

A Cry In the Wilderness
Third Sunday after Pentecost A Genesis 22:8-21 – Matthew 10:24-39
Rev. Dick Hanks June 21, 2020

Let us pray. O Lord, be with us in this place, in the speaking of your word, in the listening of our ears, in the quiet of our hearts. Amen.

This well-known story, the casting out of Ishmael, is one of the most powerful, disturbing and heart wrenching stories in the Old Testament. This story tends to touch us with its pathos on one hand and with Abraham's faith in God on the other.

As we hear this story some would say "Why would a loving God allow Ishmael to suffer such a terrible act?" Others would say "How could Sarah demand the expulsion of an innocent child like Ishmael?" Others yet would say "If this is the kind of story that is in the Bible, then I would just as soon not read it, especially to my children."

But before we pass judgment on this story or react to its apparent brutality, we need to put it into the larger context of Abraham's spiritual relationship with God. We cannot truly judge its intended impact unless we see it as one of the chapters in Abraham's life where God hears Abraham's cry in the wilderness.

If we turn back the pages of Genesis we see Abraham at a dead end in his life. He and Sarah were unable to have children which meant the couple would have no one to look over them in their old age. Except that God was always looking over Abraham, and came to him at that dead end to offer him a promise – the promise that Abraham would be the father of many nations, of many families.

This promise that God offered Abraham was not just like any pact between two friends or business associates, but was a promise given by God in the form of a sacred covenant; a covenant that joined God to Abraham in an everlasting bond of love and the unbreakable promise that "I am with you always." All God asked of Abraham for his part was that he has faith and trusts in God always.

Abraham's initial response to God's covenant was to trust in God and journey to places unknown. But as that journey unfolded over the next twenty-five years Abraham constantly struggled with the promise he had made to God.

Genesis tells us that Abraham succumbed to fear and rather than trust in God he gave his wife Sarah to the Pharaoh to save himself.

Abraham failed to trust in God's providence and later used trickery and lies to unjustly steal wealth from King Abimelech. In his hatred of "the other" Abraham pronounced a curse upon them rather than offer them God's blessing.

Yet during Abraham's flawed spiritual journey he displayed a very human mixture of incredible faith in God, while at the same time a tendency to want to have the promise on his own terms and under his own control.

Time has passed and God has yet to bless Sarah and Abraham with a child. So Sarah takes matters into her own hands and according to custom, sent her Egyptian slave girl Hagar to

Abraham that she might bear a child for the family. God's covenant with Abraham held true and finally after that long journey marked by struggle and despair, Hagar gives birth to a son, Ishmael, whose name means God hears. Finally after all those years Abraham is able to hold God's promise, Ishmael, in his very own arms.

I know that Father's Day is today and I wonder if all of the Dads in the congregation remember what it was like after your first child was born? No, I don't mean the 2:00 a.m. feedings and the last minute trips to the store to buy diapers. I mean do you remember when your life took on new meaning as you became filled with joy when you gazed into the beautiful eyes of your child or your child first called you "Dada" or their face was filled with serenity as they listened attentively as you read them a bedtime story?

Those were the feelings Abraham must have felt as he raised his first son Ishmael. But those feelings in time were to change with the birth of his second son Isaac. As we read the opening words of our text "The child grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned."

We see that about five years have passed since Isaac was born to Abraham and Sarah. Isaac, Sarah's miracle son, was the apple of his mother's eye, the object of her adoration. Sarah was so focused on the future promise of her son Isaac, that she lost sight of God's promise and lost sight that Ishmael was also God's child of promise.

Isaac being weaned was a monumental occasion for Abraham and Sarah for being weaned meant that Isaac had made it through the early years of life when infant mortality was very common. So to mark that special occasion Abraham threw a party for Isaac to celebrate the promise of a long life.

Picture with me what that party must have been like – Abraham breaks out skins of his finest wine. A calf is butchered and roasted over an open fire. The table is spread with sweet curds, fresh bread, olives and fruit drizzled with honey. What a joyous event - but then trouble bursts upon that scene when Genesis tells us "Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac" - not just "playing with" but more accurately translated from the Hebrew "mocking and teasing her son Isaac."

I can imagine what happens next.... Sarah angrily shouts out "Abraham put down that cup of wine and get over here. Look at your boy Ishmael, the son of that Egyptian slave girl. He's teasing and mocking my little boy Isaac. Disinherit Ishmael and cast him and his mother out of our family!"

I wonder what Sarah really saw and thought that day when she looked upon the two sons of Abraham acting and playing as brothers often do? What really made her so angry? What really led Sarah to call for such cruelty?

Perhaps when Sarah saw Ishmael she remembered the many years that she was barren and unable to have children. Perhaps when Sarah saw the beautiful young Hagar she was jealously reminded that she had lost her youth and became fearful that her death was right around the corner. Or perhaps Sarah saw Hagar as a dark skinned slave, a foreigner, an interloper, not worthy of a place in her family.

