

Sermon – June 25, 2023
“Do not be afraid; for God has heard.”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Genesis 21:8-21

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come. Visit, fill our open hearts, and anoint the sharing of these words that they may be a blessing for your people, a blessing that continues our transformation into Christ's image and leads us to fruitful labor as we follow Jesus into his mission right here, right now. Amen

Good morning! Welcome to summer and thanks to all who remembered to wear Hawaiian attire today to celebrate the coming of summer. I feel like we should be outside in God's creation for worship this morning. Kay and I were blessed to worship with our girls in Hawaii and after the service, that was held in a beautiful little chapel, we went outside into a garden that had a great view of the ocean and enjoyed fresh fruit. May God bless our worship this day and help us to find a blessing in His creation. Today is the fourth Sunday in the season of Pentecost, a season when our thoughts should be "Come, Holy Spirit, come" and "Guide us to those you would have us share Jesus with today." On Thursday evening at 6:00 pm at Afton Methodist Church, we will hold our quarterly healing service for the Charge. Please come and invite any who need Jesus' healing touch to come and be prayed over during that service. Come and join in a time of prayer and openness for Jesus' healing touch to restore that which is broken in our lives.

As we look at the scripture reading this morning, let me share a little background for today's reading from Genesis. We are joining the biblical account of Abraham's journey in the Promised Land, the land of Canaan. Abraham continues to move around in the land, pitching his tent and living under God's care with his family, servants, and flocks. Prior to today's reading, Abraham and Lot have separated. Whatever claim Abraham's nephew, Lot, might have had on the land has been taken away through the separation and Lot's choice of a place to live. Abraham has also been blessed with a son, Ishmael, through Sarah's maid Hagar, and now Sarah, who was barren, has been blessed with a child of promise, Isaac. Abraham's house is growing as are his herds and possessions. Today's reading begins with a feast that Abraham is holding to celebrate the weaning of Isaac. Sarah's child is growing! The joy in the family continues to grow. But there is a cloud of darkness that emerges during this happy feast. As Isaac and Ishmael play together, Sarah sees them playing and is stirred to have Ishmael removed from the family. Sarah has previously struggled with Hagar over the idea of an heir for Abraham, and now Hagar sees herself as a second wife to Abraham, a wife with his first-born son, the son who will inherit a double portion of his possessions, the son who will become the patriarch and carry forth Abraham's name into future generations. The Hebrew words used to describe Hagar have shifted from a maid back in chapter 16 to words that are used for a wife in this chapter. But when Sarah speaks about the slave woman and her son to Abraham, she does not use Hagar's name; instead, she calls her a slave woman. Sarah will also not use Ishmael's name but will speak of him as the slave woman's son. Throughout the scripture narrative this morning, Hagar's son's name is not used. God will refer to him as a boy or young man but also does not use Ishmael's name.ⁱ

After Sarah sees the interaction of the two sons of Abraham, the son of flesh and the son of promise, she comes to Abraham and tells him, "Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac."ⁱⁱ Abraham is very distressed by Sarah's words, and I think the distress shows his great love for his son Ishmael. To help us grasp what Sarah is asking, we need to look at the word translated as "cast" in the New Revised Standard Version. The Hebrew word translated as "cast" has occurred five times before in Genesis. For example, when Adam and Cain are banished, this is the word used, and because the word can carry the idea of dismissal from a position of authority, it is the word used in the Old Testament for divorce.ⁱⁱⁱ Sarah is asking Abraham to drive out Hagar and her son from his family and to not allow them to return. There would be no protection for Hagar and her son in the wilderness they

are living in, no flocks to feed them, and no well to sustain them with water. The separation Sarah seeks is a total separation. It is no surprise that Abraham is distressed by her request. He is to drive out Hagar and a first-born son from his protection and leave them at the mercy of the elements of the wilderness.

God speaks to Abraham about Sarah's request. God seems to side with Sarah, telling Abraham it is through Isaac, the son of promise, that God will work to redeem humanity, but of the son of the slave woman, God will also make a nation. God will protect the seed from Abraham that is his first-born son. It is interesting what Abraham does with God's communication. Abraham trusts God as Ishmael's protector and acts. Abraham gets up early the next morning, gives Hagar bread, a skin of water, and her child and then sends her away. There is a good deal of confusion about the age of Ishmael caused in part by various readings of the manner Abraham gives these items to Hagar. One of the clearest readings is that the bread and water Abraham places on her shoulder, but the boy he entrusts to her care and then he sends them out.^{iv} Abraham sends them out in God's care following the guidance God has given to him on this matter. Isaac will be the sole heir for Abraham through whom his descendants are named. The descendants of Isaac alone will be the people who inherit the Promised Land. The inheritance of the Promised Land parallels today those who believe in Jesus who inherit the kingdom of God.

