

Ishmael

Genesis 16:1-16, 21:1-21

June 22, 2014

Most people come to church, I think, for one of two reasons: to find answers or to find help.

Some of us come to church to find answers. We come from a life overfilled with ambiguity and uncertainty and conflict. We want to be able to sort it all out, to make sense of it. We want to draw clear lines and set clear boundaries. We want to know what is true and what is not true, what is right and what is not right, what to do and what not to do.

We want straight answers to perplexing questions. We want to know which side to be on. We want to be sure that we are on the side of the good guys, and we want to be able to tell, without a doubt, the good guys from the bad guys.

But, let's be honest. Can you do that? Is it that simple? In war, in divorce, in distress, in times of great social upheaval, in times of personal turmoil, we want it to be that simple. We pretend it is that simple. But is it?

Who are the good guys?

What about Hagar and Sarah?

Hagar is clearly a victim. She is a slave, Sarah's slave, without freedom or opportunity, without wealth or status. She is abused, by Sarah, and left unprotected, by Abraham. She is sent away, abandoned, banished along with her child into the wilderness with only some food and a leather bag of water to sustain them. And when the food and the water run out, she comes face-to-face with the unthinkable, the abject horror of having to watch her child die.

Hagar is clearly a victim, and Sarah is clearly her tormentor. Sarah is jealous and cruel. She is protective and abusive, with no sympathy at all, no compassion at all, for Hagar or her son.

And yet, Sarah suffered, too. Sarah suffered the shame, the disgrace, the utter humiliation, of being a barren wife. She could not give Abraham the child God had promised him. And when, to please her husband, to help fulfill the promise, she gave her slave to him as his concubine and Hagar got pregnant with Abraham's child and became proud and haughty and despised her mistress, Sarah suffered again. Because it was not she. The bearer of her husband's firstborn was not she, and both she and Hagar -- and the whole world -- knew it.

The relationship between the two women is full of ironies. Sarah was a Hebrew and Hagar, an Egyptian. Hagar, the Egyptian, was Sarah's slave, but Sarah's descendants would spend four hundred years as slaves of Hagar's kinsmen in Egypt. Sarah treated Hagar cruelly and sent her into the wilderness putting her son's life in jeopardy, but later the Egyptians would treat the Hebrews cruelly, working them mercilessly and putting their sons to death, until they escaped into the wilderness.

Who are the good guys? Who are the bad guys? Or is it just not that simple?

Hagar and Sarah are two very different women, from two very different cultures, with two very different destinies, caught up in a tangled web not of their own making, but of their own making, too. But they have one thing in common ...

What about Ishmael and Isaac?

Ishmael was Isaac's brother, his older brother by fourteen years. As children, they played together, young man, Ishmael, with toddler, Isaac, and, later, as adults, they buried their father together. They are both sons of Abraham, both progenitors of Abraham's many descendants, brothers, and yet not brothers, with markedly different destinies.

Ishmael was the firstborn, but also the outcast. He is Cain. He is Esau. He is the older brother in Jesus' parable. He is the one not chosen, the one left out, the one not favored.

You've seen it: the wayward child, the black sheep, the one left on the outside looking in, sometimes through no fault of her own or sometimes through every fault of her own. Or, perhaps, trying to determine fault, trying to find a reason, is making it too simple. Sometimes it just is. Some people just have a harder time of it.

That is Ishmael: against everyone and everyone against him. He is not the chosen one. He is not the son of the promise. We say "God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob," not "God of Abraham and Ishmael."

After Ishmael is sent away, the lives of Isaac and Ishmael diverge, and, while the Torah continues to tell the stories of Isaac and Isaac's descendants -- the children of Abraham, the Hebrews, the Jews -- Ishmael and his descendants are forgotten. They are two very different men, with two very different destinies, caught up in a tangled web not of their own making, but of their own making, too. But they do have one thing in common ...

Let me tell you that one thing, the one thing Sarah and Hagar, Isaac and Ishmael, have in common. It is this: "Ishmael."

Hagar took the food and the leather bag and left the tents and comfort and safety of Abraham's camp and walked with her son into the wilderness. She wandered about in the wilderness of Beersheba, no where to go, no where to be, maybe lost, certainly lost. And the food was eaten and the water was drunk and the sun was hot and their bodies grew weak and she knew it was over.

She laid her son, her only son, under the shade of a bush and she crawled away far enough that she wouldn't have to watch, wouldn't have to watch him die, piece by piece, breath by breath, groan by groan, and she began to cry, the bitter tears of a mother's grief, the helpless sobs of a broken woman.

And ...?

God hears ...

"Yishma el." "God hears." "Ishmael." "God hears." That was his name! "God hears!" His name is meant to remind Hagar and Abraham, and Sarah and Isaac and Ishmael himself -- and us -- that God hears.

God hears ...

Whom? Whom does God hear? Hagar crying? The boy crying? Yes! God hears!

God heard Hagar's cries when she fled into the wilderness by her own choice to escape Sarah's abuse, and God hears Hagar now, God hears Ishmael now, when they are crying in the wilderness to which they have been banished, abandoned by everyone, ready to die.

"Ishmael." God hears. This is what they have in common. This is what we have in common. This is what all of humanity has in common. God hears.

God hears the cries of an Egyptian slave woman and God hears the cries of Hebrew slaves in Egypt.

God hears the cries of a woman with no child and God hears the cries of a woman about to lose her only child.

We all have different stories, different needs, different destinies, but God hears ... and God helps.

Some people come to church to find answers, but some of us come to church to find help. Answers may or may not come. The path may be more or, as is often the case, less clear. We live with ambiguity and uncertainty and conflict.

We cannot sort it all out. We cannot always make sense of it. And the lines and boundaries ... Well, a lot of the time there just aren't any clear lines or boundaries. There isn't a clear line between the good guys and the bad guys.

And we know that we ourselves are some of both. We sometimes suffer, but we are sometimes the cause of suffering. Sometimes we are Hagar and sometimes we are Sarah. And sometimes, we are Ishmael, caught up in a drama so much bigger than ourselves over which we have little control, but by which our lives are made and unmade.

But God hears, and God helps. In the midst of our lives as they are, in the midst of the ambiguity and the uncertainty and the conflict, God gives strength and courage and wisdom, patience and endurance and hope. It's not that simple. Life is not that simple, except for this ... God hears. God hears you.