

August 2, 2020 • In-Home Communion • Online Worship

“Six Great Bible Stories: All in the Family”

Sermon by Rev. Larry Young



Genesis 21:1-20

The Lord dealt with Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did for Sarah as he had promised. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age, at the time of which God had spoken to him. Abraham gave the name Isaac to his son whom Sarah bore him. And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. Now Sarah said, “God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me.” And she said, “Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.” The child grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned.

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. 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. As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring.”

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. When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. 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. 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. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.” 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. God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow.

One of the TV shows Jean and I find fascinating is “Finding Your Roots” with Henry Louis Gates, Jr. Guests on the show are there to learn what genealogical research reveals about their ancestry. And what makes the program fascinating is that guests learn about ancestors they could never have imagined—heroes, villains, and all sorts of unexpected people who have helped to shape their lives.

Today’s story from Genesis takes us back to a faith ancestor that we all know of—but adds a dimension to our faith history that we often have not paid much attention to. Genesis makes it very clear that Abraham was chosen by God to be our forefather in faith. Chapter 17 quotes God as saying, “I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant to be God to you and to your offspring after you.” But it soon appeared that having offspring was the problem for Abraham. His wife Sarah seemed unable to conceive, and they were both getting old. So in desperation Sarah told Abraham, “have sexual relations with Hagar, my Egyptian slave; and maybe the child that is born can serve as the offspring we need.” So Abraham did as he was told, and Hagar gave birth to Ishmael.

But then, to the great surprise of both Abraham and Sarah, Sarah conceived and gave birth to Isaac; and that sets the scene for today’s story. Now Isaac has a claim to be the offspring to carry forth God’s promise of covenant. But Ishmael is also Abraham’s offspring; so which of them is to be the chosen one? We know today how blended families can get embroiled in convoluted issues having to do with rights and inheritance; and so it was for Abraham’s family. We can hear in the passage how Abraham is torn between the two sons; he seems to not want to have to choose. But Sarah is very clear that in her mind her son Isaac is the right choice. She is not willing to live with any other possibility; and so she declares to Abraham that Hagar and Ishmael must go. In fact, she lays down the law so firmly that Abraham is driven to prayer to sort it out. And God gives him an answer. Isaac is the one through whom the covenant will be carried forward. But God is not going to abandon Ishmael and Hagar. In fact, though it could not be known then, God is going to use Ishmael and his descendants to lead a multitude of people to another channel of relationship with the Holy One. Today we know that channel as Islam. Islam is regarded as an Abrahamic faith, and the link with Abraham is of course Ishmael.

For us it seems heartless for Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael to fend for themselves out in the desert with only some bread and a skin of water. But Abraham had understood God to say that God’s blessing would go with them.

And if that were part of the divine plan for safeguarding Isaac as the heir of the Covenant, then that's what needed to happen. Yes, that was a real test of faith for Abraham, for the life of his own son Ishmael was at stake. But as we know, Abraham's faith was soon to be tested even more dramatically with his son Isaac's life at stake. Today's passage goes on to tell us that despite Hagar's worst fears, God was present with her and Ishmael in the desert, safeguarding him for his destiny as the progenitor of a great nation which we know as Islam.

Now of course the primary focus of our Scriptures is how God was at work through the line of Isaac building a faith tradition that for us reached its definitive expression in the person of Jesus; and today we celebrate the sacrament of Holy Communion as a remembrance of the faith in which we stand. But today's story of God's dealings with Ishmael reminds us that God keeps faith with all sorts of people, sometimes to our great surprise. Probably none of us would see Islam as a faith option, coming as it does out of a culture so different from our own. Yet our own scripture bears witness that it somehow fits into God's involvement in human affairs. The people of Islam are cousins in faith to us, something we should respect even if we are not able to fully appreciate it. And God may well be keeping faith with other faith traditions in ways we do not fully understand.

How we relate to faiths not our own is often a perplexing issue. Thankfully we live in a time when it's not automatically assumed that other faiths are our enemies. Yet we sometimes wonder whether or not they have any divine truth to offer us. Has God been at work in them also? As those who stand in the Christian tradition, we know that Jesus is our lens for discerning God's revelation to us, and so it is through this lens that we are called to view the faith of others. But Abraham's story reminds us not to assume that God's working is limited only to our tradition. God is free to work in whatever ways God chooses. And we do well to keep this in mind.

Today in the sacrament of Holy Communion we remember God's amazing grace toward us in the person of Jesus. We remember how we are loved, and how we are strengthened to live as members of his kingdom in our world. We give thanks for the tradition of faith that has led from Abraham to our present time; and we take courage in knowing that God always keeps covenant with us. Thanks be to God! Amen.