

## Sermon: How Do I Sit with this Story? Part 1

Year A, Proper 7

[Genesis 21:8-21; Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17; Romans 6:1b-11; Matthew 10:24-39](#)

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In today's reading, we celebrate Isaac reaching three years, leaving that danger zone when so many children died. We see a family with more complexity than one mom, one dad and two brothers struggling to find a path forward. We see God keeping God's promises to Abraham, reaffirming great things for both Ishmael and Isaac. If you read the resources that help people like me dive into the text, apparently that's what's important in this text. Apparently, it's a good thing that God's eye is on the sparrow and God has counted every hair on Hagar and Ishmael's heads, because they don't seem to merit much of a mention elsewhere.

But when you heard it, every parent in this room shuddered to think what would happen if their child was dying of thirst and crying out. Part of my hospital training had me serve in the rotation of nurses and chaplains who would hold the babies that were dying. If their families couldn't do that, we would. So I know that no matter how you think you would handle it, you don't *know* what you'd do until you are in that horrible moment. I pray no one ever has to find out. But all of us heard Hagar call out to God, "Do not let me look on the death of the child." (Genesis 21:16).

So that is my question of this text: how do I sit with this story? Because just jumping over the heartrending cry in the middle doesn't seem like the job of a disciple. This summer we will be following Abraham's family story in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, Matthew will focus mostly on discipleship. Disciples are learners.<sup>1</sup> We become better learners, better disciples when we open ourselves to learning from Jesus and each other, especially the lessons that come from the real world. Throughout Scripture, Old and New Testaments, God and Jesus tell us to care for the widows, orphans and foreigners in our midst. I can't see how ignoring Hagar and Ishmael allows me to better understand God's intention for my life and the life of my community. So let me share what the commentaries offered because it helped me to sit with the text that they jumped over.

One thing that the commentaries pointed out is that we had to be sympathetic to Sarah because she had very few means to protect herself in such a patriarchal society. Part of why the Bible is so insistent on given special treatment to widows, orphans and immigrants is because they don't have access to the power structure, which is completely controlled by men. Women without a father, brother, husband, or grown son to fight for them were under a death sentence unless strangers gave them access to their part of the power structure. Patriarchies die hard. I've been called "little lady" at a car dealership when I went shopping for a new car. Seriously. So I take their point. But we've been reading this text. Sarah's in her 80s, Abraham's in his 90s. If he was going to throw her out because she wasn't able to give him an heir, he would have done it decades ago. If you want to find someone in this story who's vulnerable to the patriarchy, it's Hagar, an unmarried Egyptian slave. I can sympathy for Sarah, but I think she's mostly jealous,

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<sup>1</sup> Emilie M. Townes, "Proper 7, Theological Perspective, Matthew 10:24-39" in *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 3*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011], 164.

wanting to be sure that her son, Isaac, inherits his father's wealth. Ishmael is the first son, he should get most of Abraham's wealth by tradition.

Another thing the commentaries point out is that this section of Genesis in particular shows multiple traditions and multiple geographies coming together.<sup>2</sup> When the Israelites moved into the land of milk and honey, there were people already there, who rather liked things the way they were. As the Israelite tribes spread out from their center around Jerusalem, they bumped into other communities, around Bethel, around Beersheba, all over the place. The more powerful and important communities had to be absorbed into the Israelite culture. So some of their stories were grafted onto the Israelite's own stories. Sometimes the grafts took and sometimes they didn't fit so well. The Hebrew tradition called the people we would now call Arabs "Ishamaelites." Today's reading offers an origin story that fits them into the world where Abraham and Isaac are still the main focus of God's attention but Ishmael has an important role.

I am scholar enough to see the stories getting bolted together. But there had to be thousands of stories that grafted together. This one with Hagar and Ishmael made the cut. It survived the graft, it survived in oral tradition, it survived the exile to Babylon, it survived the editorial process that canonized the Genesis text, it survived after that. I'm perfectly happy to believe that this was a kind of folk tale that got tangled up in the sacred history of the Israelites. But I am not prepared to dismiss Hagar and Ishmael as merely the result of conquest 3,500 years ago because there is clearly something in their story that revealed something about the God of Israel, the God of Abraham, to untold generations.

Finally the commentaries were anxious to point out that this story points to how God works against our expectations.<sup>3</sup> We can't predict what God will do. This is the first time we see the theme that we'll return to again and again, that the eldest son should get the lion share of his father's wealth and the younger son, no matter how beloved by his parents, would get very little. It may be tough on the kids, but it keeps the property together and it keeps the family on the land. But that keeps not happening. It doesn't happen with Ishmael and Isaac. It doesn't happen with Esau and Jacob. It doesn't happen with Ruben and Joseph. We saw that God can't be constrained by human will when we heard about Sarah's laughter last week. She thought it was ridiculous and perhaps painful to think that she and Abraham would have a son. And yet here is Isaac, weaned. And, yes, I agree, no one would expect God to make a great nation of one of Abraham's sons, let alone both. But I am still not convinced that we have to see Hagar pushed to such an extreme to learn that we can't predict what God will do. Sarah isn't on the edge of death when God does something unexpected for Isaac. We can learn the lesson of the unexpected nature of God without someone begging not to look on the death of her child.

