

“God was with the boy”

Sermon on Genesis 21:1-21 by Rev. Berry French
on June 25, 2017 at Black Mountain Presbyterian Church

Introduction to Genesis 21:1-21

Today’s bible story comes from the book of Genesis and covers part of Father Abraham’s family saga. **Abraham is the common ancestor of the world’s three major monotheistic religions:** Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. We all trace our faith roots to Abraham, and all of our sacred Scriptures include Abraham’s story.

The story of Abraham and his sons Isaac and Ishmael take up roughly a third of the book of Genesis. Today’s part of the story picks up at Sarah’s promised son Isaac’s long awaited birth, but the majority of today’s story is about what Isaac’s birth means for Abraham’s oldest son, Ishmael.

Throughout the Old and New Testaments, God is referred to as “The God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob.” This is **OUR faith tradition’s story** and it’s one of the foundational stories of the Bible.

Because it’s no fun to pick up a novel with complex characters and a heavy plot and start reading in the middle of the 21st chapter, let’s fill everyone in on where we are in our common story.

[At FirstLight, our informal worship service done “in the round” we did a group remembering/Crowdsourcing the Abraham story. “Once before I’ve invited y’all to recount the Genesis story and y’all did an incredible job of crowdsourcing the story ... so let’s see what together we can remember of Abraham’s story. So what do you know about Abraham’s story?” ... congregation participated in sermon/background. Straight to Scripture reading.]

At FirstLight worship, I invited the congregation to share together as much as we could about Abraham. Now it’d be hard to have a conversation with the whole room, so I want you to take a moment and think about what you know about Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Hagar, and Ishmael. It’s just fine if you don’t know any more than their names and that they are in the book of Genesis. If you do know more, in a moment I’m going to invite you to turn to a neighbor and see which parts of the story y’all can piece together in 90 seconds. And this is an open book exercise - your pew bibles will be helpful starting on page 12.

Ok – so join with one or two or three other people and see what you can remember of Abraham’s family story. ...

Good job, thanks for engaging. I think it’s good to get our memories going, and also start asking questions of this story. What y’all just did was group bible study – it’s one of the things that has defined Christians over the generations.

So the story picks up with Abraham being 10 generations after Noah (of Noah and the arc). Abraham is told by God to take his wife and his family and leave the land of his parents and go to a land that God will show him.

God blessed Abraham and tells him “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, **SO THAT you will be a blessing!** .. and in you **all of the families of the earth will be blessed.**” (Gen 12:1-3)

Abraham receives a blessing in **order to BE a blessing to the world.** When we are blessed it’s **SO THAT** we can be a blessing to others.

So Abraham and Sarah pack up and go, and eventually settle in the land of Canaan. God makes a covenant with Abraham to be the father of many nations. But after a long time, Sarah at age **75**, decides that they might ought to **think more creatively** about how God will give Abraham an offspring.

So Sarah tells Abraham to sleep with her Egyptian slave woman Hagar and that maybe Hagar could bear Abraham a son. Sure enough Abraham and Hagar have a son, Ishmael. Sarah, who had the idea to begin with, becomes quite jealous when Hagar get pregnant and mistreats pregnant Hagar and Hagar runs away into the desert.

An angel of God meets Hagar, tells her to go back home to have her son, and that he will be blessed.¹ Ishmael is born and grows up as Abraham’s only son. Until ... Sarah in her old age becomes pregnant and has a son named “laughter” or “joy” or “delight.” In Hebrew that’s “Isaac.”

So, when **Ishmael is a teenager, Abraham is 99, and Sarah is 90**, she gives birth to her only son, Isaac. There are lots more details and twists and turns, but this is where we enter the story today - at Isaac’s birth.

Scripture: Genesis 21:1-21 (read in 3 voices: Narrator, **God/angel**, *women (Sarah and Hagar)*)

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 after 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. He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

Sermon

This is a hard story. It’s a troubling story. Sometimes we are conditioned to turn to Scripture with a certain respect and expectation. But if we saw this story played out on a Netflix release, it would not disappoint us in terms of plot and character development that keeps up with the most dramatic films.

