

**7th Sunday after Pentecost
July 11, 2021 Trinity UMC Pastor Geri Hamlen**

Opening Prayer

Merciful God, prone as we are to blame others and to hate ourselves,
take from our eyes the dust that blinds us,
so that we may treat one another by the light of your compassion,
and live always in the Spirit of Jesus Christ
who is the Light of the World. Amen.

Scripture Genesis 21: 1 – 21

As we move to the Reading of Scripture, just a quick side-bar for those who haven't been here the last few weeks. This summer, we are re-reading and reflecting on Family Conflict in the Bible. Particularly in the Earliest Books of the Bible. There's a lot of it, right? And we are living in a very conflicted time in the history of this country, and the world I dare say. So let's take some time to consider the rivalry among families in the Bible and see if we can figure out what God is trying to tell us.

Because ultimately, the Scriptures are God's lesson plan for us. And there are no cheat sheets/Cliff notes really. We just have to open ourselves to the Holy Spirit as we read the Bible, asking always to see with clarity and be led with the Wisdom of God to faithful understandings.

This week, let's consider Isaac and Ishmael.
Both are sons of Abraham by different mothers. ½ brothers.
They are often used as an example of sibling rivalry...

Ishmael is the elder son, first born and Abraham's first wife Sarah succeeds in having him cast out of Abraham's family with his mother, Hagar—Abraham's second wife.

Isaac, the younger son, becomes the carrier of the God's covenant with Abraham...that His offspring would be as numerous as the stars in the sky and the grains of sand on the sea shore and they would become a great nation in and through whom ALL THE FAMILIES of the earth shall be blessed.

The assumption seems to be that the two, Isaac and Ishmael, were somehow in conflict with each other over this covenant promise from God to Abraham. And yet...I search the scripture for more details about the relationship between Ishmael and Isaac and there is really only two times that Isaac and Ishmael are described as being in the same place at the same time. This a.m. I will read to you of those 2 times...the first one is longer and earlier in the story so we'll start there. And, as I indicated last week...this family conflict has a lot to do with the mothers so we start with Sarah—Abraham's first wife...Genesis 21: 1 – 21 New English Version

21 The LORD visited^[a] Sarah just as he had said he would
and did^[b] for Sarah what he had promised.^[c]
So Sarah became pregnant^[d] and bore Abraham a son in his old age
at the appointed time that God had told him.
Abraham named his son—whom Sarah bore to him—Isaac.^[e]
⁴When his son Isaac was eight days old,^[f] Abraham circumcised him

just as God had commanded him to do.^[a]
 (Now Abraham was 100 years old when his son Isaac was born to him.)^[b]
⁶ Sarah said,
 “God has made me laugh.^[c] Everyone who hears about this^[d] will laugh^[e] with me.”
 She went on to say,^[f]
 “Who would^[g] have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children?
 Yet I have given birth to a son for him in his old age!”
⁸ The child grew and was weaned.
 Abraham prepared^[h] a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned.^[i]
⁹ But Sarah noticed^[j] Ishmael, the son of Hagar the Egyptian—the son whom Hagar had borne to Abraham—mocking, laughing, making sport.^[k]
¹⁰ So Sarah said to Abraham,
 “Banish^[l] that servant woman and her son,
 for the son of that woman will not be an heir along with my son Isaac!”
¹¹ Sarah’s demand displeased Abraham greatly because Ishmael was his son.^[m]
¹² But God said to Abraham,
 “Do not be upset^[n] about the boy or your servaife.
 Do^[o] all that Sarah is telling^[p] you because
 through Isaac your descendants will be counted.^[q]
¹³ **But** I will also make the son of the slave wife into a great nation,^[r]
 for he is your descendant too.”
¹⁴ Early in the morning Abraham took^[s] some food^[t] and a skin of water
 and gave them to Hagar. He put them on her shoulders, gave her the child,^[aa]
 and sent her away.
 So she went wandering^[ab] aimlessly through the wilderness^[ac] of Beer Sheba.
¹⁵ When the water in the skin was gone,
 she shoved^[ad] the child under one of the shrubs.
¹⁶ Then she went and thought,^[ae]
 “I refuse to watch the child die.”^[af] So she sat across from him and wept uncontrollably.^[ah]
¹⁷ But God heard the boy’s voice.^[ai]
 The angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and asked her,
 “What is the matter,^[aj] Hagar? Don’t be afraid,
 for God has heard^[ak] the boy’s voice right where he is crying.
¹⁸ Get up! Help the boy up and hold him by the hand,
 for I will make him into a great nation.”
¹⁹ Then God enabled Hagar to see a well of water.^[al]
 She went over and filled the skin with water, and then gave the boy a drink.
²⁰ God was with the boy as he grew.
 He lived in the wilderness and became an archer.
 He lived in *the* wilderness of Paran.^[am]
 His mother found a wife for him from the land of Egypt.^[an]

