

Summer Worship Series: “Beginnings”
Call Me “Ishmael”

Second Sunday after Pentecost
June 2014—Sermon Text: Genesis 21:8-21
FUMC Arlington, Texas 76011

“One of the tortures of jealousy is that it can never turn its eyes away from the thing that pains it”
—George Eliot (from *Scenes of Clerical Life, Mr. Gilfil’s Love Story*).

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Context is everything. For example a newspaper headline that screams: “Cardinals murder Reds” means something different in Cincinnati and St. Louis in 2014 than it did in Rome, Italy in 1922. May we set the context of our lesson for today?

In the context of old age Isaac is born to Abraham and Sarah. The couple names the child Isaac and circumcises him. The context of a 100 year old man and a 90 year old woman giving birth is astonishing. Isaac’s circumcision is a sign of being one of God’s people and this rite plays a conspicuous role in our Bible.

Isaac, Ishmael, Hagar, Abraham, and Sarah play a role in remarkably similar stories found in both chapters 16 and 21. For example, Genesis 16:16 identifies Ishmael as “the son of Hagar,” but he is not named in today’s reading. We know from Genesis 16, when Sarah could not give Abraham a son, he exercised a legal option of an heir by a slave/concubine. Later Abraham and Sarah name the true child of promise “Isaac” as Sarah said: “God has brought laughter for me.” In Genesis 21 Isaac is three years old and weaned. In a world of high infant mortality, a time of weaning was undeniably an occasion for a religious celebration.

To answer the curious, what *may* account for the similarities in Genesis 16 and 21 is one story may have come from the Northern Kingdom of Israel

and the other from the Southern Kingdom of Judah. When court copyists/scribes wrote, edited, and redacted the Tanakh (Hebrew scriptures) in King David's time—about the 9th century B.C.E.—instead of choosing either one version of the story or another, the editors included both. This accounts for the multiple call stories of David (1 Samuel 16 and 17) and other features of the Hebrew narrative such as the two creation stories—one of which we looked at last Sunday. Now we focus on Genesis 21:8-21 and our day's lesson:

8 The child grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. 9 But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. 10 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." 11 The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. 12 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. 13 As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring."

14 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. 15 When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. 16 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. 17 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. 18 Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him." 19 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. 20 God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. 21 He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt (Genesis 21:8-21).

When Sarah saw Ishmael and Isaac playing together she demanded Abraham dismiss the slave woman and her son. If you think demanded is too strong, then note Sarah's own words: "Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac." Unduly harsh—then consider this: in the ancient world the future of a woman

lay with her son and nowhere else. Thus, Sarah protects what she understands may well be her inheritance.

Of course, Abraham hesitates to do as Sarah demands, but God intervenes. In this case, the storyteller relates this act because God's objective was a biological heir (see Genesis 18:9-15; cf. 21:12). Even so, as a gesture of divine intrusion, God promises to make a nation of Ishmael (21:13). What happened to Hagar and Ishmael no doubt troubles us today. Yet, the narrator reveals that God's approval of Isaac does not exclude Ishmael's blessing. This story's God is universal and seeks to bless all.

Still most of the trouble in this story is between the human actors. At Isaac's weaning feast Sarah's eyes are not on her son, but rather her rival's son. Conventional wisdom reminds us that jealousy consists of the "fear of losing love." Thus it was not so much the love of her own biological son that motivated Sarah to protect Isaac's inheritance as it was jealousy of her rival's son.

Jealousy and envy are near synonyms. Envy is what the church calls one of the seven deadly sins. Those who commit the sin of envy desire something that someone else has which they perceive themselves as lacking. Dante defined envy as "love of one's own good perverted to a desire to deprive other men [people] of theirs." In Dante's *Purgatory*, the punishment for the envious is to have their eyes sewn shut with wire, because they have gained sinful pleasure from seeing others brought low. Thomas Aquinas described envy as "sorrow for another's good."

In a way this story of Sarah and Hagar is another "fall story," along the lines of Adam and Eve. Whenever things seem to be moving well in the Bible,

then leave it to human beings to make a mess of things. In Acts, Pentecost gives birth to the church and Peter heals a person who Acts tells us was “lame from birth.” As a sign of blessed life in the early church Luke tells us, “those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common” (Acts 4:32). But then along comes the sordid business with Ananias and Sapphira. They try to keep “back some of the proceeds, and brought only a part and laid it at the apostles’ feet” (Acts 5:2). For we who believe that “private property” is an incontestable right we see nothing wrong with Ananias and Sapphira’s thinking at all. But the community’s faith agreement was to share all. Ananias and Sapphira violated the essence of the church’s first covenant.

Returning to our Genesis story, it reminds us that just because the child of promise is finally in the world does not necessarily mean that God’s blessings will be transparent to all people. The immediate result of Isaac’s miraculous birth is anger and jealousy on Sarah’s part; divided loyalty on Abraham’s part; and rejection, banishment, and near death for Hagar and Ishmael. This story, although nearly 4000 years old, even now depicts circumstances in which real people have genuine human reactions to similar emotional situations in which we find ourselves in today.

Bible realism reveals the human condition or the human predicament in telling the stories of faith and unfaith. The Bible tells about us as we are and narrates human stories in quite believable ways. We could even then ask: Is . . . life is a problem . . . a task . . . a preoccupation with itself . . . a shipwreck . . . or a vital program? Psalm 8 puts this question like this: “What are people that you [God] are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?” Believe it



or not, the Bible is a long answer to that short question. Isaac's name means "laughter" or "little joke." As part of a divine plan, Isaac's birth transforms Sarah's skeptical laughter into astonishment.

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OU wishbone option vis-à-vis time elements on Sunday morning:

- God is for all; not just for some (Sarah and Isaac are certainly privileged in this story, yet Ishmael to receive a blessing).
- Human cries move God to action (see Exodus and Psalms for many examples).
- "Do not be afraid" (see many angelic announcements).