

6-21-26 sermon

Genesis 21.8-21

Where to begin with this story? So many questions! We're continuing the narrative of Abraham in the Lectionary, and are picking up precisely where we left off last week. Sarah has finally received the gift of the son long promised, Isaac, a moment in the story filled with laughter and joy. Then a couple of years pass in the space of a single verse, and on the day Isaac is weaned from Sarah's milk, Abraham throws a great party to celebrate this milestone. Another day of joy for Sarah, no doubt filled with laughter again. But then she looks up to see Ishmael playing with Isaac, and the moment sours for her. So she turns to Abraham and says,

“Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with *my* son, Isaac.”

Now, if you recall, it was *Sarah's* idea for Abraham to try to have a child with Hagar, thinking, “maybe I will obtain children by her.” But when Hagar became pregnant, Sarah resented her, and treated her harshly – so much so, that Hagar fled into the wilderness. There “the angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water,” and tells her to return to her mistress and submit to her. Then the angel of the Lord gives her this promise: “I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted.” Then she hears these words: “You have conceived and shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael, for the Lord has given heed to your affliction.” And thus begins a thread that is woven throughout the bible: God promising a son, and telling the person what to name him. To Zechariah – whose wife, like Sarah, was unable to have children – the angel of the Lord says, “Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will call him John.” To Mary, the angel says, “You will conceive in your womb and bear a son and you will call him Jesus.” That narrative thread woven through scripture begins with an enslaved Egyptian, Hagar, and the name she is told to give her son means, “God hears.” “For,” the angel says, “the Lord has given heed to your affliction.” Then – for the first time in scripture – someone names God: Hagar declares, “You are el-ro-i” – the “God who sees.” That story concludes with Hagar returning to her mistress, Sarah, and bearing Abraham a son, who he called Ishmael. It's easy to miss the significance of those few words in scripture, because clearly *Hagar* tells Abraham what to name his son, and he does.

Fast forward about 16 years, and Sarah – who now has a son of her own – tells Abraham to cast out Ishmael. “The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son.” For fourteen years, Ishmael had been the center of Abraham's world. Indeed, as we read in chapter seventeen when God promises Abraham that Sarah will bear him a son, Abraham laughs, saying, “Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old, and a woman who is ninety? Oh, that Ishmael might live in your sight!” Clearly Abraham loves the son that Hagar has borne to him and is content for him to be his heir.

But God's purpose is for Abraham and Sarah to have a child, despite the complication that their attempt to resolve the problem themselves has wrought. It is *Isaac* who will be second in the line of the patriarchs of Israel, not Ishmael. It is Isaac who is the child of promise – not Ishmael. There's no question that the "canonical" story is an Isaac story. But the text is also equally clear, that God is well-disposed towards Ishmael. The "other son" is not to be so easily dismissed from the family, even as Sarah demands that Abraham do just that, which he finds "very distressing." But God reassures Abraham that even though he must listen to Sarah, "do not be distressed... for I will make a nation of him also, for he is your offspring."

And so, Hagar and Ishmael are cast out. With some bread and a skin of water. And when the water runs out we read that desperate scene, where Hagar places Ishmael in the meager shade of a bush, then withdraws a bow shot's length, unable to bear watching her son suffer. And so, "she lifted up her voice and wept," and once again, God hears. But this time, the text tells us the angel of God tells Hagar, "Do not be afraid: for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Come – lift him up, and hold him fast with your hand, for I *will* make a great nation of him." Then God opens her eyes and she sees a well of water. She fills the empty skin with water, and gives the boy a drink. The story concludes, "God was with the boy, and he grew up."

This is why I love the bible.

Because we get the *whole* story. It doesn't attempt to smooth out the wrinkles in the plotline. To clean up bad behavior. It refuses to remove the problematic, but instead, presents things as they are – the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the ugly truth at times. It's one of the reasons I find the scriptures reliable. Because when I'm telling my own story, the temptation is strong at times to leave out the parts that cast me in a very different light than the one I want people to see. The parts that cause me to wince when they come to mind. The parts that rarely make it into *autobiographies*, but the parts that usually sell *biographies*! The text is clear, as Walter Brueggemann observes in his excellent commentary on the book of Genesis in the *Interpretation* series: "All are agreed on the preciousness of Ishmael – Yahweh, angel, Hagar, Abraham – all but Sarah. She has a vested interest which closes that reality to her."

