

## **A House Divided**

Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17; Genesis 21:8-21

“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.” Genesis 21:9-11

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In the spirit of Father’s Day, we say thanks be to God this morning for the fathers and the grandfathers who are with us, for fathers and grandfathers whom we have loved and lost to death, and for all the great men in our lives who serve as mentors, role models and who, in general, help the rest of us be who we are, by their support, encouragement and wisdom.

In honor of Father’s Day, I decided to turn to the lectionary lesson from the book of Genesis because it features Abraham, the first and the most notable patriarch of our faith tradition. Abraham, along with several other characters in the story we have just heard, plays a crucial role in the faith history to which we all are heirs. Abraham’s story begins when God finds him and asks him to leave his homeland of Haran, which is in the Mesopotamia River Valley, and go to the land of Canaan, where God promises to make of him a great nation. In an act of extraordinary obedience and faith, Abraham, whose name at the time was still Abram, sets out with his wife Sarai, who will become Sarah, toward the future God has offered. Neither has a clue as to what will lie ahead. All they have to go on are hopeful hearts and divine promises.

What I like about Abraham is that he is a funny mix of a man. He is not all good, and he is not all bad. In other words, he is like the rest of us. Abraham does become a father of a great nation, but along the way, he makes a number of questionable decisions, including a business deal with his brother-in-law Lot, in which Abraham ends up with a really lousy piece of real estate. (1) He struggles mightily with his relationships with the women in his life. And you could write a book about how it went between Abraham and his children. And yet, you have to admire a man who lives his life by trusting God with the future. That was the one constant in Abraham’s often problematic life. There are a lot worse ways to live than to have faith in God as the compass that guides your way. You can be controlled by fear. You can sit on the edge of the riverbank all your life and never set foot in the water that is your destiny. Or you can live as Abraham and Sarah did, who set out in faith, not knowing where they were to go but trusting that God wished them well and had a plan they could not see. That God could see it was enough for them.

Today’s episode in the saga of Abraham and Sarah and their family, you could call *Desperate Housewives*, or, at the least, *Desperate Housewife*. I’m speaking of Sarah, though Hagar, after she is kicked out of the house, finds herself in a pretty desperate situation, too.

Let me fill you in on a bit of background before we get to the love triangle part of the story. What had happened was that when the prospective father and mother of the great nation arrived

in Canaan, they found themselves unable to conceive children. This was the source of great personal disappointment to them, as anyone who has dealt with infertility can attest. But it was also a situation that put the divine promise in peril. There can be no great nation if the nursery is empty. Something had to be done to rescue the promise from disaster, so Sarah offered her Egyptian servant Hagar, to Abraham, her husband, to serve as a surrogate mother. This story could, in many ways, be taken from yesterday's newspaper, couldn't it? (2) Clearly at that time, surrogate motherhood was an accepted practice in Near East culture. A child was born. He was named Ishmael, which means "God hears." Remember that for later. Time passes, and then an astonishing development. Sarah, who is old enough herself to be a grandmother or even a great-grandmother, conceives a child by Abraham, and they have a baby. His name is Isaac which means in Hebrew, "He laughs." Sarah had laughed in disbelief when she heard that she, an old woman, was going to bring would bring new life into the world. Her laugh was a cynical laugh: "Yes, sure I will."

But the advent of Isaac evokes a different kind of laughter. It's the laughter of delight at the sheer goodness, the surprising wonder of life. I know you have laughed that kind of laugh, when you're at ease with yourself and with other people. You're just happy, because the grass is growing, the ice cream is cold, the wind makes a ripple on the water. I love to play with my little granddaughter Virginia. I'll say something that tickles Virginia's funny bone. "Oh Gran!" she'll say. And then she'll throw her head back and laugh. I don't know what's funny, but I start laughing, too, and there we are, both of us with our heads thrown back, laughing - a sure sign that after all these thousands of years, God's promise of abundant life is still holding its own.

And so there were two sons of Abraham: Isaac the younger, son of Sarah and Ishmael, the older, son of Hagar. The brothers seemed to like each other. The blended family appeared to be working until the day the green-eyed monster showed up. Sarah was watching the boys. They were playing happily together, when all of a sudden, she just couldn't stand it. She went to Abraham. "Throw her out," she demanded. "Her son," notice she wouldn't even let his name touch her lips, "her son is not going to inherit along with my son."

Now before you write Sarah off, let me ask you to have a little sympathy for her. Don't you think Mother Teresa would have had a hard time living with this family situation? And besides, she was doing what ancient Jewish women were supposed to do. She was supposed to take charge of the future of the family. (3) That's what she had done when she offered her servant Hagar to her husband to serve as surrogate mother. And now that Isaac had come, it was her job to insure that the future would unfold according to the original covenant.