Genesis covers a man getting another woman pregnant, his wife getting really angry and basically convincing him to murder both his child and the other woman. There’s **jealous, greed, self-interest** that results in violence inflicted on the powerless: in this case an immigrant, slave woman.

But we need to know this story ... because it’s OUR story. This is **one of the stories Jesus grew up with** and knew and learned from. **God’s character is revealed** in this story.

Abe and his wife Sarah aren't able to get pregnant, and having offspring back in the day was super important. So in an effort to help make the promise come true, **she convinces him** to sleep with another woman so that he can have children. He does, this other woman get pregnant, and now his pregnant baby mamma starts feeling a bit more entitled to his attention.

Sarah clearly gets upset (understandable, except it was HER idea to begin with) and starts talking trash about this other woman (actually it's worse than that, she's abusive). Talk about a guy being in a tough spot: Abe is in between his wife and a woman pregnant with his son.

Due to the abuse from Sarah, eventually Hagar, the pregnant baby mamma runs away ... into the desert. People who wander into the desert alone, typically don't come back. But pregnant Hagar meets an angel in the desert, who gives her a similar blessing that God had given to Abraham: "You'll have so many offspring that they can't even be counted." And the angel tells pregnant Hagar to go back home, presumably so that the boy can grow up in Abe's care. She does, their son is born, and the baby is named "**God Hears**" - which is Hebrew is **Ishmael**.

Ishmael grows up under his father's care. God renews the covenant, and Abe and his only son Ishmael along with all the men in their family, are circumcised. When Ishmael is a teenager, that's when Sarah - who up to this point has basically been define by her barrenness - finally gets pregnant.

Isaac is born with surprisingly little fanfare covered in 4 short verses. Then we jump to a huge party 3 years later when Isaac was weaned. But the only thing we know that happened at this party is that **Sarah saw Ishmael playing**, and Sarah got pretty upset.

Something got **Sarah's blood boiling** enough that she pleads with her husband to "**cast out this slave woman with her son, for the son of a slave woman shall not inherit along with MY son Isaac.**"ⁱⁱ Pretty intentional language: Sarah avoids mentioning Ishmael or Hagar by name - it's "this slave woman," and "the son of a slave woman." Her intentions are clear - get rid of them.

The original Hebrew text is unclear why Sarah is upset ... the only thing actually mentioned in the Hebrew text is a fear around Ismael's sharing Isaac's inheritance. And then we get an understatement of emotion:

"The matter was very distressing to Abraham, on account of his son."

Ya think! His wife just told him to banish his own son! Yes, he's distressed.

Interesting side note: in the next chapter God command's Abraham to sacrifice his other son. So in chapter 21 - Sarah basically commands that Abraham sacrifice his son Ishmael. And God saves Ishmael in the desert. In Chapter 22, God commands Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac as a burn offering. And God saves Isaac. I'm telling you, this story is intense.

Back to Ishmael's near sacrifice ... which in Sarah's words is **designed to protect her son Isaac's inheritance**. Abraham is distressed and God speaks to Abraham and tells him not to worry, do what Sarah says, because God will also make a great nation of Ishmael.

So just like Abraham will do in the next chapter preparing for the sacrifice of Sarah's son Isaac, Abraham gets up early in the morning,ⁱⁱⁱ and sends Hagar and Ishmael off into the desert. When the water runs out, Hagar can't stand to see her son die of dehydration and so she leaves him for dead under a tree and weeps. God hears Ishmael's cries and God opens Hagar's eyes to see the water source.

God hears Ishmael's cries. In the original Hebrew text, we know God will hear Ishmael's cries because God has named the boy "*God hears.*" And when God gave that name to Hagar's unborn son, Hagar named God – the one who sees: "the Seeing God."

And then verse 21 tells us: "**God was with the boy**, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness." Whew - it's a serious story.