Notice in the text Abraham does not send them out to a place. Likewise, there is no indication that Hagar is made aware of God's plan for her son. She leaves the protection of Abraham's tent and wanders in the wilderness of Beer-Sheba. The Hebrew word translated as wander is much closer to lost. Hagar does not know where she is and is lost in the wilderness. The bread she was given has been eaten and the water has been drunk and now the heat of the sun and the lack of water bring dehydration, and death approaches for her son and for Hagar. Hagar is distressed and moved by the coming death of her son. She casts him under a bush. We have the word "cast" again. This time Hagar is casting her son under a bush. Again, the idea that she throws him under a bush can point to Ishmael being a young child and causes confusion with the reading of the text. A better reading that brings some clarity takes the meaning of the Hebrew word translated as "cast" not as throwing but uses the additional meaning of placing a body into a grave. Reading the text with that understanding, Hagar places her son under the tree as one would place a loved one into a grave, their final resting place.^v Hagar also does not want to be present when

her son dies and so leaves him under the tree and moves away from the place where she has gently laid her dying son to his final rest.

We now find in the text one of the earliest spoken prayers in our Bibles, spoken by Hagar, who prays, “Do not let me look on the death of the child.”^{vi} Hagar then lifts her voice and weeps for her son. God answers prayer and God answers Hagar’s prayer there in the wilderness of Beer-Sheba. The cast-out slave’s prayer for her son is heard and God speaks to Hagar through a messenger. It seems strange that Hagar cries out and weeps, but the messenger who speaks to her is responding to the voice of the boy whose words are not included in the text. The boy cannot act to save himself but needs another to act on his behalf. The angel speaks to the boy’s mother. Notice the way the messenger from heaven comforts Hagar. The messenger asks 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.” God has heard the cries for help. God has promised Abraham that Ishmael will be a nation. God’s provision is at hand and God speaks to the boy’s mother that she might act and redeem her son. Hagar is told to go and lift the boy up, for God will make of him a great nation. The news that was given to Abraham is now shared by God’s messenger with Hagar: her son will become a nation, a great nation. With this news, God opens Hagar’s eyes that she might see a well that God has provided, a well she can see because she moved away from her son so as not to see him die, and she goes, fills the skin with water, and gives the boy a drink. Notice there is no indication in the text that Hagar drinks water and then goes to lift up her son. She cares for him first and then for her needs. Hagar goes through her ordeal, and then comes God’s revelation to her. Hagar wanders lost in the wilderness and she and her son are near death and when she comes to the end, when she comes to the point where there is nothing else she can do, she surrenders her son to God, she prays, and God acts. She goes through the ordeal and then God reveals to her His plan for her son. We, as those who follow Christ, should note this aspect for our lives, We will need to go through our own ordeals before we will receive God’s revelation. Hagar learns at the point of her son’s death that he will live and be a great nation. For us today we also will need to walk with God and trust him to provide for us in our ordeals of life before we will receive God’s revelation about what God has planned to come forth from our ordeals. God is present in the storms of our lives, but it is not until the storms clear that we are able to see God’s hand and plan.

The section ends with God being with the boy and he grows. Just as Isaac grows, so does Ishmael. God is faithful to his promises to Abraham. Ishmael grows, his mother gets him a wife, and he begins to live in the wilderness of Paran. Before we leave Hagar and Ishmael, there is one last stop we should make in this account from the life of our ancestor Abraham. He did cast out Hagar and Ishmael and it would seem to be a final separation from Isaac, the ultimate breaking of that relationship. However, if we will turn in our Bibles to Genesis chapter 25:8-9, we will find these words: “Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people. His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron son of Zohar the Hittite, east of Mamre.”^{vii} Even though Ishmael was cast out, he has survived and is present to honor his father at his father’s death. Ishmael is present for the casting of Abraham from this life, for placing him in the cave purchased from the Hittites where Abraham buried Sarah. Ishmael did not forget his father Abraham nor Abraham’s son Isaac. The son of the flesh and the son of the promise are both present to lay Abraham in his resting place in the cave. In Abraham’s death, they are together again.

