

God in the Mess

6/25/2023

Rev. Jeff Mansfield



Preaching on:
Genesis 21:1–21

Well, we've got a real soap opera on our hands this morning, don't we? You might not think that Holy Scripture should be this trashy, but here it is: Two women share the bed of the same man. Sarah is Abraham's wife. Hagar is Sarah's slave who Sarah gave to Abraham as a surrogate to bear children

for Sarah because she thinks she's too old to conceive a child herself. When Hagar gives birth, the children will belong to Sarah and Abraham, not to Hagar.

When Hagar conceives a child, Sarah begins to feel like Hagar is looking down on her. Maybe this was true or maybe it was just Sarah's jealousy. We don't know exactly what Sarah does in retaliation, but it's bad enough that Hagar runs away into the wilderness before eventually returning to Sarah. (This basically becomes the plot of the dystopian novels and TV show, *The Handmaid's Tale*.)

In time, Sarah does conceive and give birth to a child (Isaac), and it doesn't diffuse the tension in the household at all. Now that Sarah doesn't need Hagar and her son, Ishmael, anymore, she wants them out: Abraham, abandon that woman and that boy in the wilderness (where they'll likely die of dehydration and exposure) and let's be done with them.

This is hardly an edifying story, right? Sarah and Abraham don't look too good here. They own a slave, she's ordered into Abraham's bed without even the possibility of her consent, she's treated harshly and made miserable, and in the end she and her child are abandoned in the wilderness, thrown out, thrown away. One skin of water and a little bit of bread—Abraham was not poor, he could have given her more, but what he gave her was just enough to assuage his own guilt, right? It was not actually intended to make a big difference to Hagar and Ismael's suffering or their ultimate fate.

Now God enters into this mess in two places. And that's what I've been trying to make sense of this past week. First, Abraham at least has the decency to feel guilty about abandoning the mother of his child and his son to the elements where they will likely die an awful death. So, he prays about it. And God, who had previously told Hagar (when she ran away to the wilderness) to go home again, this time approves of the plan. And God says, don't worry about it, I'll take care of them.

You would hope that if one of us conceived a totally immoral plan to benefit ourselves at the expense of someone else and her child, and that if we prayed to God to ask whether we should go forward with this evil scheme, that God would say, No, of course you can't do that and you ought to know better. Nobody's gonna let you get away with treating people like that—least of all me. I don't approve!

And if your neighbor told you that they had conceived some sort of wicked ends, but that it was OK because they'd prayed about it and God said, "Yeah, sure, go for it," you wouldn't believe them a bit, would you? *God would never approve a plan like that!* But here we are. Instead of sitting in detached judgment over this soap opera as the ultimate moral authority, God has gotten Godself tangled up right in the middle of all this human drama. That's troubling, but fascinating to me.

Then God gets involved again as promised. Now, it's strange because there's nothing in this story that would have prevented God from acting like Hagar and Ismael's fairy godmother, right? God could have turned the stones to bread, God could have made water spring up every few feet, God could sent

angels to shade their heads, God could have turned a lizard into a camel and let them ride through the wilderness in style, but God doesn't do any of that. God waits. God waits until the water and the bread are gone. God waits until their strength is sapped by the sun. God waits until Hagar has lost all hope, until she has dropped the young Ismael under a bush and walked as far away as a bow shot—close enough that she can still see him there, but far enough that doesn't have to see him suffer and die. And in this final moment of suffering and despair, God finally acts. God sends Hagar back across the distance to Ishmael and there her eyes are opened, and she sees the well of life-saving water there where she had not noticed it before. What does it all mean?

When I was growing up in Warwick, RI, I used to take the train up into Boston some weekends and hang out with my summer camp girlfriend up in the city. And the coolest place to hang out in Boston in the early and mid-90s was Cambridge Square. It wasn't too gentrified. It was still pretty grungy, eclectic, weird. It hadn't been taken over by all the chains and corporate brands yet. And right in the heart of Cambridge Square, right behind the entrance to the T was this small, brick, almost like an amphitheater. It was like a round little public space where you could just hang out. And back then it was the place where all the grungy teens hung out. Nobody else went in there except for the kids with the ripped clothes and the tongue rings. So, of course, I wanted to hang out there with them. But I didn't quite fit in.

They were a rowdy bunch. They were intense, certainly. And they had a bad reputation. The conception of them was that they were a bunch of drug-addicted, juvenile delinquent runaways and that they were nothing but trouble. But even though I was just hanging out at the absolute margins of that scene, that didn't seem to be the whole story to me.

I started at Boston University in 96 and at that point I felt confident enough to talk to some of these kids. And I discovered that "runaway" was not really an accurate term. A lot of these kids were abandoned, kicked out of the house, or on the run from serious abuse and neglect. A lot of them were LGBTQ teens who had been kicked out of the house or who had been subjected to such abuse that they had to run. Coming from a really healthy and supportive home this was really astonishing to me. I talked to one girl who told me that her mom had told her that she had prayed about it and that God had told her to throw her daughter out of the house as a punishment for her lesbian lifestyle. And I was like, This is awful, someone should make your mom live up to her obligation to you, someone should make her do the right thing! And this girl looked at me like I was crazy and just said, "Well, it's better for me out here than it ever was for me in there. And it sucks. This is hard. But it's worth it." Meeting this girl really shook me spiritually. I prayed to God about it because I was angry with God and eventually slowly I got a surprising answer from God. God said, "No one can make her mother do the right thing. Not even me. And I had to get her out of that house somehow."

I left Boston was I graduated in 2000 and I didn't come back until a decade late when I was working as a minister at a church two subway stops away from Cambridge Square. So, I went back to check on

that scene, to see if those kids were still there. There little park was still there but now it was full of strolling tourists, and Harvard students studying, and business people eating lunch in the sun. Where had all the kids gone?

I mentioned it to someone in my church and she told me that those kids were all living in a special shelter in a church a few blocks from the square for LGBTQ kids who had been kicked out of their homes. While the rest of the world had kept those kids at an arm's length, trying not to see their suffering, God had been working quietly behind the scenes, providing a refuge for them.

Just like Hagar, these young people had experienced abandonment, rejection, and suffering. They were cast out into a wilderness of uncertainty and despair, left to fend for themselves. But just as God saw Hagar in her distress, God saw these young souls in their pain and had been working to provide them with a place of shelter and support.

God's response to Hagar's cry in the wilderness was not immediate. God's timing may not always align with our own. We may question why God allows suffering to persist, why God doesn't step in sooner to alleviate our pain. But the story of Hagar reminds us that even in the depths of our despair, God is present and working, preparing to bring forth blessings and transformation.

God's involvement in the messiness of human drama is not a sign of divine approval for the wrongdoing or the mistreatment of others. Instead, it reveals a God who enters into our brokenness, who meets us in our suffering, and who ultimately seeks to bring about healing and restoration. The story of Hagar and Ishmael also challenges us to examine our own actions and attitudes towards those who have been cast aside by society. It prompts us to question whether we are truly living out the love and compassion of Christ, especially towards those who are marginalized and rejected.

The story of Hagar and Ishmael reminds us that God's love and care extend to all, especially those who have been abandoned and marginalized. God sees our suffering, even in the midst of the messiness of life, and works quietly to bring about transformation and redemption. Let us strive to emulate God's love and compassion in our interactions with others, seeking to create a world where no one is left in the wilderness of despair but is instead embraced and uplifted by the grace of God.