There are no doubt endless lessons in this story, but today I want to **draw attention to God's unwavering commitment** to Hagar and Ishmael - the outsiders. Clearly, God's primary blessing is to Isaac, but God also blesses Ishmael – the illegitimate son of a foreign slave woman.

This story is unashamedly told from the perspective of Isaac's people. Isaac is the son that God promise to Sarah and Abraham – the miraculous son. And yet – when we pay attention to God's words and actions – it's clear that despite the human character's clear preference for Isaac – **God WILL NOT abandoned Hagar and Ishmael.**

When pregnant Hagar escapes Sarah's abuse, God meets Hagar in the desert, **calls her by name**, and tells her: "*I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude. Now you have conceived and shall bear a son: you shall call him Ishmael, for the Lord has given heed to your affliction.*"^{iv} This is essentially the **same blessing** that God gave to Abraham and Sarah. God names her child Ishmael, just like God will later name Isaac for Abraham and Sarah, and much later name Jesus for Mary and Joseph.

In the middle of this intense story about the unique position of the chosen people - **GOD was with the boy** ... the boy and his banished Egyptian slave mother, who are clearly the vulnerable outsiders in this story. Despite all the human attitudes and actions against Hagar and Ishmael; despite the fact that the story is written to preserve the uniqueness of God's blessing upon Isaac – GOD acts to save, care for, and BLESS Hagar and Ishmael.

When we follow God's words and actions in the story, it's clear. Twice God meets Hagar in the desert to save her, and bless her and her son with a similar blessing given to Abraham. **And God was with the boy.**

Friends, there are a lot of ways that we've divided up individuals and groups of people so that we can **protect ourselves from having to SEE or HEAR to the other**. We've gotten good over the years at **disguising our tendency to act in our own self-interest**. We use words like "safety" and "protection," which sound nicer than acknowledging that often **our actions are driven by fear** and misunderstanding.

At least Genesis doesn't beat around the bush at Sarah's reason - "*Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac.*" It's a bit more complicated than this, but taking at face value, what she said was: "**Abraham get rid of your son and his mother, so that MY son doesn't have to share.**"

It's **greed that leads to violence**: "I don't want my son to have to share, so do what you have to do **get rid of that threat** to my son and his inheritance." Yes, it's harsh. With all due respect to Sarah and the way God clearly worked through Sarah and Abraham and Isaac – it's a harsh line. And yet God intervenes to save and bless Hagar and Ishmael.

And I sometimes wonder **what God might be thinking** about our actions of **safety and protection**, or our tendency to remain in our **comfort zones** and make sure we don't have to **SEE or HEAR the other** – those who are the most vulnerable. But God SEES and God HEARS. Hagar named God the one who sees; and God named Ishmael, the vulnerable one, "God Hears"

I also wonder if we are strong enough and faithful enough to **align our thoughts and actions with GOD** who intervenes to save and to bless the vulnerable, rather than follow **our human instincts of self-interest and selfishness and greed**.

It is clear where God stands – protecting, providing for, and BLESSING the vulnerable outsider. Over and over in the Gospels, Jesus commands that we welcome the stranger and care for the vulnerable. Our job as disciples is and always has been to follow God's call and follow Jesus' lead.

*Prayer: Gracious God, give us all **EYES to SEE** and **EARS to HEAR** the cries of the vulnerable all around us. Give us courage to think, **ACT** and **LIVE** with compassion. Give us the resolve to follow you in welcoming the outsider: the immigrant, the refugee, the sick, the mentally ill, the prisoner, the pregnant teenager, the awkward kid in our math class, the annoying coworker, our lonely neighbor. Amen.*

ⁱ This story is told in Genesis 16

ⁱⁱ Gen 21:10 in the NRSV version

ⁱⁱⁱ Abraham gets up early in the morning before attempted sacrifice of both his sons: 22:14 for Ishmael and 22:3 for Isaac.

^{iv} Gen 16: 10-11