The interaction between Ishmael and Isaac seems on the surface to be child’s play and at first glance an overreaction by Isaac’s mother. But when God agrees with Sarah’s request, we need to look more closely at what the concern might be that God would seek to separate the two sons. We should keep in mind that Ishmael is the son of the flesh, and that Isaac is the son of the promise. God blesses both and makes nations, great nations, from both sons, but one is to inherit the Promised Land and the other is not. The son of the flesh is seen as seeking to be in the place of the son of the promise. The son of the flesh persecutes the son of the promise by his interaction, presence, and intent. We still have these two nations today. One is the nation that comes from Jesus’ death and resurrection, the nation of the promise, and the other is the nation that comes from the flesh that does not acknowledge Jesus as Lord and that seeks to take away the inheritance of the sons and daughters of the promise. Sarah’s response to the boys’ interaction is that only the son of promise is to inherit the land of promise. Only those who believe in Jesus and accept him as their Lord are to inherit the promise of God. We often call the nation of flesh the world and still today the world seeks to put itself in the place of the nation of the promise. There is a need to separate the nation of flesh from the nation of promise to prevent the nation of flesh from crowding out and taking over the nation of promise. Separation is not to say we are to separate ourselves from the world, for we are to be in the world as witnesses to Christ yet not of the world. Jesus

speaks to this separation in Matthew 10 when he tells his disciples he has not come to bring peace to the earth. He has not come to bring peace, but a sword. There will be strife between a man and his father, and one's foes will be members of one's own household. We are to expect that belief in Jesus will bring conflict between the members of these two nations, yet we as followers of Jesus are to step into this conflict and share the love of Jesus with those who are members of the nation of flesh.

Abraham's response to God's instruction to listen to Sarah's guidance is another surprising aspect in our ancestors' lives. Her advice seems harsh, yet God supports her view and tells Abraham to listen to Sarah. What Sarah has realized is that there is a conflict between her son and the son of the slave woman that needs to be resolved even if that seems harsh to our thoughts. We also need to realize where we are becoming of the world and seek to separate ourselves from those temptations so that we might be holy as Christ is holy, yet we are to always be ready to go where we are sent to be Christ to those in the nation of flesh.

Abraham's trust in God to care for Hagar and her son is another amazing aspect of this moment in our family history we should note. Once God has told Abraham he will make a nation of the son of the slave woman as well, Abraham trusts God with their care. Abraham gets up early and gives them daily bread and a skin of water and sends them away. Abraham's distress over the separation is gone with God's promise of care for Ishmael, and Abraham releases his son into God's care and sends them away into the wilderness. We see this aspect of God in many of the parables Jesus shares such as the prodigal son whose father sends his son out into the nation of flesh with perishable provisions and with only God's hand and care for his son. As the father in that parable watches for his son and goes to him while he is far off. So also Jesus watches over our sons and daughters who live in the nation of flesh and goes to them, often as other Christians whom Jesus sends to them in their time of need.

It is through Isaac that offspring will be named for Abraham, and that offspring leads to Jesus Christ whose name we as Christ followers carry and whose love we are to carry into the world as those sent into the nation of flesh. God brings forth from Isaac a great nation, a chosen people, to be a blessing to all nations including the nation of flesh. God is at work in both of these nations and as we see at Abraham's death when Isaac and Ishmael are together to bury their father, through the death of Jesus the two nations can be reconciled as those in the nation of flesh come

to believe in Jesus and become citizens of the kingdom of God through Jesus Christ who died that all might have eternal life.

Pray with me: Jesus, help us in the ordeals of our lives to trust you as Abraham did when we are to send out our sons and daughters into the nation of flesh in your care. Lord, let us lift up our voices in prayer for them and cry out so that you will save their lives as Hagar cried out for her son. Lord, hear our cries and let those whom you speak to hear your voice, have their eyes opened, and send them living water, water that restores and brings life eternal. We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen

ⁱ Hamilton, Victor P.. The Book of Genesis, Chapters 18-50 (New International Commentary on the Old Testament) (p. 80). Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.. Kindle Edition.

ⁱⁱ NRSV Genesis 21:10

ⁱⁱⁱ Hamilton, Victor P.. The Book of Genesis, Chapters 18-50 (New International Commentary on the Old Testament) (p. 79). Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.. Kindle Edition.

^{iv} Hamilton, Victor P.. The Book of Genesis, Chapters 18-50 (New International Commentary on the Old Testament) (p. 82). Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.. Kindle Edition.

^v Hamilton, Victor P.. The Book of Genesis, Chapters 18-50 (New International Commentary on the Old Testament) (p. 83). Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.. Kindle Edition.

^{vi} Hamilton

^{vii} Bibles, Harper . NRSV Bible with the Apocrypha (p. 78). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.