So where is this woman dying in the desert in all of these texts? Hagar did not ask for this. The whole plan of her having a child with Abraham was Abraham and Sarah's idea. It was their way of trying to use their own resources to fulfill a promise of God instead of waiting for God to keep God's promise.

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<sup>2</sup> Cuthbert A. Simpson, "The Book of Genesis: Exegesis," vol. 1 in *The Interpreter's Bible: The Holy Bible in the King James and Revised Standard Versions with General Articles and Introduction, Exegesis, Exposition for Each Book of the Bible*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1952), 637.

<sup>3</sup> Donald K. McKim, "Proper 7, Theological Perspective, Genesis 21:8-21" in *Feasting on the Word: Year A Additional Essays*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014], 3.

Furthermore, Sarah didn't ask for this either. She wanted Hagar and Ishmael sent away. Abraham clearly has feelings for the boy. God reassures him, tells him he can do as Sarah asks, that God will still make a great nation of Ishmael. But at no time does God say, "A quart of water, a loaf of bread and send them out into the desert." Abraham is a rich man, he has plenty of resources. There are a million other paths that don't end with Hagar and Ishmael dying in a desert.

There was one point in the commentaries that I did find useful. The two sons are intentionally set up as contrasts.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, when we see the pairs of brothers that will follow, they too will be juxtaposed, to highlight the differences between them. Hagar and Ishmael live in the world of necessity, coercion and fate.<sup>5</sup> Sarah and Isaac live in the world of gift, freedom and destiny.<sup>6</sup> We need both. Living in a world made solely of skillful determining, planning and competence, living entirely on our own resources, crushes the spirit and constrains the diameter of our lives.<sup>7</sup> Living with an openness to God adds an arena of wonder that opens up the path to freedom and joy.<sup>8</sup>

But it isn't an either/or. In both the New Testament and the Old, the will of God for us gets simplified to two rules: Love God and Love your neighbor as yourself. You need both. A love of God will allow us to step away from a good enough life, with a small diameter, and trust that God will make nations of both our sons. But loving our neighbors as our selves requires us to do more than simply pat one of them on the head and wish him luck.

When I look at today's Genesis reading in light of the Matthew reading, I think it's easier to see the both/and that was possible here. I am careful not to say that the New Testament is an upgrade or a replacement for the Old. The Hebrew Scriptures were the texts that Jesus loved and revered. We can do no less. The New Testament does give Christians more material to work with to increase our understanding of God. In that light, what do we learn about the Genesis story from what we are taught in the Matthew story?

First, in Matthew Jesus says *nothing is secret that will not become known* (Matthew 10:26). We make a million decisions a day and only a vanishingly small number of them would merit being remembered for a day, let alone 2,500 years. But when the big decisions come up, like what to do when we thought we'd take matters into our own hands instead of leaving them to God, we need to realize that 2,500 years later, people will still be reviewing our decision to essentially tell a slave and the mother of our child that hers is a life not worth saving.<sup>9</sup>

Second, following God may mean that we have strife in our household. Sarah would probably not have been thrilled if Abraham had freed Hagar, found her a husband who would be a good father to Ishmael and given them enough resources to get established on a farm many weeks travel away. But that would have fulfilled God's message to do as Sarah asked and send Hagar

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<sup>4</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, in *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1982), 184.

<sup>5</sup> Brueggemann, 184.

<sup>6</sup> Brueggemann, 184.

<sup>7</sup> Brueggemann, 184.

<sup>8</sup> Brueggemann, 184.

<sup>9</sup> Nibs Stroupe, "Proper 7, Pastoral Perspective, Genesis 21:8-21" in *Feasting on the Word: Year A Additional Essays*, ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014], 5.

and Ishmael away. In this case Abraham would have been using his resources to accomplish God's will, not in spite of it.

Third, Abraham is ready to take up the cross of letting go of his son Ishmael and trusting God's word that Ishmael will be ok. He is growing in his faith because he hadn't been willing to trust God's word that Sarah would have a son. We can see him as a disciple here, even if I would argue that simply handing Hagar and Ishmael over to their fate is retreating too far. He used his own resources to bring Ishmael into the world when he should have waited for God's promises to be kept. Now he is withholding his resources that would actually further the promises God has made.

In order to sit with this story, I have to be honest enough to say that while it all came out ok in the end, there was a huge problem in the middle. To sit with this story, I have to engage with that problem in a way that I believe is faithful to God's work in this world and the other lessons God offers. To be a disciple is to be a learner. If I am unwilling to touch the problem in the story, I am unwilling to learn.

Every time we decide that caring for the poor and the weak is too complicated or too costly, we are taking Hagar and Ishmael out into the desert yet again. And we are doing it despite having more than enough resources for all the those who need help in our society. Trusting God doesn't mean that God is the only one allowed to help keep a child from dying. Loving God and being obedient to God's wishes doesn't mean that we cannot care for others. If I am unwilling to see that the problem so heartbreakingly described 3,500 years ago is still playing out today, I am not a disciple, I am not a daughter of the God of Abraham and Sarah and Hagar.