

Pentecost 3 – A (2020)
Genesis 21:8-21

There are passages in the Bible, when read carefully, that can raise the tension level our tension level. There can make us feel very uncomfortable. That isn't necessarily a bad thing. Sometimes a little discomfort is in order. God's Word will not just comfort the afflicted. It will also afflict the comfortable!

When I read the story of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, and Ishmael, I feel a little bit uncomfortable. This story just sits there in our Bible unresolved. It is unsatisfactory. It may leave us squirming.

When, at the beginning, God appears to agree with Sarah's jealousy over Hagar and Ishmael, it strikes me as unfair. It's not Hagar's fault. She is a slave-woman, and if you recall the circumstances of Ishmael's birth, you'll remember that it was Sarah's idea for Abram to go to her slave Hagar, because she couldn't have children. And then, when Hagar gave birth, she was angry and jealous and Sarah "dealt harshly with her." That's back in chapter 16. So Hagar ran away. But an angel came to her and told her to go back and to name her son Ishmael, which means "God hears." So she did.

Instead of attempting to explain away the uncomfortable details or skirting the issue, I think we need to begin by accepting that this is an upsetting and dissonant story. The very fact of Hagar's situation as a slave and a handmaid to Sarah is hard for us to hear. Because of that, it is difficult to sympathize with Sarah's jealousy or be comfortable with her decision to send Hagar and her son Ishmael away into the desert with only a little bread and water and no way to support themselves. The cold hard fact is that Sarah sends them away, basically, to die.

Horrible stories and difficult times are part of our human history and every individual human life. All of us here are personally acquainted with suffering, injustice and oppression, jealousy and fear and death. Dealing with the reality that even the first families in the faith committed atrocities against other human beings, treated people unfairly, and behaved in unrighteous ways is not something to be avoided.

The Genesis story is real for many families. Not quite a soap opera, but, nonetheless, a very real story. How many families, perhaps even yours, experience dysfunction and conflict and separation and

disagreements? Families break apart, relationships break apart, there is a division in our society.

Today is Father's Day, and in light of our story today, problematic. Father's Day can be a mixed bag for too many people. So is Mother's Day, but more people it seems have trouble with their fathers. And if there is a divorce situation, fathers are more likely to be distanced from their children.

In the story of Abraham and Sarah and Hagar and Ishmael, we get a glimpse of the tension-filled moments that are part of all our families: families that are pulled apart, families of broken dreams and broken promises, families abandoned, estranged, full of jealousy and even rage.

I would like to think that our church families can become surrogate families for people who are not close to their biological families. Church folk are called to love each other and feel a sense of closeness with each other, even more so than with our blood families. But churches can also be just as dysfunctional as blood families can be. Unfortunately, much of the disagreements in churches center around power and preference. When these things happen, the church can become the ideal place for learning how to practice the Christian faith, as a family of faith.

It's a reminder of the fully human nature of the church, and at the same time God's grace and presence, through, and sometimes despite, the foibles and failings of particular congregations. Are there jealousies in congregations? Are there fears about who will "inherit" leadership in the church? Are there squabbles over who gets their way? Are there ever some folks in some churches who would be just as happy to see others "thrown out" or at least leave?

There can be dysfunction, division and separations in our communities, in our biological and spiritual families and in the larger world.

The world is still paying for Abraham's and Sarah's mistake with Hagar. The Arab nations that are descended from Hagar's son, Ishmael, have been fighting the sons of Isaac for thousands of years. They are still fighting each other today. Just as Adam blamed Eve, we like to blame Sarah for Abraham's goof up. She felt she was too old to have children so she suggested the next thing that came to her mind -- her maidservant! Hagar must have been much younger (and maybe better looking!) so Abraham went along with it.

That shows what the world had to pay for one seemingly small mistake -- for not taking God seriously when he said that Sarah was going to have a child, for not trusting in God's promises.

And then later, to compound the error, Hagar was thrown out along with her son. That put a tension between them that has never been resolved. But perhaps most disturbing in this story is not only is Abraham willing to have his concubine and child deported, but God is portrayed as complicit in this action. God comes to Abraham to assure him that his son will be protected and that Ishmael's offspring will be counted among Abraham's heirs. There is still disagreement about who the true heir of Abraham really is.

Like Isaac, Ishmael will become a "nation" in accordance with God's promise. And in fact, God confirms this to Hagar, when God hears "the voice of the boy" and sends an angel to tell Hagar not to be afraid, but to go to her son and comfort him.

Even though God intended Isaac to be the top dog, he still heard the cry of the little son of Hagar who was thirsty. God cares about everyone. God cares about Muslims, Jews, and Christians alike.

Different people can *look* at the same incident and see something very different from each other. This can be also a personal story.

Chances are you may be able to identify more closely with Hagar. We've all been in our own wilderness places, where the desolating emptiness surrounds us and we feel abandoned by all forms of care, including that of God. The desperate injustices dealt to Hagar and her son remind us that our own cries for help do not fall into empty, arid space, even in the wilderness of our suffering. Our cries fall into the heart of the Holy. The universe is unfair, but thankfully, God provides a well of grace to ease the journey. In the midst of our own crying out, the voice of God comes to us like it came to Hagar, "Do not be afraid!"

There may still be a few who believe in the church as a sanctuary, where there is no sin or hypocrites and where everything is light and love, but those who have been in the church a while are no longer "starry-eyed." Hearing the story of a Biblical "first family behaving badly" may help this congregation name and own at least some of its own bad behaviors (what congregation doesn't have some?) and shortcomings, and, as Abraham and Hagar learned to do, trust God's more than abundant grace for life and community and blessing. While there may be quite a few among you who strive after perfection in love in this life,

and maybe even a few who have attained it, no congregation, or any kind of family, taken on the whole, is perfect. Or likely ever will be.

So once again we have a chaotic, jumbled, messy life situation. But what is it we said two weeks ago when I preached on the creation story? When things get chaotic, jumbled, and messy, look for signs of God. God is always present with us, no matter how hard the going gets, no matter the chaos and the jumble.

God heard Ishmael's cries, and God heard Hagar's cries. God told Hagar to hold fast to her faith and assured her that God would make a great nation of all of Abraham's offspring, even Ishmael. When Hagar opened her eyes, a well appeared and water to quench their thirst.

The name *Ishmael* translates in English to "God hears."

God hears, even when we are alone in the wilderness.

God hears, even when we don't know what to say to God.

God hears, even when the tension of living remains unresolved.

God hears.

Through our Bible story today and in our life experiences, we choose to trust God is with us. And we know that although God is present, difficult times still come our way. We get thrown into chaos over and over. Life's stories can be discomfoting and discouraging and challenging.

The good news is, God is with us, even when we do not act in Christ-like ways toward our sisters and brothers. God is with us, sending messages through "angels" to encourage us to engage the really hard questions, admit to our sins, own up to our mistakes, turn our lives around, and head in a new direction.

God is with us, inviting us to trust in God more than in ourselves.

God is with us, offering us grace so that we may have the faith to trust in God.

God is with us, allowing us to fall down and urging us to learn from our mistakes so that we will not repeat them.

God is with us, sometimes saying and doing things that are confusing and difficult to hear, let alone, understand.

God is with us, watching over brothers and sisters in our own Christian faith and our brothers and sisters in nations born to the cousins of our faith.

God is with us. A child is given. Emmanuel, God with us.