



“God’s Other Stories”
Scripture – Genesis 21:8-21
Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson
Sunday, June 25, 2017

Professor Patrick Miller, who taught Old Testament for years at Princeton Seminary, was fond of telling his students: “God has other stories.” These are stories of the Holy One’s concern for those *outside* the community of Israel ... Stories “of God’s redemptive work [on] behalf of other nations” and peoples.¹ Such accounts are mere footnotes to the primary narrative related in the Old Testament – the story of the *God* of Israel at work in, through, and on behalf of the *people* of Israel. But – nevertheless – they are there, echoing from the pages of our Sacred Text, testaments to God’s inclusive and expansive grace.

You know about *other* stories. You might have some in your own family ... They’re the ones you first learned at the reunion, when Uncle Barry had one-too-many cocktails. These are the stories behind every stunted offshoot on your family tree ... where the branch has been broken, if it was ever recorded in the first place. These stories go something like this:

You know, your grandmother had a baby boy the winter after she finished high school. It was all very hush-hush of course – it was the 40’s, after all. Her parents made her give him up for adoption. I didn’t know until I found a crinkled photograph at the bottom of her jewelry box.

Joe was your great-grandmother’s first husband. He fell in love with the banker’s daughter. The two of them ran off to Omaha, or was it Kansas City? Last I heard they’d had six kids.

That one, in the photograph – that’s your Dad’s older brother. He doesn’t talk about him much. Bob moved away when he was eighteen, and left your dad to take over the family business. Put an end to his dream of medical school. Gosh, your Dad probably hasn’t talked to him in thirty years.

Sometimes your family’s *other* stories make for a good laugh, at least once enough time has passed. More often they’re the memories that weigh heavy on the heart – or the conscience. And with good reason – for they’re the tales behind every missing snapshot in the family photo album and every broken branch on the family tree. Often they go untold (until Uncle Barry comes along with his cocktail, that is). Despite the wounds they leave, the pain they have caused, they become mere notes on the margins of the family history.

¹ Patrick Miller, “God’s Other Stories: On the Margins of Deuteronomistic Theology,” in *Israelite Religion and Biblical Theology* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series 267 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press), 593.

Much like this story of Hagar and Abraham's *other* son. His first son. The one who was *not* promised, but who was beloved.

This is one of God's *other* stories. It's the tale behind that broken branch on our collective family tree. A footnote to our shared history as people of faith.

Now, I realize some of you might be a little fuzzy when it comes to our spiritual ancestry. And that's OK; I do not expect you to spend your days reading the genealogies of Genesis. In fact, I would be a little worried if you did. So here's the recap:

We begin with Father Abraham ... who – if nothing else – you know from that Bible Song: *Father Abraham had many sons. Many sons had Father Abraham. I am one of them, and so are you. So let's all praise the Lord!* Abraham, himself, did not have *many* sons. He just had two. But that was enough to unleash plenty of drama.

You see, when God called Abraham, the Lord said to this unsuspecting old man: Leave *everything* you know, and follow me. And I will bless you. I will make you the father of a great nation, and – in you – “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 12:3).

This was all well and good, I suppose, except for one small thing ... Abraham and his wife, Sarah, had no children. And they were well beyond child-bearing years. So, this couple set out on faith ... trusting that God would prove faithful to the promise of children, and grandchildren, and great-grandchildren, and – ultimately – a great nation to bear the divine blessing to the world. And God *does* prove faithful, but not quickly enough for Abraham and Sarah.

After ten years filled with ‘all talk and no action,’ Sarah takes matters into her own hands. She gives Hagar, her Egyptian maidservant, as a wife to Abraham, so that this young woman might bear children on Sarah's behalf. As shocking as this is to modern sensibilities, this was a legitimate way of ensuring the family line continued in the ancient world. But it was also fraught with conflict, at least according to Scripture. So, here we are – after decades of waiting, Abraham welcomes his firstborn son: Ishmael.

