

“God Sees and Hears”
Sermon by Lisa Crismore
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Genesis 21:8-21

“The child grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. 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.” The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. 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. As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring.” 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. When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. 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. 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. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.” 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. God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.”

A couple of weeks ago, Jim, Bethany, Sarah and I were blessed to go away for a little vacation. It was unfortunate that Richard, my son in-law, could not get off from work and we greatly missed him. One would wonder where you would go in the middle of a pandemic when everything especially tourist attractions were closed. We decided to rent a cabin in the woods near Nashville, Tennessee. We had a great time playing cards and board games, cooking together, talking and resting. Jim and I are grateful that our children as adults still want to spend time with us. We love our children with all of our being even though our girls are different as night and day. One is a vegan and the other a meat eater. One is outgoing and dramatic and the other is quiet and reserved. Perhaps you can relate to this as you have seen it in your own children or even your siblings. No matter what I love my girls! Bethany and Sarah are in their early thirties and as a parent, I will do anything – sacrifice, grant grace and forgiveness and even be a mama bear when it comes to defending them.

I believe this is where we find Sarah, Abraham’s wife, today in our scripture. She has had a baby after being barren for decades. She loves Isaac with all of her being. It is at the celebration of Isaac being weaned that she observes Ishmael playing with Isaac. We don’t know if Ishmael is tickling him, or playing ball with him or doing the brotherly thing and teasing him. But, Sarah does not like the connection that the half-brothers are making. She begins to fear that Ishmael being the first-born to Abraham will inherit all that God had promised to Abraham. Sarah was chosen by God to have Isaac and God promised that he will have many descendants of a great nation. Isaac is the one that will inherit this promise

NOT Ishmael. The mama bear in Sarah decides to have Abraham send Ishmael and his mother, Hagar, away.

I get Sarah's protective instinct but this is not nice! There is nothing humane about sending a young boy and his mother out into the wilderness with some water and bread. But Sarah has never been compassionate with Hagar. This goes back even before God changes their names and they were called Abram and Sarai. She was the master's wife and Hagar was her slave. When she went years without a child, she sent Hagar to be Abram's wife. Hagar had no choice in the matter. She gets pregnant. Sarah finds herself in a "be careful for what you wish for, you just might get it" scenario. There is friction and cruelty that happens between the women. Hagar flees and finds herself in the wilderness of Beersheba. An angel of God comes to her and tells her to return and submit to Sarai. This messenger from God promises her that she will have a son named Ishmael. God will take care of them. Ishmael will have descendants of a great nation.

The story continues in Genesis with more promises from God. God announces that Abram will change his name to Abraham and he will be the "father of many nations." God makes a covenant with Abraham that he will be his God and the God of his descendants. He gives the land of Canaan to him and his family. God also changes Sarai's name to Sarah and makes the promise that she will have a son at the age of 90 years old. Their son shall be named Isaac and God's covenant will be with him and his descendants. Abraham shows concern for Ishmael. God reassures him by promising to take care of him and to provide him with a great nation as well as Isaac. However, God confirms that the covenant will be with Isaac.

This story is messy and very complicated. When Sarah decides to have Abraham send Ishmael and Hagar away, Abraham is distressed. It is no doubt that he is concerned for his first-born child. God comes to Abraham saying, "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. As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring."

So, the obedient Abraham gets up early and takes Hagar and Ishmael out to the wilderness of Beersheba. It is no doubt that Hagar is afraid for the safety of her son. She is asking herself, "How did I get in this mess?" As the water runs out and the bread becomes crumbs, Ishmael is sun burnt and dehydrated. Hagar can tell that he can't go much farther so she puts him under the shade of a bush. She leaves him because she can't bear to watch him die. She gets out of sight but still can hear her son crying. She looks up to the sky and weeps. She weeps! I am sure she is asking God, "Why?"

It is then that our ever faithful, loving God comes to her and says, "Hagar, what is troubling you? Do not be afraid! I am with you and your son." God has heard the cries of the boy and he knows that you both are in trouble. Go to Ishmael, take him in your arms and hold him. He will be okay. I, God, will make a great nation of Ishmael.

At that moment, Hagar opens her eyes and sees a well up ahead of her. It is full of fresh water. She runs and fills the skin with water. She gives it to Ishmael. He survives and grows to be a man. Hagar finds him a wife and they live in the land together.

This story is messy and complicated! We want to scratch our head. It is about ordinary, messed up people like many of us doing extraordinary things. Abraham will go on to become the Father of the Jewish and Arab nations. It is about people and as John Calvin puts it - their "defective" faith. (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching – Genesis; John Knox Press; 1982; Walter Brueggemann; p. 151).

We all find ourselves walking on a wilderness journey these days. There are many days, we are asking, "Why, God?" First, there was the Covid-19 and we are confined at home. People died. I am sure the people in the hospitals, doctors and nurses and aides looked up to the sky and wept! Second, there was the murder of George Floyd and the protest and rioting that followed. People screaming out for justice!

When I picked this scripture two months ago, I had no idea what all would transpire. Now, I find my dad in the hospital with broken vertebrae in his neck. He was supposed to have surgery this past Tuesday but due to complications, the surgeons could not do it. I keep wondering where is that well of fresh water in the desert? I have asked, "why?" Then, I hear the words of God spoken to Hagar, "DO NOT BE AFRAID." I need to hear those words!

It is then I can open my eyes and see the well of fresh water. It is in my dad's faith. He is a trooper! His faith is unshakable. I wanted to scream and shout on Wednesday when the surgery was postponed and he had to wait almost another week! I was so mad and frustrated with the doctors! Yet, my dad says it is okay and that it happened for a reason.

He said, "Lisa, I have a list of prayer concerns with people's names. I am very concerned about Jeff Roberts. He is the first person on my list! I am the second!" To think that my dad would put somebody else before himself is incredible. That is faith! There is where my well of fresh water is in the wilderness.

There are also the prayers and support that my family and I have received from church members and friends. That well of fresh water also allows me to see the things of thanksgiving. I am thankful that my dad's spinal cord is not damaged. My dad is talking and eating. He can move all his limbs and his lung is not collapsed or kidneys shut down. These are all the obstacles which he had to concur last time. All these things are that well of fresh water. I hold onto the words, "DO NOT BE AFRAID." God is with us – even in the silence, even in the darkest times, even when we face tremendous challenges.

Thanks be to God for God sees us and hears us crying out! God can take our defective faith and do extraordinary things. Amen.