Sermon ‘Sibling Rivalry? Or God’s Plan?’

That was probably a pretty fun family gathering, a public celebration of a milestone in the life of little Isaac. He was successfully weaned from his mother’s milk to solid food. Good reason to party. But something went wrong...Let’s think about this for a minute.

Isaac was 2 maybe 3 years old. Ishmael was maybe 15 or 16 years old. This party is the only time we know of that they are in the same place at the same time as children. How would you expect a teen-ager to conduct themselves on a feast day, a celebration day? It probably depends on the child but it would not be unusual for a young boy to be a little rowdy, silly, rambunctious. Which wouldn’t bother a 3 year old all that much. But it sure did bother Sarah, Isaac’s mom.

In truth...Isaac didn’t know much about Ishmael first hand. We never hear Isaac talk about him. Isaac leads an eventful life...his father almost sacrificed him but didn’t. Rebekah became his wife. Then there was King Abimelech, arguments over wells. Isaac even had his own

personal encounter with God relative to the Covenant God made with his father Abraham ...again with the descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. But nowhere in any of those events is there a word that Isaac speaks about Ishmael recorded for us.

And then there's Ishmael who has a profound experience of God through his mother...before he was born, as we heard last week. And now as a teen-ager in the wilderness. God made covenant with Hagar:

As for **Ishmael**, I have heard you. I will indeed bless him, make him fruitful, and give him a multitude of descendants. He will become the father of twelve princes; I will make him into a great nation.

Ishmael, like Isaac, went on to have an eventful life and indeed, he did have sons who became the 12 princes. We will hear more about Ishmael in the stories of Esau and even Joseph, the Joseph who had a coat of many colors...but not a word about Isaac is recorded coming from Ishmael. It's as if the two...Isaac and Ishmael didn't really have that much to do with each other.

So if the rivalry between the two half-brothers isn't between the 2 of them...where does it come from? As with so many conflicts, there are underlying issues and external forces at work which elevate the relationship of these 2 to the level of a long-lasting historical problem for the human race.

Issue #1 Sarah—Anxious and overprotective Mom was a problem. She was afraid that Ishmael, that teen age boy, was going to take something away from her and her son, Isaac. We know that insecurity breeds Fear...Hatred...Violence...Fear and hatred make it easy to demonize the other person...whether they deserve it or not. And that bad rap that Sarah gave to Ishmael did get Handed down from generation to generation.

From our point of view, we can't help but wonder if Sarah wouldn't have benefited from the teaching of Jesus: Consider the birds of the air and the lilies of the field...and Love your enemies as yourself. (Matthew Sermon on the Mount.) But she didn't have access to that wisdom.

No disrespect to Sarah. These events in Genesis precede the laws that Moses brought to his people. These rivalries and family feuds happened long before the Wisdom of the proverbs or the poetry of the Psalms. We have to trust that these Genesis events are a backdrop, a foundation for our human need for God's guidance and for our obedience to something besides our innate, human instincts for security. That need just doesn't go away from generation to generation. Each of us as individuals has to find our faith and our security in God in order to overcome the cycle of fear—hatred—demonization and violence that we continue to see over and over again in our times.