But Ishmael is *not* the promised son ... The Lord makes that very clear. Ishmael is not the *one* who will carry on the family line, who – alongside his father – will become the ancestor of a great nation. That identity belongs to Isaac, whom we finally meet a few chapters later. *Isaac* is the child of promise, the long-awaited son of Abraham and *Sarah*.

It is *Isaac's* name that we find at the top of our family tree. It is his bloodline that continues, by way of Jacob – the one whose twelve sons would give rise to the twelve tribes of Israel, that – generations later – would give rise to King David, and – eventually – to Jesus the Christ, who welcomed us as brothers and sisters into the family of faith. *Many sons had Father Abraham. I am one of them, and so are you. So let's all praise the Lord!*

There you have it: the highlights of our spiritual genealogy. The names that would make it onto the front page of the family Bible. But, at the very beginning of that family tree is a stunted offshoot, where the line of lineage has been cut off, the relationship lost. The story behind this broken branch is a mere aside to our covenant history. But, it is a piece of the family lore that is noteworthy. For it speaks of promise, and hope for those who have been all but erased from the family of faith. After all, God has *other* stories.

This story of Hagar and Ishmael weighs heavy on the heart, and the conscience. It's one of those episodes in the life of Father Abraham and Mother Sarah that we – their spiritual sons and daughters – would conveniently overlook in their eulogies. It doesn't paint them in a very good light. In fact, their behavior here is downright appalling.

How could Sarah cast a mother and her child of her household out into a desolate wasteland? Yes – this has been a difficult journey for an old woman. We know enough of the family story to understand that – for Sarah – resentment and jealousy have mingled with the deep-seeded pain wrought by years of barrenness – pain that must still linger, even after the birth of her son. But still, such heartache cannot justify sending Hagar and Ishmael to face certain death in the wilderness.

And Abraham – Abraham is not much better. Yes, the matter distressed him greatly. Or to translate the Hebrew text literally: “The matter was very evil in the eyes of Abraham.” But he did not challenge Sarah, or question God – which Abraham *had* done before. Instead he acquiesces, sending away his second wife and first son, with too-little water and not-enough bread.

With that – much to our dismay – Hagar and Ishmael are pruned from the family tree. Mother and son are cut off from the family of Abraham and cut out of God’s covenant. But, they are *not* cut out of the promise. In fact, God makes another promise – a promise much like the one that binds him to Abraham. “As for the son of the slave-woman,” says the Lord, “I will make a nation of him also.” There is room in God’s story for Hagar and Ishmael.

Herein lies the good news: The God of Abraham and Isaac also lays claim to Ishmael ... to the son born of Abraham and Sarah’s *impatience*, the one who was *not* promised or planned. But, by the grace of God, Ishmael has now been *included* in the promise and given a future with God, a future in which he and his family flourish.

Of course, when Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael away into the desert, we cannot imagine this future. We can scarcely see *any* future for this woman who has been used and abused and discarded, and for the helpless boy she shelters in her embrace. Neither can Hagar. When the skin of water runs dry, she can only see the possibility – no, the inevitability – of death in the wilderness. So she sets Ishmael under a measly bush and walks away, for she cannot look on the death of her son.

If it were not for the promise of God, we would lose hope ... hope for Ishmael, hope for Hagar, hope for every person represented by a broken branch on the family tree.

But God is faithful. At this moment, when all seems lost, God opens Hagar’s eyes to behold a well of water ... and a future that is just as life-giving. “Come,” says the messenger of the Lord, “lift up the boy ... for I will make a great nation of him.” The Holy One re-affirms the promise for Hagar, and for *all* of us – the promise that God will lay claim to those who are discarded or cast aside, or – for whatever reason – written out of the story. And, as this episode draws to a close, we glimpse the promise fulfilled. God remains with Ishmael as he grows, as present to him as God is to the covenant community born of Isaac.

