

God's Love Story

Sermon by Rev. Désirée M. Youngblood at Midway Presbyterian Church, KY

June 22, 2014 (12th Sunday in Ordinary Time-Year A)

Genesis 21:8-21 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.

Let's face it, today's Scripture lesson is one that most Americans are uncomfortable with. We do not like to think of Sarah as being jealous. We do not like to think of Abraham as being a parent who would abandon his child. We do not like to think of God as letting all of this happen to poor Hagar and Ishmael. Really, we would rather just hear feel-good stories from the Bible that tell us that we are doing a good job and how to be better at what we are already doing. Yet, the Bible is God's love story to humanity. It tells us how God loves us even though we are sinful creatures who continue to make mistakes even after God calls us to repentance. I believe that today's Scripture lesson is one of those amazing stories of God's love. Let's delve a bit deeper into the story to see the abundance of God's love.

Our lesson begins with the child of the covenant—Isaac. God had promised Abraham in Genesis 12:2 that he would make of him a great nation. In Genesis 15:4, God told Abraham that

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he would have an heir born of his own flesh. In Genesis 15:5, God told Abraham that his descendants would be as many as the stars he could see. In Genesis 17:16, God promised Abraham that his wife Sarah would give birth to a son. God showed his great love for Abraham by allowing a miracle child to be born to his ninety-year-old wife. In today's lesson, that son has been born, has grown, and has been weaned. Now the real trouble begins.

Yet, did it really just begin? Abraham and Sarah have shown much faith in God in the past by moving away from Haran when Abraham was 75 and Sarah was 65. They left everything and everybody they knew and loved at an age where most of us move closer to family. They traveled under harsh conditions for many months, maybe even years to get to the land that God promised them. They showed tremendous faith. Yet, they did not fully trust in God's promise to give them descendants. Instead, they used their understanding and reasoning in an attempt to fulfill God's promise instead of relying on faith and waiting on God to fulfill the promise. Sarah gave her slave girl Hagar to Abraham to have a child with. When Hagar conceived, she became proud and forgot her place as a slave girl. Sarah responded by treating her harshly, and Hagar ran away, only to return and submit to Sarah after seeing the angel of the Lord. The child, Ishmael, was born, and then Sarah became jealous, especially after Isaac was born. Well, Sarah's jealousy is not too surprising, is it?

How many times do we try to use our intellect and reasoning as a substitute for faith? How many times have we allowed our sinful nature to muck up what God is doing in our lives or in our church? How often do we let our doubts and fears stand in the way of the blessings that God has for us? How often do we forget to look at each other as children of God? It seems to me that our lives would be so much easier and our churches would run so much more smoothly if

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we could just get past our sinful nature and our need to be in control. Yet, we are human, and God loves us anyway.

Yes, Sarah's humanity got in the way of how she viewed Hagar and Ishmael. She was jealous. She also wanted to protect the birthright of her son. She was the primary wife, so her son would be first in line for the inheritance according to the custom of her time. Yet, Ishmael would be entitled to a portion of the inheritance, as well. Sarah did not want Ishmael taking anything from her son.

In this story, it is hard for us not to judge Sarah for her lack of compassion. We wonder how she could be so cruel to Hagar and Ishmael. After all, she is the one who created the predicament they were all in. Yet, we cannot be too quick to condemn her, either. After all, she is a mother protecting her child. We do not walk in her shoes. We do not know what it was like for her. We do not know that we would have acted differently if we were in the same situation in her day and culture. It is easy to sit outside of the story and judge. But in reality, we do not know all of the facts.

On the flip side, we often do not condemn Abraham for sending Hagar and Ishmael out into the desert. After all, he was distressed over Sarah's demand to cast them out. Thus, he must have loved Ishmael. And he was assured by God that they would be fine. In fact, God promised to make a nation out of Ishmael, too, because he was also Abraham's son.

I just love this part of the story because it is where God really shows his love. Even though Sarah and Abraham have allowed their humanity to muck up God's promise, God remains faithful. God promised to give Abraham many descendants, and God carried out that promise through both sons. God did not abandon Ishmael because he was not the son of the promised covenant. No, he extended his promise.