This Isaac and Ishmael feud problem lived on in the Abrahamic family history but in addition, there were other factors that kept it alive.

Issue #2: Like Biblical interpretation: I am not an expert on Jewish interpretation but it didn't take me long to find my way to Jewish sources, respected philosophers, scholars and poets dating as far back as the 12th century who maintained that Ishmael was dark and evil and an enemy to God's people. One author went so far as to claim that Abraham was the 'best of men but he contained in himself some bad elements, and these bad elements came out in the form of Ishmael.'ⁱ

And yet, the Scriptures don't indicate 'bad elements' for Ishmael. Just because he was loud and strong and a 'wild donkey of a man.' We, in the 21st century might hear that as an insult but at the time...Wild donkeys were seen as sturdy survivors of a harsh environment. They were potentially domesticated and used for their strength and endurance. Yes, Ishmael may have been inappropriate, laughing at the wrong time and arguing with those who were more settled than he but Scripture tells us that he was married and prosperous and fruitful...he had 12 sons for heaven's sake. He lived out the covenant that God gave to his mother so what purpose does it serve to continue to condemn him?

Issue #3 Well, another underlying issue was and continues to be...Desire for the land. You may or may not be aware that over time, Ishmael, right or wrong, has been identified as a fore-father of the Muslim religion. Where Jews and Christians name Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as Patriarchs of our faith, Muslims name, Abraham, Isaac, Ishmael, Jacob as the Patriarchs. Somehow, over the centuries, 'the Ishmaelites (descendants of Ishmael) evolved into a

designation of a desert people, and eventually extended to Arab/Palestinian people as a whole.ⁱⁱ They populated not only the geography of what we now know as Israel but also throughout the contemporary Middle East.

The idea that Jews and Muslims are cousins, descended from Isaac and Ishmael respectively, continues to be a strong assumption for both of those faiths even today. In 1985, Prime Minister Shimon Peres of Israel at the time, indicated in an address to the United Nations: "The sons of Abraham have become quarrelsome, but remain family nonetheless."ⁱⁱⁱ

Quarrelsome seems like an understatement when you think in terms of the ongoing violence we hear about in the news so often.

The Jews, God's chosen people, the people of the Covenant, the descendants of Isaac were intended to be a blessing to the nations, to be settled in the Promised land...and yet they didn't return to the Middle East until 1948 after surviving potential genocide during WWII.

Their return and the formation of an Israeli state has set off a contentious and often violent struggle for land, for recognition as a Nation and placed in excess of 5 million Palestinians/Ishmaelites in refugee camps.

Sons of Abraham notwithstanding, I think we all know that the on-going conflict between Israel and the Palestinians is a human struggle of epic proportions for control and dominance over the land, the resources, the history and the holy places in the Middle East.

It is a struggle that is rooted in Holy Writings and in human victimization of the Jews over centuries. It is a struggle that is also Rooted in the issues of equity and justice for indigenous people displaced by Declarations and Legal documents put in place by politicians from far away nations.

I listen to CDs from the Teaching Company about History and the Professor J Rufus Fears maintains that the Middle East is the both the graveyard of Empires as well as the birthplace of hope.^{iv}

Disrespecting Ishmael even now, against all evidence in the Holy writings, somehow makes it easier for current day Israelies to demonize the Palestinians and to keep the flames of insecurity, fear, hatred, violence and demonization going year after year, decade after decade, generation after generation.

Was that God's intention when Abraham's covenant was passed on to Isaac? Is that what God hoped for when Hagar's cries and Ishmael's thirst for life-saving water was heard and a covenant made with Ishmael?

