway K in Conover. He was dressed in a KKK robe and hood. How will we choose to react to this disturbing incident? Will we stand up and declare that this incident is not acceptable in our time and area?

We are being asked to hear this story of Hagar and Ishmael and to know it is not a story of yesterday or of history. It is a story of TODAY and we are challenged to make manifest God's compassion. We're reminded of the damage we cause ourselves when we wish harm of others and the wells of possibilities that exist if we only allow our eyes to be opened to them. And we are reminded that God cares about all of God's children.

Frederich Buechner describes the mystery of God's ways in this story marvelously. He writes, "The story of Hagar is the story of the terrible jealousy of Sarah and the singular ineffectuality of Abraham and the way Hagar managed to survive them both. Above and beyond that, however, it is the story of how in the midst of the whole unseemly affair, God, half tipsy with compassion, went around making marvelous promises, and loving everybody, and creating great nations, like the last of the big-time spenders handing out ten dollar bills."

We see that God's love is expansive, extending to those whom we regard as *hagers*: outsiders, strangers, the other. God's love is not limited by our narrow sense of who should be privileged and blessed and who should not. May this love of God become our acted upon love for all people. Because the peace and future of Vilas County, our nation, and the world depends on it! Amen.