

Genesis 21:8-21
Matthew 10:24-39

word count: 1674

The story of Abraham and Sarah opens a series of stories in Genesis that the lectionary has set apart to be read at this particular moment in time. Many of these stories might be very familiar to you, or maybe you are hearing them for the first time. Next week, for example, is the famous story about Abraham taking his son Isaac away to a place where he plans on sacrificing him, only to be stopped by an angel and given instead a substitute sacrifice of a ram.

Today's reading brings us an example of two women who stand up for their children in the only ways they know how.

As a woman of her day, Sarah had little power or protection of her own. She is living in the latter days of her life, and she is the property of an elderly husband in a new land that is unfamiliar to her—a place to which she has been brought without any say. When he passes on, like many women who could not inherit personal property, she might face a very difficult situation. Unable to bear children until old age, her husband has taken her servant Hagar and made her his concubine, and in turn the slave woman Hagar bears him a son, his heir.

Abraham is a man of privilege, and like many with privilege at the top of the social order, he feels a natural sense of entitlement, which allows him to assume the right to make life-changing decisions for others without such power.

To hold onto what Sarah did have, which is the promise of an inheritance for her young son, Sarah demanded that Abraham throw out her Egyptian slave Hagar and her son, Ishmael. We see in Sarah the plight of many who are without power; when faced with limited resources and rights, those who are marginalized often feel their only option is to compete with others in the same situation for access to power.

Hagar's name means, "A stranger, one who fears." She lives her name. A female child of a slave has no rights—she can be used in any way her owner chooses. Hagar is the property of Abraham, and her purpose in life is to look to the needs of his wife, Sarah. When Sarah cannot bear a child, Abraham appears to practice a kind of polygamy in how he treats Hagar. He takes her physically, yet being thus coerced, she has no say or legal recourse regarding what happens to her own body. Hagar bears a child named, "Ishmael," which means, "outcast."

In Hagar we find a woman whose son, Ishmael, threatens those around him simply by existing. Hagar's love for her son won't allow her to disown him or cast him aside. Like the mother of a gay child, Hagar stands up for Ishmael, even though it will surely result in her being cast into the desert along with him.

Something newer, better, "straighter" in Abraham's family comes along—Isaac is born to Sarah. Ishmael suffers what many outcasts after him will feel—he is "other"; incomplete, outside, unwanted. Even Hagar cannot protect him—she leaves him under a bush and walks a distance away to sit down and weep because she cannot bear to watch what will happen to him.

It is troubling to read this text and find that God is shown to be complicit in the casting out of Hagar and Ishmael; the stranger and her outcast in exile. At the same time, we are assured that Hagar is important to God—she has a higher purpose, and as God hears her cries in the wilderness, Hagar is comforted by knowing that God has "heard the voice of Ishmael where he is."

I think that perhaps there are many of you religious exiles here, many lgbt people, many people who for whatever reasons have been in the wilderness and excluded from where you were before. Many of you who have finally found a place in the church where you are valued, honored and celebrated know that this story speaks poignantly to the experience of exile that too many children of God have suffered.

So, what do we read into this passage this morning? What word of hope can come from it? Where is God in the text?

First, let's talk about marriage. The marriage of Abraham and Sarah contains elements of polygamy, slavery, coercion, plotting, shunning, and literally driving a woman and her son into the desert wilderness to die. In the Islamic version, Abraham takes Hagar and her son and creates a new settlement for them in Paran, and thus is the father of two families in different places.

I can't help but think while hearing the story of Abraham and his family, that if we in California are going to be drawn into a debate from now through November about "protecting traditional marriage as defined by the Bible," that today's reading from the Bible should really give us pause about what that means.

Marriage as a form of property and a means of continued lineage, such as Abraham experienced (and in fact was normative to his culture) has evolved. But marriage is now the joining of people who love each other for the purpose of expressing that love for a lifetime, which often means children, though as we all know in the examples of our married friends, not always. Additionally, it has evolved from the male ownership as witnessed in the Bible to the free mutuality we have today in our culture. This, as an institution that has necessarily evolved for us in our own day and age, is traditional marriage. So may God Bless traditional marriage, and let's do something to honor the institution by making it the freedom it should be for all couples who wish to share in it.

As God was speaking to Abraham about the plans that were laid out before him, and as an angel of God was also speaking the word of comfort and hope to Hagar in the wilderness, is God still speaking in some way to us and thus meeting us where we are today? Does the passage from Genesis imply that God is in tacit agreement with how these very human people lived out their lives together with such an imbalance of power that nearly led to parricide, or does the presence of God in these stories imply that God meets people where they are, gives them a word of hope, and guides them where they might yet go in order to grow and evolve?

Pastor John Robinson, speaking to the pilgrims before their voyage to begin the free expression of Christian faith which we in the UCC have inherited, said, "There is still more truth and light yet to break from God's holy word."

What truths do we see in the story have we been holding in that need to be proclaimed?

Do we like Abraham sometimes use what privilege we have against others with less power? How can we be constantly aware of our own tendency to leave someone out or exclude them from what we are given to enjoy, and, instead, trust that if God is still speaking the word of hope and direction such as was given to Hagar in the wilderness, that the still-speaking voice we hear in our desire to provide justice and healing to all is directed toward helping us to figure out how to provide what is needed for the good of all?

United Methodist pastor Vernice Thorn says, "Our Genesis passage represents the many people who are cast out and kept out because of race, economic status, sexual orientation, gender, and ability. The Good News is [that] God continues to speak liberation and hope to situations that often appear hopeless."

We have an opportunity to speak liberation and hope as a church, and we should grasp that opportunity. At our annual conference yesterday, our 132 churches in Southern California and Nevada gathered and voted without a single “nay” to affirm the marriage equality resolution that came out of this conference in 2004, and was accepted by our denomination at our General Synod in 2005. Six days ago, on June 17, marriage equality became the law in California, as mandated by the California Supreme Court. I cannot wait to obey the law.

Next week our church website will read, “We Do ‘I Do’s,” (credit due to Gary Chomiak) and we will take out an ad that will show that we are at least one church in Orange County that does not discriminate. Next Sunday, please join us in welcoming what will be our newest newlyweds of twenty-three years, Bob and Steve.

Jesus tells his disciples not to fear their persecutors, “for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known.” A tide is finally turning, and it is sad to say that in this civil rights struggle, in the end, the church was on the wrong side. But not all churches. The abolitionist church was there. The first mainline church to ordain an African-American was there. The first church to ordain a woman was there. And we are there again.

Today’s reading brings us an example of two women who stand up for their children in the only ways they know how. How strong a mother’s love is. How much the church should love all of its children as God so loved the world, and us as well, no matter how little we do to deserve it.

There will always be people among us whose names mean, “a stranger, one who fears,” or “an outcast...” but these are the ones God comes to with the word of hope in the wilderness, these are the ones who like us, can hear, “Even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid...” In wilderness times, God is still speaking the word of hope that keeps us steady on the path. Amen.

Sermon Resource:

Claiming God’s Promise in the Midst of Exile, “Out in Scripture” Proper 7A

Scripture Readings June 22, 2008

Genesis 21:8-21

8 The child grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. 9 But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. 10 So she said to Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac." 11 The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. 12 But God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you. 13 As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring." 14 So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba. 15 When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. 16 Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, "Do not let me look on the death of the child." And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. 17 And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. 18 Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him." 19 Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink. 20 God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. 21 He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

Matthew 10:24-39

26 "So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. 27 What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. 28 Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. 29 Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. 30 And even the hairs of your head are all counted. 31 So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows."