

Abraham Had Two Sons

Genesis 21:1-21

Preached by Rev. Phyllis A. Norman June 22, 2008

Prospect Congregational Church, UCC

Back in January I participated in an intense 8-day experience offered by Hartford Seminary and developed by Yeheskel Landau. Yeheskel is a Doctor of Minister candidate with me—I have gotten to know him well over the past three years. He is also professor of Christian/Jewish Relations and Dialogue at the Seminary—through his position Yeheskel developed this program: “Building Abrahamic Partnerships.” Abraham is the father of the world’s three major religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The class was made up of Jews, Christians, and Muslims—for 8 days we shared one another’s faith experiences.

As the class wrapped up we learned the project to be completed by those of us who needed credit for the course, could be just about anything we might creatively come up with—I chose to write a story book for older children. Easier said than done! Suffice it to say that from early February to this past Tuesday when I turned in my project, it has been one continual learning experience. Our confirmation class for the first time since I have led this program, were able to worship in a Synagogue and learn about Judaism from a Rabbi; we also experienced an Arabic Muslim prayer service in a Mosque and learned from an Imam about Islam.

I involved by three granddaughters, hoping to bring my learning and understanding down to their level of learning. Therein lies my deeper insight into Judaism and Islam—one cannot possibly engage in an experience with children without seeing that experience through their eyes. It was powerful!

Our Holy Bible is filled with stories of heroes, men and yes even a few women whose faith has been passed down for thousands of years. There are fantastic stories of David and Goliath, Daniel in the lion’s den, Joseph and his famously colored coat, Deborah the Judge, Naomi and Ruth...I could go on and on and on. This morning we have the story of Abraham and the birth of his son Isaac. It is also a story of jealousy between women, and rivalry between brothers who probably got along quite well until their parents intervene. In fact it is a difficult story to understand—it is hard for us to imagine how Abraham’s wife Sarah could be so rude; it is hard to imagine how Abraham could condone his wife’s demands; and it is even harder to see God condoning such actions.

The story of Hagar and Ishmael is a tragic one, and I admit every time I read it I am ashamed—it should not have happened, it did not need to happen, but the truth of the matter is, it did happen. We cannot exclude the events from the story so we read it and it stares us in the face—it bears witness to the failure of our ancestors to treat each other with the most basic level of human decency.

The story of Abraham begins back in the 12th chapter of Genesis. God called Abraham to leave his father’s house and travel with his wife Sarah to the land of Canaan. God

promised Abraham he would have many descendants, “Look at the stars Abraham; as numerous as they are, so shall your descendants be.” And Abraham believed God. And all was well. But the children didn’t happen. Abraham took matters into his own hands and adopted his nephew Lot. But that did not work out because Lot lived in Sodom near Gomorrah and we know what happened there, so Abraham’s plan of descendants through Lot fell through.

Then Sarah decided she could solve the childless problem through her servant Hagar. In the early days of the Bible slavery, owning people, was an acceptable practice. Sarah owned Hagar; any children born to Hagar belonged to Sarah. Sarah gave Abraham Hagar and told him to sleep with her in the hope a child would result and God’s promise would be fulfilled. Abraham slept with Hagar and their son Ishmael was born and became the son of Abraham and Sarah.

There is a reason why it is not good practice to take things out of context, and this complicated story is one good reason. When we read this morning’s text we understand Sarah to be a mean-spirited woman. However in the context of the whole story, Sarah’s actions take on a new meaning: when Hagar became pregnant it was obvious to the whole village it was Sarah’s fault she was barren. Hagar looked down on Sarah and pumped herself up in the community to Sarah’s shame, and Sarah became defensive and angry with Hagar—in fear Hagar fled to the desert. God comforted Hagar and sent her back. Hagar gave birth to Ishmael and all remained calm between her and Sarah until Sarah became pregnant, and gave birth to Isaac. By this time we believe Ishmael was about 12 years old.

This is where we pick up today’s lesson. At last the promise was fulfilled as God had told it to Abraham. The story would not have ended so badly if the people of God had put their faith and trust in God, but that was not to be. One day Sarah looks out from her tent and sees Ishmael playing with Isaac—some translations say Ishmael mocked Isaac—and Sarah’s old hurts and resentments came flooding back. She suddenly realized she no longer needed Hagar and Ishmael, and she banished them to the desert.

Sarah’s decision broke Abraham’s heart—Ishmael was his firstborn son and he loved him as much as he loved Isaac. We have a tendency to forget Abraham had two sons. In both cases God asked Abraham to sacrifice each one: Isaac’s sacrifice we will look at next week. God asked Abraham to sacrifice his firstborn son Ishmael. Early in the morning Abraham prepared Hagar and their son to leave the camp with food and water, a short journey to probable death. But that was not God’s plan. God met Hagar in the desert and promised Hagar that through her son Ishmael there will be a great nation and many descendants.

I imagine along the way you have heard the story of Abraham and Sarah and the birth of Isaac when his parents were 90 and 100 years old. You have probably heard the story of how God asked Abraham to sacrifice Isaac on an altar. But how many of you have heard the story of Hagar and Ishmael and the great nation that came down through them? Not only is Abraham the father of Judaism and Christianity; Abraham is the father of Islam.

The Qur'an, the holy book of the Islamic faith written by Muhammad in the 7th century, tells the story a bit different from the way our story is told: the angel Gabriel leads Abraham, Hagar, and Ishmael into the desert. They come to what is now known as Mecca where Hagar runs between the hills of Safa and Marwah seven times, praying and crying out in desperation. Finally Gabriel stomps his foot and water appears. This story of God's provision of water in the middle of the desert is reenacted every year by Muslims around the world during their great hajj—once a year literally millions of people run between the hills before praying together a prayer of thanksgiving for God's faithfulness, and then they drink from that same well.

For people who claim Mohammed as the Great prophet, this story is one of formation, the beginning of the story of faith in the One God who was revealed to Hagar and Ishmael—and while it may be argued every culture tends to create legends and lore to support their own perspective, the truth is that even from our own scriptures we can see that this story is a story of amazing grace. This is a story that ought to cheer our hearts rather than confuse and anger us. It gives us reason to sigh in relief: Hagar and Ishmael, the outcasts, the dejected, the despised—the exiles no longer considered a part of the Jewish faith—could call on God and find relief.

This is a story that offers hope, a story that celebrates God's universal love, a love that knows no limits. Through this story, so easy to avoid, but so important to remember, we come to know that God hears us as surely as God heard Ishmael. We come to know God that God loves us, as surely as God loved Hagar. And we come to know deep down, no matter how desolate we might feel, that we are not alone.

Abraham and Sarah, pastors and people, we don't always know what to do with the Hagar's in our midst, but God still does. We may be quick at times to limit ourselves and likewise quick to limit God, but God's love knows no limits. This is what I teach and preach; this is learning we offer our Confirmands. This is what I offer my grandchildren: in her hour of great desperation, God did not turn away from Hagar and God will not turn away from us. Where people strive to limit God's promise, God extends it. When Sarah wanted to close ranks, the Lord also widened the circle. In the wilderness when hope had failed, God extended the reach of God's providence—God's universal love is given to all people. This is our lesson today: God hears. God listens. God provides. Thanks be to God. Amen.