

“Letters to Our Fathers”
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Presbyterian Church in Leonia
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e-Worship

Genesis 21:8-21
Matthew 10:24-39

Let me start by acknowledging that our Genesis story does not give us a neatly packaged, nuclear family. In other words, this biblical family of Abraham, Hagar, Sarah, Ishmael, and Isaac closely resembles many of the kinds of families we see in our lives today. I know in my family I have had a mom, a dad, two stepmothers, one stepdad, a half-brother, a half-sister, and a stepbrother and a stepsister. Today is Father’s Day, and I look forward to talking to my dad this afternoon; as a family, this is the first Father’s Day without my father-in-law, who was a wonderful Lolo to our daughter, and we lament that. Our daughter does not have a dad at home, but she doesn’t get off the hook that easily-- she has her godfathers Erik and Kerry, and her Uncle Colin, and my dad who she still makes cards for.

When I first started thinking about this scripture and what I might preach, it occurred to me that it is Father’s Day. And so, I started to imagine what kinds of letters the half-brothers Isaac and Ishmael might write to their father, Abraham, the patriarch who we celebrate as the common ancestor to three religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. I wonder what kind of loss, love, lament, and longing they might express to this man whose actions and inactions shaped the course not only of his sons’ lives, but also of the nations that would follow forth from them. For her grandfather, Kai made a card with a collage of a river, boat and paddle and wrote about how she looks forward to her next adventure with him. For her godfathers, she used the silhouette of her hand to make the shape of a tree, and then decorated it with every kind of sparkly sticker she could find. I suspect Abraham’s card would not have invitations to adventures, and certainly not have sparkly stickers on it.

I realize most people are not familiar with the story of Hagar and Ishmael, with good reason: the Hebrew and Christian bible treat Abraham’s wife Sarah, and his second-born child, Isaac, as the main event. For those who do not know, in Genesis 16, Sarai and Abram-- they had not yet received their new names from God, who had made a covenant with them-- find they are getting even older in age, and had not yet participated in the promise God made to them: that they would parent a multitude of generations that would become a great nation.

However, rather than relying on this promise of God, Sarai and Abram decided to take things into their own hands and speed the process along. Sarai forced her slave girl, Hagar, to lie with Abram; Hagar conceived. Scriptures say that Hagar, pregnant with Abram’s child, looked with contempt upon Sarai-- I can’t say I blame her, as Sarai had stolen Hagar’s body for her own

reproductive desires. Sarai could not handle Hagar's hostile gaze, and so she dealt harshly with Hagar.

Hagar ran away to the wilderness, and who could blame her? She wanted to preserve some portion of freedom for herself and the child she held in her womb. And yet, there in the wilderness, an angel of the Lord appeared to her, and let her know that her child would bear the blessing of covenant and would become the father of a multitude-- a nation of his own. The angel directed her to return to Abram, and to name the child Ishmael-- which means "God hears"-- for God had heard her lament and given heed to her affliction. In turn, Hagar named God: El-Roi, which means "The God Who Sees." Interestingly, Hagar is the very first person who names God in the bible.

Still, the angel of God tells Hagar to return to Sarah and Abraham. Elsa Tamez, a Mexican liberation theologian, suggests that

God's plans are not for Hagar to return to the oppression. What God wants is that she and the child should be saved, and at the moment, the only way to accomplish that is not in the desert, but by returning to the house of Abraham. Ishmael hasn't been born. The first three years of life are crucial. Hagar simply must wait a little longer, because Ishmael must be born in the house of Abraham to prove that he is the first-born (Deut. 21:15-17), and to enter into the household through the rite of circumcision (chap. 17). This will guarantee him participation in the history of salvation, and will give him rights of inheritance in the house of Abraham.

So, Hagar returns, and gives birth to Ishmael. But then Sarah has Isaac, and when she witnesses the two boys playing together, she gets enraged, and demands that Abraham send Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness. Left only with a piece of bread and a skin of water, they come near death. Hagar, weeping, begs God not to let her watch the death of her child. It is then that a life-giving spring bubbles forth in the wilderness. They were saved, and indeed Ishmael does become father of a great nation after Hagar finds him a wife in Egypt, the place of her birth. God blessed him, and also promised that he would become a "wild ass of a man." Today, Islam names Ishmael as their spiritual ancestor, and Jews as well as Christians trace their spiritual ancestry through Isaac. All three religions name Abraham-- or Ibrahim-- as their first father in faith.

Yesterday I was enjoying some social distancing, backyard conversation with some friends while our children played together, also at a distance. My friends are religious and belong to another congregation. I told them which passage I was preaching on, and one of my friends said, "Hagar... isn't she the homewrecker who tried to destroy Sarah and Abraham's relationship?"

Well, I guess the answer to that question depends on who is telling the story. Maybe that would be Sarah's version. But Hagar would more likely tell it a very different way.

In contrast to my Leonia friend's view on Hagar, there are some other views out there. In Bible Study yesterday morning, Yolanda pointed out that her Hispanic friends who also study the bible

were on fire for this story, because they said they strongly identified with Hagar and in Ishmael, much more so than with Sarah-- they saw themselves as people who society is happy to throw out and move on, as disposable and expendable once their service to those in power has finished.

Where we locate ourselves in any story has important implications. Like many of you, I have had many conversations on race, some of them with members of this church, in the past month especially. One thing I have learned that white people tend to do is that we center ourselves in such conversations. Even when we want to be in solidarity, sometimes the energy turns to how we are perceived by people of color, or what we do not understand, or how we can feel better about the generations of brokenness that racism has caused in this country. What we often miss, because we make ourselves the center of the conversation, is the chance to listen and to hear, and to give authority to, the experiences of those on the margins.

It seems we need to pray to El-Roi, the God Who Sees, the God Who Hears, so that we can better see and hear, and be moved by the tears that flow from our siblings in the wilderness. When we fail to see, we push our sins of ignorance and worse onto future generations. You'll notice if you read a few generations later in Genesis that Joseph, who would have been Abraham's great-grandson through Isaac and Jacob, gets sold by his jealous older brothers to a caravan of Ishmaelites traveling on a trade route into Egypt. And within the span of another generation, all Joseph's brothers find themselves living in a terrible famine, and they are at the mercy of Egypt's abundance in order to survive.

Today's gospel reading is certainly no Hallmark Father's Day card. Instead, it tells us "whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy than me." Let those words today remind us that our spiritual family is bigger than the limits of family or of tribe. If we bind ourselves more tightly to our genetic heritage than to our formation in the image of God, then we cannot go where God may call us.

And sometimes, God calls us into the wilderness; sometimes it is to discover our freedom, and some of the time it is to have open eyes, open ears, and open hearts, so we can notice who is already there, and share in the search for a redemptive stream of water.

For those of you who feel like you may be wandering in the wilderness...

For those of you who feel like you have been discarded like trash...

For those of you who keep insisting on your own liberation, even when you are told it is not within your inheritance,

Today's words are good news for you.

Remember that God did not just let Ishmael and Hagar survive by providing them a stream of water in the dry desert. God also gave them a promise: that Ishmael would become a great nation. Not only that, God blessed him with a special skill that would ensure his protection and provisions: he would be an expert with the bow, and a wild ass of a man. No, God did not make

it so that Ishmael's life would be easy. But he could protect himself and his mother and feed the both of them with his bow and arrow. And his "wild ass of a man" attitude would give him the grit to carry him through wilderness living, and guarantee that he would not be controlled again.

If you find yourself in the wilderness, consider this: perhaps God has blessed you with a spiritual gift, something uniquely yours, which will be your key not only to surviving, but also to find your way towards liberation from whatever has shackled you.

I don't think I could write a letter to Abraham in Ishmael's voice, or Isaac's either-- next week the lectionary gives us the story of Abraham *almost* sacrificing his son Isaac on the altar to God. But what I can do is to take that love, that loss, that longing, and that lament, as I hear it in the communities around me, and in my own life. With the help of El-Roi-- the God who sees-- I will learn from these experiences and feelings in my community and within myself, and pray that this generation of faith can face its brokenness and work towards healing in ways that make a more hopeful future for generations to come.