

Sermon by Rev. Michael J. Hoyt
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church
12th Sunday in Ordinary Time
June 23, 2002

“Family Problems and Persistent Promises”
Genesis 21:8-21; Matthew 10:34-39

There had been bad blood between Sarah and her slave-girl Hagar for a long time.
Ever since that desperate day when Sarah, unable to bear children in her old age,
gave Hagar to Abraham, and Hagar conceived.
It was then that the cold shoulering and snide comments started between them.
Genesis says that when Hagar saw that she had conceived,
she looked with contempt on her mistress.

It isn't long before the jealousy gets the better of Sarah,
and she goes to Abraham to complain to him, to force him to choose sides.
So, caught in the middle between two warring women,
Abraham gives Sarah permission to have her way with Hagar.
And the story says that Sarah dealt harshly with her, so harshly that Hagar runs away.
But God coaxes Hagar back. God makes a promise to Hagar
that her offspring will become a multitude.
So Hagar returns to the family, and bears a son, and they name him Ishmael,
and the saga of this family continues,
carried inevitably forward, despite its brokenness, by the promise of God.

But God had also made a promise to Sarah.
And one day, at long last, to everyone's great amazement,
God's promise to Sarah comes to fruition,
and in her old age Sarah conceives, and bears a son.
And there is great rejoicing, a great celebration,
as this family of God revels in the joy of the moment:
Isaac, the child of laughter, the child of the covenant, is born.

But even now, even after receiving this miraculous blessing, the chosen family of God
remains dysfunctional, remains broken,
still a human family, and a sinful one at that.
And before long *even* the blessing of God, in the hands of sinful people
becomes an opportunity for vengeance.
God's promise that Sarah will bear a son for Abraham is fulfilled,
and the burr under Sarah's saddle can finally be removed.
Hagar, and her son Ishmael, must go.

Now Sarah has her reasons, of course.
You might even say that her harsh judgement is theologically sound, and in line with
the will of God.
God *does* after all go along with Sarah's plan (at least God appears to in the beginning)

And God *had promised* that it would be Sarah's offspring
through which the world would be blessed.
Isaac *is* the child of the promise, and Ishmael's presence only complicates things:
The custom of the day says that both sons stand to inherit.
The blessing would have to be split between them if Ishmael stays.
So Sarah could argue that she's only concerned about doing the will of God here.
So she says 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.

But the ugly wounds of the past are not easily hid under a thin layer of pious justification.
And so it goes with the chosen family of God, then and now,
chosen *not* for the admirable quality of their life together,
but solely because of the grace and mercy of God.

* * * * *

It's not hard to find the church in the story of Sarah and Hagar.

Technically speaking, we find the church
anywhere the Old Testament refers to the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob,
the family that would later become the nation of Israel.
These are the chosen people of God, the people of the covenant,
the people through whom God will work to bless the whole world.

We in the church proclaim
that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of God's promises to this chosen family,
and that by putting our faith in Jesus Christ
we are engrafted into the people of God
and participate in the new covenant that God has established
for the sake of the whole world.

So when we hear the story of Abraham and Isaac, of Sarah and Hagar and Ishmael,
we can hear it as a story about the church.
Even if we did not know this theological connection,
I suspect that we might still recognize the church in this story about God's chosen family.
All the necessary elements are here...

...there is a family who has received a promise from God
that they and all their descendants will be blessed,
and that through them God will bless all the families of the earth.
...a family that is living in an unsteady, up and down relationship with God.
...a family that experiences both blessing and pain in its life together.
...a family whose faith and trust are not always what they should be,
...a family whose special relationship with God
doesn't make it any less dysfunctional, any less broken,
and less in need of healing.

So the story of this family of the old covenant, the descendants of Abraham,
bears a striking resemblance to the family of the new covenant, the church,
and to the many families that make up the church – your families, and mine.

* * * * *

But because this story is ultimately a story about the gracious and merciful God
there is good news yet to come for this chosen-yet-still-broken family.
The good news is found *not* by looking at the people of God,
but in coming to know the utter reliability of God when God's promises are concerned.

Hagar, wandering and lost in the wilderness
with her waterskin empty and cast aside,
her child at the point of death,
and her own life withering away,
lifts up her voice toward heaven and weeps.

And God hears. And God hears the voice of the boy.
The angel of God calls to Hagar from heaven, and says to her,
What troubles you, Hagar?
From anyone but an angel of God the question would sound like mockery.
What troubles you, Hagar?
What troubles you that cannot be overcome by the promise of God?
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 opens the eyes of this weary woman, and she sees a well of water.
It had been there all along, perhaps; but now she sees it.
In the midst of her wilderness, in the depth of her physical and spiritual agony,
God leads her to a place where new life is possible.
God shows her the way to renewal.
Despite the sin of God's people, and all of its messy consequences,
God remains faithful to the promise.
God's promises persist through even the worst of the problems faced by God's family.

* * * * *

Now I have to be honest and say there are things about this story
that I don't like very much.
Partly because we see the enduring consequences of this animosity
between the descendants of Isaac and the descendants of Ishmael
being lived out in the brutality of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.
I don't like that Abraham and Sarah could get away with being so cruel,
and that they couldn't find some more compassionate way to work this out.

I am glad that God had a plan all along to bless Hagar and Ishmael,
and that God can redeem even the worst of human brokenness.
But I would rather the people of God didn't have to live through such pain
in the first place.
I would rather God would set things straight before anyone got hurt.
I would rather the fulfillment of God's purposes could be a little less messy.

But like it or not, this is the story we have.
I suppose the power of scripture is often
its unflinching acknowledgement of just how difficult life really is.
The Bible looks squarely at the real world of human relationships
and offers a word of hope in the midst of even the most hopeless situations.

Jesus also acknowledged the messiness of human relationships for those who seek God.
In a passage that is equally hard to hear, Jesus says
I have not come to bring peace, but a sword.
I have come to set a man against his father
and a daughter against her mother
and one's foes will be members of one's own household.

Jesus is not PRE-scribing here, but DE-scribing
the reality to be faced by those who follow him.
Jesus knew that following him would draw his disciples into conflict
with those who do not believe the gospel and those who struggle to believe.
Jesus knows his disciples will not find easy harmony in following him,
but an opportunity to find their lives by losing them
an opportunity to find fulfillment by walking the path of sacrifice.
In our day, the conventional wisdom of a culture of profit and leisure
has no room for the radical paradox Jesus offers here.
Why sacrifice and lose, when you can go for all you can get, and probably get a lot?

But for anyone seeking a deeper spirituality,
one that can grapple with the most trying adversity of life,
there is important counsel to be found in these hard passages today:

For one, there is hope for us in that
God doesn't have to perfect people before God can work through them.
God works with the people who are on the scene.
We can expect to be amazed at what God can accomplish
by working through broken men, and women, and children,
by working through sinful people like you and me.
Our faith is not finally in the goodness of people, but in the infinite grace of God.

Secondly, we should not confuse adversity with abandonment by God.
It is sometimes through adversity that God's purposes are being worked out
in your life, and in the world around you.
Is it not the experience of many faithful people that in the times of greatest difficulty

we come to the deepest knowledge and dependence on the grace of God?

Finally, perhaps most importantly, when you come face to face with the sin of the world,
the cruelty, the inhumanity, the callousness of the self-serving soul,
and you find these traits even among people of the covenant,
at the point of your darkest despair,
remember Hagar.

Remember Hagar and call out to heaven, cry out for mercy,
pray to God and know that God will hear you.

Prayer is your lifeline trouble of your days and nights.
Pray and God will open your eyes to see the well in the desert,
where the refreshing waters of grace are poured out.

The people of God will not be free of conflict and adversity in this age,
sin is relentless in its pursuit of our souls.
But the God who has chosen us is more relentless still,
and God's promises will persist to the end.