

Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17 ~ Genesis 21:8-21

And God Heard the Voice of the Boy

June 21, 2020 ~ 3rd Sunday after Pentecost ~ Father's Day ~ World Refugee Sunday

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Introduction to Genesis Text:

It's Father's Day. Why couldn't we have a nice scripture about an amazing father, like maybe Jesus' parable about the prodigal son? You may remember the story Jesus tells about the father with the two sons who are so very different, one leaves, one stays--but the father loves them both and throws a big celebration when the son who left, returns. That would be a nice story to preach on Father's Day. But that's not what we have.

Today's story *is* about one of the big daddies in scripture, none other than the patriarch of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam: Father Abraham. And it is a story about Father Abraham and his first two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. This story starts with a party, "a great feast." Happy day for Father Abraham. Young Isaac was growing healthy and well. Everything seemed on track. But all that changes on a dime.

Things devolve and this family story gets very messy, very quickly. Tempers flare, things are said that can't be unsaid. The family separates, and no one is really happy. Poor Abraham gets separated from his first-born son Ishmael, and Hagar becomes a very single mother, out completely on her own, trying her best to be father *and* mother to Ishmael. It's a story about dead ends, difficult choices, and distress.

Once they are cast out into the wilderness, the spotlight shifts from Abraham to Hagar. Just to further complexify this story: interwoven in this family squabble are three forms of oppression: nationality, class, and sex.ⁱ Yes: all those personal and systemic already problems in play—and we're not even halfway into the Book of Genesis.

What's the take away for us today here at the summer solstice of a summer unlike any other summer we've had? I am here to tell you, friends: that there is hope in this messy story. That means there is hope for us right where we are, right in the middle of our very own personal muddles, as well as our cultural and cosmic muddles. In this ancient story, there is good news: Not the surface kiss and make up and *pretend it's all better*, kind of good news. Nor, the close your eyes, look the other way and insist *it's not that bad* kind of good news.

We are here because our Bible is about *real* good news. There is nothing fake about this good news. But there is something raw and awkward about it. Kind of like the story we are about to hear: God is right where we are, and hears our voice whether we are speaking or not. And Jesus is not only with us, but also *is* us. Jesus came to be one of us. Jesus knows how it feels to be dying of thirst, to feel utterly abandoned, to stop being able to draw his breath. If you, feel like our psalmist today, just about at the end of your rope, crying all day, or all week long, this good news is *especially* for you.

Truthfully—even Jesus’ beautiful salvation parable about the prodigal son doesn’t get wrapped up with a bow. Jesus ends his story leaving us to wonder whether or not the spitting mad older son accepts his father’s gracious invitation to join the party. That’s the thing about Jesus. He knows who we really are and how things really work. And our God who hung on the cross for us, still hangs in there *with us*. No matter how badly or how long we keep messing up: individually and systemically.

Here, in the everyday reality of our world, 4000 years after Abraham, Sarah and Hagar were walking this earth, 70 million people who woke up this morning are displaced in the world, 26 million of them are refugees, and half of whom are children.ⁱⁱ Here today, where political oppression and famine continue to plague and bedevil us, God is with us. God is calling to us. God who sees and hears us, *right where we are*. Our God who will not cast us off, or separate from us. Yes: Our messes matter, to God.

Shall we get to the story? Let’s see what goes down, as the camera zooms in on a “great feast” already underway. Get ready to see: *Abraham*, whose name means, “exalted father” and his wife, *Sarah*, whose name means, “princess” and the slave woman, the Egyptian named *Hagar*, which means “outsider.” In Islamic as well as Jewish midrash tradition, Hagar began her life as an Egyptian princess in the house of Pharaoh.ⁱⁱⁱ At this point however, she is a slave in the house of Abraham and Sarah, and things are about to get even worse for her. Perhaps *this* family has been sheltering in place together just a little too long...

Sermon:

Do you know me? Do you even see me? I contain multitudes [Whitman], but here in this story I am an innocent victim of use, abuse, and rejection. I’m the exploited, faithful maid; I’m the surrogate mother; I am the slave, I’m the undocumented foreigner without resources to get legal help; I’m the rejected wife, the single mother, the homeless woman, the refugee. My name in this story is Hagar. But I am sure that was not what my father named me. What parent would give their child a name that means, “Outsider?” Perhaps that’s a good way to begin telling you my story. And maybe in it, you will hear some of your story, too.^{iv}

Yes, I am an Egyptian slave, from the continent of Africa. I was Sarah’s personal servant, given a position of trust, a gift to her from Sarah’s parents when she married Abraham. I knew her in a way no one else did, including Abraham. I saw Sarah grow bitter toward God with all the hardships she was forced to endure. The worst being her barrenness. No seed took hold in her womb. And so Sarah came up with her own solution: I would bear Abraham’s child for her. And so I did. Against my better judgment, but what do I know? God spoke to me, Hagar, and gave me a divine promise of seed, like he did to Abraham! Yes, to me: a foreign, slave, woman! And so, like Abraham, I did as I was called to do and gave birth to our son Ishmael.

But things only got worse: for all of us. In time Sarah did conceive, by God’s miracle, and she gave birth to Isaac. At the weaning feast for Isaac, Ishmael and Isaac were playing together, as boys will do, and Sarah just snapped. Even though God had made the covenant with all of us. Sarah and I could have become like sisters, and Isaac and Ishmael, like brothers, without

diminishing God's covenant. Two great peoples could have been established, living in harmony. But instead, their jealousy, their anger, their cruelty sabotaged that possibility. What happened to me, happened because the people of the covenant forgot what covenant means. Faithful Abraham faltered. Struggling Sarah stumbled. And people like me, on the underside of the power curve, got crushed. The homeless, the landless, the powerless, faceless, and the voiceless are bruised and worse, because of the faithlessness of people of faith.

In every community, these countless women and men despair of their lives. For some, it is not safe to walk in a park, fall asleep in their car, sleep in their own house, or simply drive their car down the street. If you, people of the covenant do not exercise your faith to advocate for justice and peace, who will? In my story, you might have noticed that God heard my boy, Ishmael. Yes, God heard the voice of my thirsty boy. But, do you? Do you know me? Do you see me? Do you even want to?

As your pastor, I hear God, our Father asking us on this Father's day, "Do you hear what I hear?" What children are crying out in the wilderness of neglect, exploitation, poverty, and systemic racism? Children separated from the parents at the Southern border. Children crying out to stop gun violence in their schools. Children crying out against the decimation of our climate. Children whose fathers are never coming home because they have been shot and killed or imprisoned, just because of the color of their skin. A color much closer to the skin of Jesus, Abraham, and Hagar, than the skin of white people, like me and many of you. Yes, God is asking us, "Do you hear the voices of the children that I hear?"

ⁱ Alice Ogden Bellis, *Helpmates, Harlots, and Heroes: Women's Stories in the Hebrew Bible*, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2007), p.64.

ⁱⁱ Presbyterianmission.org/yearbook/June-20-2020

ⁱⁱⁱ Wilda C. Garney, *Womanist Midrash: A Reintroduction to the Women of the Torah and the Throne*, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville, KY, 2017), p.40.

^{iv} The idea for this first-person Hagar narrative came originally from a sermon by The Rev. Esther Hargis, published in *The Abingdon Women's Preaching Annual Series 1-Yr. A*, edited by Jana L. Childers and Lucy A. Rose, (Abingdon Press, Nashville: TN, 1998), pp. 124-127. I have adapted, amended, and edited it extensively.