

Lord, Do You Hear Me?
Genesis 21:7-14
June 25, 2023
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I want to preface this sermon with a content warning that I will be referencing some of the domestic violence that is raised in this story of Sarah and Hagar. I acknowledge that this topic may be difficult for some and I encourage you to put first your own self-care needs if you need to leave the service or would like further support later. Let us pray.

I was listening to “Wait, Wait don’t Tell Me”, with Peter Sagal on MPR on this weekend. If you are not familiar with it is a weekly quiz show about the news of the week. Now I don’t always hear the news or read interesting studies published in national newspapers like the New York Times, so Wait, Wait is a great way to hear fun news facts and have some good laughs on Saturday mornings.

The latest episode I listened to said that the New York Times had an article on a new report about college grads entering the workforce. The report showed that Google searches are up among college grads on basic office etiquette like how to talk to people, how to dress and how to handle conflict in the office. The report went on to say that even some large companies are offering classes on basic remedial human behavior with tips like, making eye contact when talking, how to make small talk and how to dress. The report concluded that these issues are up due to remote learning for the past three years during the pandemic. I am wondering if Ed read the same report because at the talent show the other night, he came wearing a Tux jacket and pajama bottoms.

Well, I have news for everyone, our ability to communicate about our differences and our concerns is not a new problem. I don’t think that fact is lost on any of us. This is clear when we hear terms like “fake news” and “alternate facts” mentioned and you know we struggle to communicate with one another.

It is part of human nature to have differing viewpoints, values, interests, and conflicting personalities that cause strife. We have all been there many times with many people in our lives, even with the people we love dearly. This is not a new thing, just look at today’s reading and the dire consequences that one ongoing rivalry had on Abraham’s family. We look up to Abraham as the great person of faith and yet this week’s story is just one of several, we struggle to understand because of the bad actions of these people we look up to. You may even be asking how are these stories considered part of the sacred text? I am with you on that. Yet we can also so relate to the human condition exhibited in the

text. Each one of us can probably name people in our lives that act like the characters in this story. We may even be able to admit that we have played these roles in our lifetime.

The first thing I want to raise about this story is the power dynamic going on in the story. Often, such conflicts arise because of an unequal power dynamic that is challenged, shifts, or is exercised over others. These power dynamics are like fault lines where conflict arises.

Sarah and Hagar are unequal in several areas. Class or status, age, influence or power, ethnicity and fertility or ability to create. Interesting it is all the things we struggle with today. Add to the mix the feelings of inferiority, jealousy, and greed, especially in the part of Sarah and we have a real toxic mix of energy happening.

This power imbalance also creates a triangulation of aggressor or bully, a victim and a bystander, Abraham. Which is odd, because he is the head of the family and would have the authority to intervene but doesn't. He only takes orders from Sarah on what happens next. Each time, it is her initiating the shift in status and then regrets her actions with hostile outcomes.

To get the full picture you need to read chapter sixteen also. This is where Sarah becomes impatient or doubtful of God's promise of an heir and demands that Abraham take Hagar as his wife to produce an heir. But Sarah regrets that when Hagar, as the second wife becomes pregnant. Sarah feels diminished in the eyes of her husband and Hagar gets a taste of some new power. Sarah's attempts to regain her status by abusing Hagar, causing Hagar to run away. It is here that Hagar cries out to God and God hears her, giving her a promise that Ishmael will also be blessed to be a great nation also. Hagar in return calls God El-Roi "The God who hears me."

Hagar goes back and raises her son. But the conflict in the family is never fully addressed. Now jump ahead several years. We get to Chapters 20 and 21. The promise of Sarah getting pregnant and having an heir brings her great joy, even though she laughed at the idea at first. Now she is full of happiness and raising her child. Today's reading opens with a celebration of Isaac being weaned. This is significant. Infant mortality in these conditions was dangerously high. Having a child live until it is weaned, usually around age 5-7 years old, was a time of great celebration because it meant they were out of danger of dying from a childhood disease or malnutrition.

This again caused a shift in the relationship between Sarah and Hagar. This meant Sarah had no more use for Hagar or Ishmael. Sarah saw Hagar as an object to be used and now felt confident that her usefulness was expendable. Sarah had her own heir, Isaac. She was also jealous that Ishmael

and Isaac were being raised together. She feared that one day they would have to divide the inheritance or worse yet, Ishmael would be counted as the first born and get more or all of it.

Again, Abraham fails to address Sarah's unfounded fears or defend Hagar and Ishmael. He is the bystander in this and could have intervened. Instead, he gives in and pushes Hagar and Ishmael out with the bare minimum of supplies. This now becomes a life and death situation for Hagar and her son. Sarah, however, is not fazed by this, her unaddressed jealousy, insecurity and even greed push her to an extreme with no regard to the impact it is having on others. We deal with this still today. People flee violence in their homes or in their countries and risk their lives to find peace and a better life. The ability to get out of such situations is often very dangerous and cannot be done without support from others.

This week we have seen once again drastic attempts to rescue one group of people, while at the same time watching a boat with eight hundred refugees drown, while other countries refuse to intervene. I have to ask myself, where is the God that hears our cries here? Do we hear their cries? Do we listen and respond with compassion and lifesaving tools? Do we cherish life enough to stop these atrocities? Or are we like Abraham, unwilling to intervene for whatever reason. Or are we more like Sarah, because we callously want to hoard the blessings of God all for ourselves? Who is advocating for those who have no voice, no standing, and no power?

Remember the promises of God to Abraham and Sarah way back in Genesis 12 "I will make you a great nation and I will bless you, and make your name great, **so that you will be a blessing.**" Those same blessings are given to Hagar and Ishmael each time they are in distress. It was God's will for both Sarah's descendants and Hagar's descendants to be blessed and become a blessing to the nations. God did not make a distinction, Sarah did. God did not bless one and curse the other, Sarah did.

In the story, God sides with the oppressed in the end. Hagar and Ishmael go back to Egypt, free from bondage and start over again. Hundreds of years later the roles are reversed. Egypt is the oppressor and Israel is the oppressed and God once again hears the cries of the oppressed people and seeks to deliver them out of bondage. God is always on the side of the oppressed.

I struggle to read this story and others like it, because it shows us the worst side of humanity. The bullying, the greed, the lack of compassion and yet I see Hagar finding hope and faith. We see God coming to her and showing her a way forward. Her response is to put her trust in the one who hears her and the one who hears the cries of her child. I ask myself, what role would I want in this story? Do

I want to be insecure and selfish like Sarah, Do I want to be impotent and passive like Abraham, Do I want to be abused and rejected like Hagar? Or do I want to be like God who hears and who listens to the cries of the distressed. Who is moved with compassion to help find a way forward?

May we be a people who hear the suffering of others and are moved to be a blessing for them. May we be filled with compassion to a blessing to others because we are all God's children. May we pray as St. Francis Prayed.

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace;
where there is hatred, let me sow love;
where there is injury, pardon;
where there is doubt, faith;
where there is despair, hope;
where there is darkness, light;
and where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master,
grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled as to console;
to be understood, as to understand;
to be loved, as to love;
for it is in giving that we receive,
it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life.

Amen.