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God gives each of us free will to do as we please. Yet, our will is not as free as we like to think it is because of the power of sin. We forgot our place. We become proud. We forget that God is the Creator and we are the created. Of course, God's greatest desire is for us to be in a loving relationship with him. By the grace of God, Jesus Christ broke the power of sin through his death on the cross. The power of the Holy Spirit leads us to the faith that allows us to receive God's grace. Through the power of the Holy Spirit we grow in sanctification, the process of becoming more Christ-like. Yet, we are still human. We still make mistakes. We still sin. In our weakness, we sometimes try to use our intellect and reasoning as a substitute for our faith. And yet, God remains faithful to us! Although our humanity continues to muck up our own lives and God's churches over and over again, God calls us to repentance and continues to restore his blessings to us. No matter what path we choose to take, God will help good come from it because God will not let us go. We might not follow the path that God has prepared for us, and it might cause us much heartache and pain. Yet, God will not abandon us, and God will extend his promises. What an awesome God we serve!

Abraham, knowing that Ishmael will be okay in the end, sends Hagar and Ishmael away. He gives them some bread and water, but not enough to last very long. After the water runs out, Hagar either let her logic take the place of her faith or forgot the promise of God in Genesis 16:10 when the angel of the Lord said, "I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude." She lays Ishmael under the shade of a bush and sits a ways away from him so that she will not have to watch him die. Her love was so deep that she could not bear to watch her child suffer and die. Yet, she also could not bear to be far away from him in his time of need. She used up the last of the water in her body to cry for her beloved child.

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I cannot imagine being in Hagar's shoes. I have heard from people who have experienced it that having a child die is a terrible thing. In Hagar's mind, that is exactly what was happening. I do know that all parents fear harm coming to their children. Hagar was living a nightmare.

In the meantime, Ishmael must have been crying out to his mother and to God; God hears his cries, and God responds. The name Ishmael means "God hears." God does not abandon Ishmael and Hagar in their time of need. God is near enough to hear Ishmael's cries. And God loves them enough to do something about the cries.

The angel of God appears to Hagar and lets her know that God has heard Ishmael's cries and reminds her of God's promise to make a great nation of him. Then her eyes are opened and she sees the life-sustaining water that must have been nearby all along.

How often are we in a similar situation? I do not mean a situation of life and death, but rather a situation in which we see no way out? How often does our own understanding fail to see what is right before us? How often do our problems seem so big that we cannot see a solution? Do we trust in our own understanding and reasoning at that point, or do we trust in God? Do we cry out like Ishmael, or do we just keep sinking further and further into the bog of self-despair and helplessness? During times such as these, it is hard to remember that God is with us because he feels so far away, if we feel his presence at all. Yet, God is never far away, and God will never abandon us. God loves us just as much as God loved Sarah, Abraham, Isaac, Hagar, and Ishmael. We just have to remember to call out to God in prayer. Through prayer, we can calm down, and God will help us see the solutions that have been in front of us all along. During these times, breath prayer and meditation work particularly well.

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Hagar's eyes being opened to the well reminds me of the two people walking to Emmaus in Luke 24:13-32, when their eyes were opened in the breaking of the bread to recognize Jesus, who had been walking with them on the road. They saw the bread of life in the simple action of having a meal. Hagar found the water of life for her son and herself in the simple action of God reminding her of his promise.

The next verse in today's Scripture lesson is really profound: "God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow." Then we learn that his mother got him a wife from Egypt. Everything God promised came true. Ishmael grew up. He had a place to live. He had a career, which provided food for his family, and he had a wife to begin a new family, which would begin a new nation.

Yet, what is most profound in all of that is that God was with the boy. Even though Ishmael was not the child of the covenant, God never left him. Today's Scripture passage tells us about God's love story with Ishmael. In the end, it is not the sad story that it seems to be in the beginning; it is a story that was made possible through God's love.

What is God's love story with us? God loves each and every one of us here this morning, even though we are still sinful humans, even though we make mistakes and muck up our lives. God loves us even though we do not always treat each other with kindness. God loves us even though we often take the wrong path. Where have you seen God's love in your life? I encourage you to write those times down for the future. Unfortunately, we will go through times of trials and tribulations, when we will not feel God's presence. Unfortunately, we will continue to make mistakes. Yet, God will never abandon us. We just need to remember God's love during the tough times.