I know you're not buying what I'm saying. I'm just trying to get you to see beneath the surface. Like most family situations, this one is more complex than it would appear. Think about the relationship between the two women and how they must have shared the intimacies of daily life: braiding hair, trading secrets, choosing clothes. I'm sure there had been affection between them. But all of it was gone in the white hot heat of anger and jealousy. A friendship was destroyed. Or was it a friendship? A slave and master. Hagar was a piece of property like a bushel of figs or a basket of barley that could be bought and sold. And what about the marriage? Two wives? Polygamy? Slavery? This story of Abraham and Sarah is filled with deep and painful things, on a personal level, in terms of society, and in terms of national history, too. It will be from Ishmael's

descendants that desert nomads will come. From that nomadic culture, the religion of Islam will be born. And from Isaac's line Judaism will emerge. This story today of one man, two women and two little boys is the explanation our faith tradition gives as to why there is Islam and Judaism, why there is tension in the Near East, why there are ethnic differences and rivalries that go so very deep.

Sarah issued an order to Abraham. Abraham was distressed. God said, "Don't be distressed. I have a plan for you and Sarah. I have a plan for Hagar and her son too, because he is your son, and all of you belong to me, and you are all a part of the story of grace and redemption." Trusting God again, Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael, the little boy, on their way with a water bottle and not much else. This is not my favorite moment in Abraham's life. I don't care if he had faith in God. It seemed like a pretty crummy thing to do. But still, off they went, mother and child wandering in the wilderness, like Abraham and Sarah, not having any idea about where they were going. Soon the water ran out. The child became dehydrated and was close to death. Unable to stand the thought of watching him die, she put him far away from her, under a bush. She went and sat a bow shot away from him and wailed up to heaven.

I have not agreed with Terri Shiavo's mother and father about much of anything, but on a fundamental human level, I have felt empathy for them for the simple reason that parents hate to lose their children. Hagar hated to watch her little boy die. As her cries echoed off the hills and pierced the sky, I believe it happened this way. Her little son who was sinking into the silence of death. It was his mother's cry that woke the baby up, and the child began to cry, and God heard his cry. The angel of God said to Hagar, "Don't worry. I've got a plan for him. I'm going to take care of him. Open your eyes." She does, and what does she see? A well has popped up in the middle of the desert. You don't see that kind of thing very often. The water was just the beginning. God never, ever took his eyes off Ishmael, just as he never took his eyes off Isaac, whose future became full of abundance, too. To this day, Ishmael's descendants give him honor.

What a saga. What a wild set of characters. We love them and admire them and disrespect them and want to wring their necks. It's an amazing thing to realize that through the mess that is the human family, with all its drama and brokenness, God's purposes are being worked out in the world. We do not have a Creator who said I'm going to create a world and then I'm going to set it over here, a bow shot away, and see how they do. No, when the world messed up, God said, I'm going to get involved. (4) God got involved by making a covenant with a man named Abraham and a woman named Sarah, and when that plan went into the ditch, God said, "I've got to do something else." I've got to get involved again in a new and a different way. "And the word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth." (5) Jesus Christ is the ultimate involvement of God in the mess that is human life.

What do we have on Father's Day? A family with the same sorts of losses and limitations that our own families have, but we also have the assurance that God's hand is at work in it all. We have the reassurance that when it appears that all is lost, the blessing is still there. The plan still holds. One of the great Presbyterian ministers of the last century was a man named Elam Davies, a Welshman, senior pastor at Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago for many years. After he died, among his papers was found this sentence, written in his scrawly handwriting, "All my life

Thou has been at the helm, though very secretly.” What an eloquent way to acknowledge the reality of the providence of God.

The final Father’s Day gift is the assurance that whatever wilderness you and I are in, God has promised, “I will not leave you comfortless. I will come to you.” (6) God abandons nobody, and I mean nobody.

May the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Ishmael bless you and keep you. May the God of Sarah and Hagar give you hope for your not so perfect life and for your not so perfect family and for God’s family, the fractious and often wrong-headed human race. Above all else, may the grace of God’s own son fill your heart and fill your home this Father’s Day.

In the name of the Creator and the Redeemer and the Sustainer. Amen.

1) Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures*, Harper and Row, 1979, P. 4.

2) Bill Moyers, *Genesis*, Doubleday, 1996, p. 187.

3) *Ibid.*, p. 189.

4) *Ibid.*, p. 199.

5) John 1:14.

6) John 14:18.