Feelings of Jealousy, feelings of loss, fear of the future, hatred of the other, racism all led Sarah to call for the casting out into the desert, the almost certain death of Hagar and Ishmael.

Abraham had to be devastated by Sarah's demands and in the darkness of that wilderness he cried out to God for guidance, for healing of the divisions in his family. And God heard his cries and said to Abraham "do not be afraid for the boy and his mother, for as I have promised, I will make a nation of him because he is your child."

So Abraham rose early the next day and took bread and a skin of water and cast out Hagar and Ishmael into the hostile desert of Beer-sheba where soon the water in the skin was gone and their thirst overcome them.

We've all been thirsty at some point in our lives – after a full day of summer yard work or a day on the golf course or getting through these past 80 degree days with a broken air-conditioner in my car. But the ordeal of thirst that Hagar and Ishmael experienced is beyond any thirst we've ever experienced as described by Luis Alberto Urrea in his book *The Devil's Highway*. Listen to his words:

They stumbled out of the mountain pass so sunstruck they didn't know their own names, couldn't remember where they'd come from, had forgotten how long they'd been lost. They were burned nearly black, their lips huge and cracking, what paltry drool still available to them spuming from their mouths in a salty foam as they walked. Their eyes were cloudy with dust, almost too dry to blink up a tear. Their hair was hard and stiffened by old sweat, standing in crowns from their scalps, old sweat because their bodies were no longer sweating. They were drunk from having their brains baked in the pan, they were seeing God and devils, and they were dizzy from drinking their own urine, the poisons clogging their systems.

They were beyond rational thought. Visions of home fluttered through their minds. Soft green bushes, waterfalls, rivers. Not like this place where they'd gotten lost.

They were walking now for water, not salvation. Just a drink. They whispered it to each other as they staggered into parched pools of their own shadows, forever spilling downhill before them: Just one drink. Water. Cold water! They walked on lost, though they didn't know it; they had no concept anymore of destination.

In the distance, deceptive stands of trees must have looked like oases. Ten trees a quarter mile apart can look like a cool grove from a distance. In the desert, twenty miles looks like ten. And ten miles can kill. There was still no water; there wasn't even any shade. Their full-sun 110-degree nightmare.

Jealousy, fear, hate, sense of loss, racism all led to the suffering of Hagar and Ishmael, and those same feelings have led to suffering and injustices in our world and country today.

Those words that I just read to you from *The Devil's Highway* were penned to describe the suffering and death of immigrants at our southern border. In the past fifteen years 10,000 migrants have died in the desert attempting to seek a new life free from oppression in America.

And like Abraham, many of us cry out to God for guidance, for justice for the migrant, for the 70,000 children of migrants who have been separated from their parents or locked in cages.

We've all experienced a sense of loss and fear during these past four months of living with the coronavirus. Many of us have lost friends to this pandemic. The economy is in tatters and I for one grieve for the days past when we were able to worship and enjoy fellowship face to face with each other. I grieve that I am not able to hug my little granddaughter. I walk through the grocery store, gazing upon too many folks who refuse to wear a mask, and I fear that this might be the day I will become infected with Covid-19.

And like Abraham in the darkness of the night, I cry out to God for healing for all of those affected by this pandemic, especially people of color, native Americans, and the elderly, who combined make up almost 70% of those who have died from the coronavirus.

Juneteenth was celebrated just two days ago to mark the day in 1865 when slavery was abolished throughout the United States. Yet once again in the past months we have seen racism rear its ugly head again as African American voters experienced stumbling blocks to the polls and young black men like George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery and Rayshard Brooks were murdered in our city's streets.

And like Abraham many of us cry out to God in the streets of our cities for justice, for equality, for the healing of our divided nation.

Raising our voices against injustice so others may receive God's promise does not come without a price. We see peaceful protestors bludgeoned and shot with rubber bullets. We see peaceful protestors tear gassed and pepper sprayed in a city park as they shout out "Black Lives Matter." We read of professional and college athletes and civil servants who have risked their careers by taking a knee and calling out for racial equality.

And like Colin Kaepernick and Chuba Hubbard of Oklahoma State University, and Mary Elizabeth Taylor of the State Department, many of us cry out to God in the streets of our cities, in the halls of our government, and on the playing fields of our nation for justice, for equality, for the healing of systemic racism that plagues our nation.

God calls us to speak up, stand up and show up against hatred, racism and injustice. Friends, receiving God's promise and heeding God's call does not entail being sheltered from those moments when we will cry out in the despair and question God's presence in our world.

But know that when we cry out, when we approach God in prayer, God hears our cries and offers us the same words of comfort that were offered to Abraham and Hagar and Ishmael - "Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid."

I'm here to tell you this morning that in the face of the suffering caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, systemic racism, and injustice; God is faithful, and will always be with us as he was with Abraham and Hagar and Ishmael.

Amen and amen.