

Sermon for June 21, 2020
12th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)
Sermon Texts: Genesis 21: 8-21 and Matthew 10: 24-39
Sermon Title: "*It's a Family Affair*"

PRAYER OF INVOCATION: Lord, the road to peace and reconciliation with our brothers and sisters is long, and we are weary. The future is uncertain. Open our eyes and our hearts that we may accept your blessings and not resent the blessings that you give to others. Revive our souls and strengthen our resolve to live peacefully with all people. Amen.

PRAYER OF ILLUMINATION: Holy Spirit, come. Come as Holy Light, and illumine us; come as Holy Wind, and cleanse us; come as Holy Truth, and dispel our ignorance; come as Holy Fire, and burn in us; come as Holy Life, and dwell in us. Amen.

There is so much feuding, fighting, and fussing in the world today that it's hard to keep all the players straight. We're afraid of people who don't look like us, don't worship like us, and don't speak like us.

However, for longstanding feuds, we need to look at ancient texts: The story in Genesis 21: 8-21 is both familiar and scary. It doesn't get preached often and is frequently referred to as a *text of terror*. But in times of terror we need to look at texts of terror. First, a little background.

In spite of the fact that God has made the promise to Abraham and Sarah that he will make a great nation from them, Sarah has never gotten pregnant. Perhaps the belief that *God helps them who help themselves* is an idea as old as this story, because Sarah takes matters into her own hands and gives her maid, Hagar, to Abraham in the hopes that Hagar will bear a son to him. This was a common practice in those days and seems to have found a place in contemporary times as well with surrogate mothers.

Here's where the family dynamics start to get ugly. When we meet Hagar this morning, it is actually the second time she has been in the wilderness. In an earlier chapter we see that Hagar

begins to feel empowered by her pregnancy. She responds to the social mores of the day and sees Sarah's barrenness as judgment and her own fertility as a blessing. Perhaps she begins to swagger about the camp; she treats Sarah contemptuously. Sarah becomes so mean that the pregnant Hagar flees into the wilderness.

An angel finds her there and tells her to return to Abraham and Sarah, and that God will give her son many descendants. In response, she names God El-roi, which means the One Who Sees, and she gives the name of the well in that part of the wilderness Be'er Lachai Roi, the **Well of the Living One Who Sees Me**. Remember these names, because they reappear later in the story. Hagar returns to camp and gives birth to Ishmael.

Today's story occurs many years later, after Sarah has given birth to a son of her own - Isaac. The two boys are playing together, apparently getting along, and Sarah once again gets jealous and feels threatened. She tells Abraham to send Ishmael, his first-born son, away. Abraham is distressed, but he goes along with Sarah's plan because God has told him that everything will turn out well.

So once again, Hagar finds herself in the wilderness. Reality shows have nothing on these family dynamics. A teenager has been disowned by his father, separated from his half-brother; he is despised by the step-mother, and is thrown away like so much garbage. In the wilderness, Hagar learns once more that God is El-Roi, the one who sees and hears. God hears Ishmael's cries and responds, once more promising to make a great nation of him. *God was with the boy, we are told, and he grew up.*

So here's the question in the family, in the neighborhood, on the world stage. If God loves me, then is there enough love to go around? Can God also love someone else whom I may not particularly like or feel threatened by? If God is for me, my

family, my neighborhood, and my country, does God have to be against them?

I have a lot of sympathy for Sarah, the great matriarch of the Judeo-Christian faith tradition. She went with Abram, leaving everything behind, she endured Abraham's cowardice when he passed her off as his sister so another king could romance her. In fact, Hagar is probably one of the gifts Sarah received from Pharaoh for taking Sarah into his harem. But Sarah, like all of us, has flaws.

In spite of God's faithfulness and God's promises to her, she gets impatient. Perhaps she also felt, like we often do, that there isn't enough money, love, or blessing to go around, and she was going to make sure that she got her share. It was Sarah who created a lot of this mess. Hagar and Abraham were, after all, Sarah's idea, which led to Ishmael. The ethical issue in this story is not surrogate motherhood or Abraham's infidelity, or even Sarah's cruelty, but Sarah's attempt to keep Ishmael from his inheritance, one promised to him by God.

God, however, as we know from the creation story, is a God of imagination and creativity. In spite of Sarah's actions, God manages to work with both Sarah and Hagar. Instead of one great nation, God makes two. Sarah tries to make Ishmael into the loser so that Isaac can be the winner, but God makes winners out of both children.

Ishmael is associated with Islam. With dark skinned people. The Koran tells of Ishmael going on to Mecca and building a mosque there. He becomes the physical father of the Arab peoples, and spiritual father to the Islamic community. Just as Abraham is seen as the physical and spiritual father of the Jewish people. Christians come into the story much later, but this is our story too. The history of Muslims and Jews, and Christians and Jews, and

Christians and Muslims has not exactly been a loving one. Yet, here in this ancient Hebrew story is this irrefutable fact: **peoples who are rivals and even enemies are actually part of the same family.**

Now to the present. We will do well to remember that the God of Abraham and Sarah, the God of Isaac and Rebekah, our God, is also the God of Hagar and Ishmael, the God who sees and hears, the God who loves and cares for our enemies as well as for us. We would also do well to remember that God cares for our black and brown brothers and sisters, the ones who have been pleading with us for generations to be acknowledged as part of the American family. If we look closely and honestly, we will see that they are not that different from us.

Ishmael leaves the stage after this story, but he returns one more time. He comes back for his father's funeral. Ishmael and Isaac bury their father together. After Abraham's death, Genesis 25 tells us that God blessed Isaac and he settled near Beer Lachai Roi. Remember the name? It's the **Well of the Living One Who Sees Me.** This is Ishmael's well, the well that God gave Hagar and Ishmael when they were suffering in the wilderness. Rabbi Arthur Waskow suggests that for Isaac to be blessed with a peaceful life at Ishmael's well, something must have happened at Abraham's funeral. Did the brothers reach some reconciliation? Is this a picture of what peace might look like between brothers who have been enemies?

Our national leaders might do well to read this ancient text. We're in this together. There's enough love and blessing to go around. It's a family affair. Amen.