

Third Sunday after Pentecost, Year A – Genesis 21:8-21
St Andrew's Episcopal Church - Sedona, AZ

Covenant Blessings

*“But God said to Abraham...As for the son of your slave woman,
I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring.”*

Last week you may recall that the reading from Genesis ended with the birth of Isaac. God kept the promise made to Abraham, that Sarah would bear him a son. Sarah exclaimed, “God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.” Sarah initially laughed at the notion that she would give birth to a son in her advanced age, and now she was laughing with joy while being the mother of one whose name means laughter. But Sarah’s laughter seems to have dissipated as Isaac grew, and was weaned, and became friends with his half-brother, Ishmael. I imagine that the tensions between the two mothers that we hear about in today’s reading didn’t suddenly happen overnight. There was, of course, some back story to their relationship.

God had made a covenant with Abram that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky and the grains of sand on the seashore. Abram and Sarai were already getting on in years, and they waited patiently for another decade for God’s promise to become a reality. But Sarai remained childless, so she decided to take matters into her own hands. She came up with the idea that her slave-girl, Hagar, might bear Abram a son on her behalf. Such an idea might sound strange to our contemporary ears. But there are

stories from other biblical narratives that tell of barren women seeking the assistance of their handmaids in bearing children on their behalf, and being particularly blessed when they had sons. Although this practice was commonly accepted in ancient patriarchal Mediterranean societies, childless women nevertheless felt unfulfilled, scorned, and blamed for the absence of fertility. Being a mother was of primary importance, and based on cultural expectations, having sons was the pinnacle of a woman's existence.

Considering these deeply engrained societal pressures, it is no wonder that, when Hagar conceived a child with Abram, Sarai would feel more than a hint of jealousy even though it was her idea to help God along in making God's promise a reality sooner than later. It is no wonder that Sarai allowed her jealousy to fester. It is no wonder that by anxiously focusing on what she did not have, Sarai unwittingly abused her powerful position and injured her relationship with her slave-girl. Sarai's harshness must have been quite excessive because Hagar not only ran away while she was pregnant, but she escaped into the wilderness, having nowhere else to go. Providentially, an angel of the Lord appears and convinces Hagar to return to her previous position, where in due season she gives birth to a son named Ishmael, which means God hears.

Sometime later Sarah gives birth to her own son, Isaac, which sounds like a joyful occasion for the entire household. That is until we recall the tensions

between the two women, and remember that Hagar is Sarah's handmaid – the primary person who facilitates the laborious and dangerous process of childbirth. Not only did Hagar return to an awkward position of servitude with a jealous mistress, but with the birth of Isaac and his survival into boyhood, her own son's position in the family would soon be called into question.

In today's reading we hear that Abraham prepared a great feast to celebrate the day that Isaac was weaned. There is no biblical account of a celebration taking place when Ishmael was weaned, but even if there were a great feast to mark the occasion, Hagar would eventually be wondering in the back of her mind how her son would fit in to the family hierarchy once Isaac was born. Now that he was weaned, there was a greater chance that Isaac would grow into a healthy young man, would have children of his own, and inherit all of Abraham's worldly goods and social status. Sarah understood the significance of Isaac growing into the next stage of boyhood. As she watched Isaac and Ishmael playfully wrestle, Sarah imagined their rough-housing behavior eventually turning into sibling rivalry and competition for their father's attention, acceptance, and love. Sarah began to feel threatened by the thought of Ishmael taking away Isaac's birthright. Despite her sense of joy that her son was growing up a healthy boy, jealousy overcame her sense of trust that God would care for and provide for the entire blended family. We already heard how Sarai's anxiety led to impatience; and impatience led to fear; and

fear led to jealousy. But now anxiety, fear, and jealousy led to an unjust and evil action.

Today's lesson is a painful reminder of what happens when we choose retaliation over reconciliation. When we succumb to fear rather than grace. When selfish pride attempts to overpower abundant compassion. But thankfully our ways are not God's ways. And God is always calling us toward faithfulness in keeping God's covenant rather than succumbing to faulty human desires, emotions, and actions. God reassures Abraham that he will be the father of a great nation, and that this promise will be fulfilled not by choosing one son over another. God's promise will be fulfilled through both of Abraham's sons, because God's care and providence is not limited by human boundaries and justifications. Such an extravagant expression of love is pleasant music to our ears when it relates to us personally. But things get messy when we try to imagine God's mercy being wide enough to embrace those whom we determine to be undeserving, unworthy, and unlovable.

In reflecting upon the predicament of our biblical ancestors, we have heard about a variety of complicated emotions and complex relationships that I imagine we can all relate to regardless of our age, or child-bearing abilities, or status within a biological, adopted, or blended family system. Who has not felt external pressures to behave within socially-constructed gender norms?

Who hasn't questioned their self-worth based on standards perpetuated by the dominant culture?

Granted, it's probably not fair to impose such 21st century first-world perspectives onto an ancient biblical narrative. But I imagine that we can see some aspects of ourselves in similar predicaments in our own families, or extended families, or families of friends. Perhaps there have been family disagreements about who would inherit a favorite set of dishes. Or maybe you've been accused of being your mother's favorite child. Could it be that your self-worth has always been measured against the shining example of a sibling, a cousin, or your best friend? Has there been a time in your life when stubbornness seemed to win out over compassion? Have efforts to protect your pride led you away from a path toward compromise? Have you competed for attention, or status, or wealth rather than being grateful for having enough and being enough? How's that working out for you? I know from personal experience that wanting to be right, and focusing on my rightness often leads me into a black hole of self-righteousness rather than toward God's pathway of right relationship.

When Sarah wants Abraham to cast away the slave woman and her son from their household, such news tugs and our heart strings. Such news triggers in our minds questions of fairness and justice - even thousands of years later. This situation is not only distressing to Abraham, but also to God.

For when Abraham's heart is broken, and whenever our hearts are broken, God's heart is broken as well. The good news is that even in our human vulnerability, frailty, and brokenness, God is always calling us toward forgiveness, reconciliation, and amendment of life. To repent of the evil that enslaves us, the evil we have done, and the evil done on our behalf. God is always with us to help us bear our burdens whether we are Sarah or Hagar. God cares for us and provides for us whether we are Ishmael or Isaac. God is not concerned about who is going to inherit earthy wealth and status. God desires that we be in right relationship with all of our family members and all of our neighbors. God's covenant with Abram extends far beyond his generation and our generation. And God's goodness and mercy extends far beyond a select group of chosen people. For God's compassion and love and blessings are intended for all.

God blesses all the people of the earth that we may be blessings to each other, especially when we are fearful, or threatened, or feel betrayed, abandoned, or outcast. God hears us crying in the wilderness and God responds to our desires for healing and wholeness with abundant compassion and unconditional love. May we, being children of God, live faithfully into the inheritance of God's heavenly realm, with mercy and grace from generation to generation; now and through eternity.

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