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I typed those words two days ago, on Friday, June nineteenth. Juneteenth. The day we commemorate Union Major General George Granger announcing the emancipation act to enslaved Texans on Galveston Island. Nine hundred days *after* the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect. Six months after the Thirteenth Amendment was proposed for the national abolition of slavery, and two months after Robert E Lee surrendered to the Union army. Five years ago, Juneteenth became a federal holiday.

We're about to celebrate the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the United States of America, with the Declaration of Independence from the tyranny of the king of Great Britain. A declaration that includes these words:

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.”

Powerful words. Inspiring words. Aspirational words. Yet clearly words that belied the truth at that time, which was that many – if not most – of those who wrote them did not *act* as if all men were created equal, nor that women should have the same access to the pursuit of happiness as men. The wealth of the new nation would be built on the backs of the enslaved, on the stolen land of indigenous peoples. That is the ugly truth of our history, a history that some are once again attempting to gloss over, if not erase. Removing commemorative plaques, rewriting school textbooks, stripping memorials of the names of Black Americans, including a U.S. military cemetery in the Netherlands, where panels displaying the contributions that the 192 Black American troops buried there made to the liberation of Europe and which were removed last November. Like Sarah, those with a vested interest in ensuring only *some* of America's history is told are closed off from the aspirations articulated in the Declaration of Independence.

This time three years ago, Maggie and I visited the Tomb of the Patriarchs in Hebron, which we viewed from inside the Al-Ibrahimi mosque. Hebron was once a thriving community, known for its exquisite glassware. Shuhada Street was thronged with tourists from all over the world making pilgrimage to one of the holy sites of the three monotheistic religions. But then on February 24<sup>th</sup>, 1994, an American-Israeli physician in military fatigues entered the mosque during Friday prayers – in Ramadan – and shot more than 140 people at prayer, killing 29 of them. The Israeli government put Hebron under curfew for six months and then took half the mosque and turned it into a synagogue. When we visited, there were no tourists, all the glassware filling the shelves of the few remaining stores was covered in dust, and only one store remains open on Shuhada Street. The owner showed us the blank check the State of Israel gave his family to tempt them to sell their store, the passports they would be given to migrate wherever they wanted, so that the last remaining descendants of Ishmael in Hebron would have to leave. Mahmed told us something we would hear over and over again during our 10 days in the West Bank: “Existence is resistance.” And telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the ugly truth is also resistance. Because the ugly truth must be named and owned before it can be healed. That's true for individuals, for families, and it's true for nations.

The conflict between Isaac and Ishmael – which they did *not* create themselves – continues in their descendants thousands of years later. And just as their story – told in scripture – is complex, so the story of their descendants is complex.

That is one of the reasons why the work of reconciliation is so difficult. Why healing ancient wounds so often fails to happen. But the fact that the bible narrates Ishmael's story as well as Isaac's, should exhort us to tell *all* the stories that make up our national history. Because only that which can be named, can be healed. And if someone tells us we should just move on, "as that all happened so long ago," "as it's ancient history," well, the legacies of that history continue to shape our common life, and rarely, if ever, for the better. When those with power deliberately re-shape history for their own purposes, we must demand that we hear the whole truth. Because only that which is named can be healed. We've seen that happen in South Africa with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In Northern Ireland, with the Good Friday peace process, which were both about restorative justice and not punishment. Healing, not revenge. That is the Gospel – the ministry of reconciliation which we have all been given. The work to which we are all called.

And it begins by telling the truth.

The image on the cover of your bulletin is titled, "Clear vision." It shows Hagar and Ishmael, and the well of water which saved their lives. Hagar – an enslaved Egyptian woman, who was the first to name the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, 'El-ro-i' – "the God who sees." The God who saw them in their plight – and responded. The God who saw to it that *their* story would not be scraped from scripture. The God who sees us – all of us, the whole truth of who we are – and who invites us to speak that truth, especially the ugly truth, so that we might be healed. Healed as individuals, as families, as communities, and yes, as nations.

As we approach the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of these United States, may it be so.

And amen.