There are many good, good reasons to think not. The Holy Writings about Ishmael are compelling, heart wrenching, intended to evoke our sympathy and empathy. Who among us would want Hagar, while pregnant, to expire in the desert? And who would want Ishmael as a teen-ager, and his mother, to die of thirst? No...the writers of the scriptures were trying to engage us on behalf of these ancestors. They are trying to describe for us a God who is so Good and Faithful and Loving that no matter what an angry fearful mother like Sarah wanted...God does not reject anyone.

Peter in Acts 10 discovers this same truth in relation to the Gentiles as he tells them about Jesus over dinner at the house of Cornelius. Jews and Gentiles didn't eat together until it became clear, in a vision, by the power of the Holy Spirit that '...God shows no partiality...'

We are all made in the image of God and precious beyond belief to our Creator. In fact, God is so great, that God chooses the children of both Abraham and Hagar to receive covenant promises...Not the same promise. But that's OK, isn't it? God surely has enough covenants to go around for each person and each family on an 'as-needed by God' basis to fulfill God's dreams for humanity.

It's human shortsightedness to read about Isaac and Ishmael as though one were better than the other. As though God's playing favorites in some fashion. Maybe the most important lesson the Bible has to offer about family conflict is that we are all God's favorites. God has an intention for each of us. And it's not for us to create conflict where it doesn't belong.

**I told you at the beginning that there were two time that we know of when Isaac and Ishmael were in the same place and the same time. Let me read this to you:
Genesis 25: 7 – 10**

Abraham lived a total of^[a] 175 years.⁸ Then Abraham breathed his last and died at a good old age, an old man who had lived a full life.^[b] He joined his ancestors.^[c] ⁹ His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah^[d] near Mamre, in the field of Ephron the son of Zohar, the Hittite.^[e] ¹⁰ This was the field Abraham had purchased from the sons of Heth.^[f] There Abraham was buried with his wife Sarah.

With his wife Sarah AND with his two, beloved, unique, special sons right there, together. Isaac was 75 years old. Ishmael 88. Both of them, like their father Abraham, had felt the touch of God on their lives. They, like their father Abraham, had been faithful to the unique covenant each had received. I like to think that they had lived long enough to look past their Mothers' fear, hatred and violence to each other. I like to think that they could look out over that field and hear the sweet song of the birds. Celebrating the life of Abraham, their father, together, without a single thought or premonition about how unfaithfully we, even to this present day, have used their lives to justify our own inhumanity to each other. I imagine them seeing the lilies blooming. Feeling the sunlight and breezes that shine and blow on all of God's children, always and forever, the good and the evil alike.

Would that we too could live as those who have been set free of fear, hatred, violence and can share the blessing of God's fierce attachment to each of us, unique and individual as we are, with the whole world. May it be so in our lives, our community, our nation and the world. Amen.

Pastoral Prayer followed by the Lord's Prayer

Almighty God, have mercy on those who do harm and don't notice.

Forgive those who turn their backs on pain and injustice.

Heal those who hurt others because they have been hurt.

Mend all who have been damaged by ignorance and cruelty.

Forgive all of our faults, in all the ways they show up.

Amend, repair and make us saved souls on earth as in heaven

where we may live and love together with you forever,

through the bitter passion of our sweet Savior, Jesus. Amen.

Benediction

Life is complicated.

Families are complex.

People are often confused.

None-the-less:

Our Father God's covenant for blessing and reconciliation is secure.

The Holy Spirit's comfort and power are all around us all the time.

Christ's healing miracles and loving warmth is always present to those who accept it.

Take that peace and comfort and warmth into the world with you this day and everyday.

Share the light and love of God with all—strangers, friends and family. Amen.

ⁱ Shipler, David K., Arab and Jew: Wounded Spirits in a Promised Land, Times Books, New York, 1986, p. 151, referencing Judah Halevi, Jewish poet and philosopher.

ⁱⁱ Ibid, p. 152.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid, p. 152.

^{iv} Fears, J. Rufus, The Wisdom of History Course Guidebook, The Great Courses, Chantilly, VA, 2007, Lectures 1, 17, 18, 35, 36.