We know little else about Hagar and Ishmael. The text tells us that Ishmael becomes an expert with the bow, a skill he needs to flourish in an unforgiving wilderness. And we know Hagar finds a wife for her son, so that Ishmael will become the father of a great nation, with a family tree as rich and storied as our own. We trust that Hagar and Ishmael prosper, sustained by the inclusive grace of God, but beyond these details, this mother and son vanish from the narrative. In the next chapter of Genesis, we return to Abraham and Sarah and Isaac, to our own family’s story. We carry on with the next generation, to learn the tales behind all the names we read on our family tree.

But we return to the pages of our covenant history with renewed perspective, for God has also opened our eyes to a sign of God’s intent for salvation. In this one of God’s *other* stories, we have witnessed the Holy One’s care and concern for those outside the family, and have come away with an ever-important reminder: God’s compassion-is for all. While we – who are heirs of the covenant – enjoy a particular relationship with the God of Abraham and Sarah, we know this same God chooses to be with and for others ... our forgotten ancestors and

estranged cousins, and those we have written out of our family story. For, as this text makes clear, God's love is bigger than that of any human parent – of Abraham or Sarah or Hagar. God's love is large enough to embrace those beyond the ones we claim as family and strong enough to sustain when our own fears and doubts defeat any generous or compassionate impulse within us.

Our hope lies in *God's* compassion, in *God's* care for all – both those within and beyond the family of faith. This is the hope that sustains hearts that are breaking, and mends relationships that have been ripped apart. This is the hope that calls us to offer witness wherever words wound and hands do violence, wherever hatred or privilege dismiss another as unwanted or unloved. In the challenges our communities face each day, embodying such hope is rarely easy, but Hagar's story reminds us that God is faithful. This is the hope in which we live, and by which we journey forward ... all of us as the children of Abraham – intended to bear God's blessing to the world.

It is worth noting that Ishmael does make one, final appearance in our family story. He is there – alongside Isaac – at the graveside of their father. We do not know what has led to this reunion; we simply witness these two brothers standing side by side – the child of promise, and the child who was *included* in the promise.

It is just a snapshot ... a single picture in the family photo album. But it suggests some degree of reconciliation. We have no details of the journey that brings these brothers together at the end, but to the extent that wounds have healed and hearts have turned toward each other, we have no doubt that it is God's love that has made a way. And this is the image we must carry with us – back to families and communities that are yearning for wholeness and hope. For this too is part of our shared family story – a story of God's promised faithfulness to children who are beloved. And as we turn away with this story on our hearts, may we be encouraged by this image of Isaac and Ishmael, of a family tree made whole again for even a moment, and commit ourselves to work toward that day when all may live in peace as children of one father and one God.

Prayers of the People ~ Dick Jolly

Loving God, we come to worship this morning with thankfulness for the opportunity to hear your message for your world and for our lives. We come with our joys and our sorrows, with our hopes and our fears and with our faith and our doubts. We come open to discovering your spirit and your love through the inspiration provided by music, by your word and by the mystery of your presence.

Move your Spirit around and upon us O Lord. Help us silence the busyness and the noise of all that surrounds us. Help us to center ourselves in this moment and in this place. Help us to listen... and to experience your presence in our lives.

We ask also, O God, that you reveal yourself to those who are not with us this morning – those who suffer from illness, from grief, from terrorism, from displacement, from war... from all the challenges and sadness that the world can bring. We pray that you might be with them and grant them solace, comfort and hope and that we might do our part in making that happen. This morning we think, too, of those from Westminster working in partnership with our brothers and sisters in Guatemala. Allow your spirit and your truth to provide guidance and inspiration to them, to us, and to all throughout the world, however they come to know you and your call to justice and to the power of love.

Finally, we thank you God for this church, for its openness to all and for all it does to serve our community and our world. This morning we especially thank you for Diana Milburn and for the wonderful ways in which her talent and her music have graced our worship and glorified you for so many years. We ask your blessing upon her as she takes her leave from us.

Hear our prayers this morning O God, both spoken and unspoken, and grant us the assurance and peace only you can provide. This we ask in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ who taught us to pray...

Our Father, who art in Heaven Hallowed by thy name, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not temptation but deliver us from evil for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen.