



The God Who Hears
Genesis 21:8-21
June 21, 2020

Today is Father's Day. The scripture passage I am about to read doesn't sound much like a Father's Day scripture passage. At first glance, it looks like it should have been read on Mother's day, because it is mainly about a woman and her child.

But looking deeper, it is appropriate for Father's Day because it is about an earthly father and a heavenly Father. I know it is not culturally correct to call God Father (in other words, attributing male qualities to God), but today it is appropriate.

Today we are going to read about an earthly father who has messed up and a heavenly Father who takes care of a child. It is the story of an earthly father who hears God and a heavenly Father who hears us, especially the outcast.

Since our passage is a story within a story, some background is needed. Last Sunday, Pastor Craig began that story about three strangers who visited Abraham and Sarah, and told them at their old age Sarah would bear a child.

Now, God had given this promise years before and nothing had happened. So, Abraham and Sarah decided to take matters into their own hands to hurry along God's promise. Sarah, who was barren (and old), gave her maidservant to Abraham to see if they could produce a child. Abraham did not hesitate, and he and the maidservant, Hagar, bore a child. They named him Ishmael, which means "God hears."

Eventually, in God's timing that only God can understand, Sarah becomes pregnant in her 90s, and has a son, Isaac, which means laughter. You can take that laughter 2 ways – laughing at the ridiculousness that God promised a child in their old age, and laughter that comes from joy when it comes true.

Now, if you can imagine what kind of household this might be. Perhaps a little dysfunctional? Five people – one husband, 2 wives, 2 children from different wives. Jealousy reigns. Which son will receive the inheritance? Which son will receive the promise from God of becoming a great nation? Sarah is bound and determined it will be her son, and this is where we pick up the story.

Before I read, let us pray. Holy Spirit, speak through these words today so we will have hope and encouragement that will deepen our faith and relationship with you and others. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Read Genesis 21:8-21

The child grew and was weaned, and on the day Isaac was weaned Abraham held a great feast. ⁹ But Sarah saw that the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham was mocking, ¹⁰ and she said to Abraham, "Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that woman's son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac."

¹¹ The matter distressed Abraham greatly because it concerned his son. ¹² But God said to him, "Do not be so distressed about the boy and your slave woman. Listen to whatever Sarah tells you, because it is through Isaac that your offspring^[a] will be reckoned. ¹³ I will make the son of the slave into a nation also, because he is your offspring."

¹⁴ Early the next morning Abraham took some food and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar. He set them on her shoulders and then sent her off with the boy. She went on her way and wandered in the Desert of Beersheba.

¹⁵ When the water in the skin was gone, she put the boy under one of the bushes. ¹⁶ Then she went off and sat down about a bowshot away, for she thought, "I cannot watch the boy die." And as she sat there, she^[b] began to sob.

¹⁷ God heard the boy crying, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What is the matter, Hagar? Do not be afraid; God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. ¹⁸ Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation."

¹⁹ Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. So she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink.

²⁰ God was with the boy as he grew up. He lived in the desert and became an archer. ²¹ While he was living in the Desert of Paran, his mother got a wife for him from Egypt.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Let's take a look at the two fathers. First, the earthly father, Abraham. This whole situation came up because Abraham and Sarah were impatient for God to fulfill the promise of a son. They hurried it along, so to speak. As a result, it was a house full of tension. So much so, that Sarah says enough is enough and tells Abraham to get rid of the slave and the boy. Notice she does not name them. She and Ishmael are mentioned only by social status. Hagar is nothing but a slave.

But to Abraham, this is his son. To cast them out in the desert, they will surely die. He is in great distress.

Then something strange happens. God intervenes and tells him to do it. God agrees with the casting out of Hagar and Ishmael into the desert. What kind of heavenly Father does that?

But then God gives a promise to Abraham. They will be taken care of. Ishmael will live, and out of him will come a great nation....just like Isaac.

Abraham agrees and tells Hagar and Ishmael to leave. It must have cost him great anguish as a father because he knew he would never see his son again.

The story now follows the outcast. This is unusual. Genesis is about the chosen people. The story should follow them. But the story leaves the history of the chosen ones (Abraham, Sarah and Isaac) to follow the lost and the outcast. And now we learn about the heavenly Father.

And by the way, some struggle with this whole concept of God's chosen people. What about those who are not chosen? What happens to them? What happens in our story is that God makes the same promise to Isaac (part of the chosen people) and to Ishmael (the outcast). They both became a great nation. They both experience God's presence and blessing.

The difference between Isaac and Ishmael was not so much chosenness, but calling. Abraham's people were chosen to tell of God's love for the whole world. Not to keep it to themselves. They were chosen to be a light to other nations.

So, back to our story as we follow the outcast for a moment.

Hagar is given water and food, but it doesn't last long in desert. Hagar lays her son under a bush to die, and she begins to cry.

Then the passage says this, "God heard the boy crying...." Remember what Ishmael means? "God hears." God heard the boy named God hears. God then puts a well of water in the middle of a desert. It is hope in the midst of desperate circumstances. God reiterates his promise of making Ismael a great nation. A different one from Israel, but a great nation none the less.

And the passage says, "God was with the boy as he grew up." When we think we understand God, the Lord does the unexpected. Ishmael's descendants do become a great nation. Muslims claim Ishmael as the forefather of Islam. Muslims believe Muhammad was a descendant of Ishmael.

It's a stunner of a story. The God who hears works in unexpected ways.

So what do we make of this story for today?

In this story, God hears the cry of the outcast, the victim, the one excluded. Jesus showed us this characteristic of God time and time again. Jesus said when you see me, you see the Father (John 14:9). Jesus showed us, His Father, what God is like.

Jesus paid special attention to the outcasts of his society. Most people feared the lepers because it was thought they were contagious, so they were cast out into the outer edges of the community (sound familiar?). When they walked among people, they had to shout out, "Unclean! Unclean!" so people could walk away.

It reminds me of when I go walking these days. When people see me, they either make a big circle around me, or turn around and walk the other way. It is disconcerting. Imagine having this happen the rest of your life. But Jesus welcomed the lepers, talked to them, touched them.

In Jesus' day, people hated the tax collectors who worked for Rome. They were Jews and looked upon as traitors. Yet Jesus invited a tax collector, Matthew, to be one of his 12 disciples. Jesus invited himself over to the house of the chief tax collector. A man named Zacchaeus.

Everyone looked down up the prostitutes, but Jesus welcomed them and cared for them. He rescued one woman about to be stoned for adultery. He spoke in public to a Samaritan woman. The Samaritans were hated by the Jews because they were only partially Jewish. A Samaritan became the hero of one of Jesus' most famous parables: the Good Samaritan.

Jesus looked for the underdogs of society and welcomed them into his presence. All throughout the Bible, God always showed himself as the God of the outcasts, the One who hears.

Thus, God heard the voice of George Floyd as he cried out, "I can't breathe." God didn't save George Floyd's earthly life. Rather, he received an eternal life. At his funeral, Rev. Al Sharpton said as George Floyd cried out for his mamma, he saw his mother who was waiting to take him "home." A sign hung in the front of the sanctuary said, "I can breathe now."

God hears our prayers.

See what has happened since George Floyd's death. America is taking a good, long hard look at itself. There is dialogue, protest, some of it difficult and violent. But hopefully, prayerfully out of it will come reform, a new way of doing community. Let us pray that it will be so. O God, hear our prayers.

Greater good comes out of hard things. Look back on your life in the hard times and see how God worked. And as you cried out, you were heard by the God who hears.

Psalm 116 says, "I love the Lord, for he heard my voice; he heard my cry for mercy. Because he turned his ear to me, I will call on him as long as I live" (verses 1 and 2).

O Lord, hear our prayers.

So, we cry out to God, to the One who hears, and we watch how God will work. We need to remember that God saw the tears of an outcast woman and heard the cry of an abandoned child. We need to know that God hears us even when we feel godforsaken. O Lord, hear our prayers.

As the old hymn reminds us, "There's a wideness in God's mercy like the wideness of the sea." We cannot limit God's mercy. God works outside our structures and categories. God hears the cry of the abandoned. God hears the cry of the outcast, and God saves. O Lord, hear our prayers.

Through the story of Ishmael, we know that no matter how we are treated by others, no matter how uncertain our future may look, no matter how hopeless things may seem- the Lord hears our prayers.

When we watch or go through injustice, or unfairness, or grief, or helplessness. When we can't watch one more police video....O Lord, hear our prayers.

God tells us to hold on. We are to lift up those things that we think are beyond hope to the one who IS hope... and just as God gave life-giving water to Hagar and Ishmael in the desert, we watch in wonder as God gives life-giving water that we aren't able to see, but will come...because God hears our prayers Amen.

