

The Rev. Michele Simmons

Year A Proper 7

Genesis 21:8-21; Romans 6:1b-11; Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

Preached at Thankful Memorial, St. Elmo, June 25, 2023

Good morning, neighbors! I'm Michele Simmons, Associate Priest at the Church of the Good Shepherd up the mountain. But this is not the first time that I have joined you for worship. A few years ago, when I was a seminarian at Sewanee, I visited Thankful for a service and stayed afterwards for coffee, conversation, and a study of the Psalms with Mark Neighbors, who was your intern back then. I'm delighted to be back!

I must admit that I chuckled a bit when I saw the sequence hymn for today (that we just sang). "Spread the mighty word" it says, "word of how the Spirit came bringing peace in Jesus' name." And then we turn to the gospel and hear Jesus saying, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." There's an awful lot of conflict in today's gospel. Man against father, daughter against mother, daughter-in-law against mother-in-law. Yikes! And so, like any good coward, I turned to the Old Testament reading to see if it might offer friendlier options for a guest preacher.

Sarah says to her husband Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac." Looks like we can't get away from family conflicts this Sunday. This week at our staff meeting I asked my colleagues, "How do I preach a children's homily on this week's readings?" They offered a number decidedly unhelpful suggestions. These are tough readings. But I do want to spend some time with Hagar and Ishmael and then we *will* return to that gospel.

For starters, let's admit that what Sarah asks Abraham to do is wrong on many levels. Hagar is an Egyptian woman that they have acquired as a slave for Sarah. Earlier in Genesis we read that Sarah has given Hagar to Abraham "as a wife" (16:3). There is no indication of

whether Hagar had any choice in the matter. Likely she did not. But by rights, once Abraham had taken her “as a wife,” he was not able legally to cast her away. We also don’t know if Abraham felt anything for Hagar; but clearly he cared about his son Ishmael. He does not want to send his son to a likely death sentence in the wilderness. Nonetheless, when God assures him that Ishmael’s future is secure, Abraham agrees to Sarah’s demand.

And so, Hagar and Ishmael find themselves abandoned in the wilderness with limited resources. All Hagar knows is that she has been exploited and thrown away, that her son is facing death, and that she can’t face the prospect of watching him die. And so, she lifts up her voice and weeps. This is the first time the Bible records someone crying. And evidently Ishmael is also crying – or maybe crying out – because the text says that God heard the voice of the boy. In fact, it was God who instructed Hagar to name the boy *Ishmael*, which means “God hears.” For Ishmael is precious to God.

In fact, except for Sarah, Ishmael is precious to everyone in the story – to Abraham, Hagar, the angel, and to God. God now gives to Hagar a promise regarding Ishmael that is equivalent in many ways to what God promised Abraham. Ishmael will beget a nation. We later learn that Ishmael becomes the father of twelve sons who became princes of their own twelve tribes (Gen. 25:12-16). Sound familiar? The only difference with Isaac is that the family birthright and covenant promise with God go through Isaac’s line. But we shouldn’t miss the fact that Ishmael thrives with God’s blessing. It says, “God was with the boy.” That’s big. Ishmael may have been cast out of his first family, but he was never, never abandoned by God.

Before we get back to the gospel, let me make one more note about wilderness. Wilderness in the Bible is often a place of hardship and confusion. Hagar and Ishmael are cast out into the wilderness. The people of Israel wander in the wilderness for forty years.

Wilderness can be unpleasant and uncomfortable; survival is a struggle. But wilderness is also a place of learning and transformation. A place where Hagar and Ishmael find a new life free from bondage and oppression, where the people of Israel grow into their identity as a nation, and where everyone is drawn into deeper relationship with God.

I mention this to you all because the time of transition between clergy can feel like a wilderness time. I encourage you to remember that the wilderness is a place of great learning, great creativity, and deepening relationships with God and with each other. In my former profession I was a National Park Ranger, and I can tell you from experience that many people find Wilderness to be the place where they reconnect with their most authentic and best selves. Where they not only recreate but re-create. I believe that will be true for you.

But I promised a peek at the gospel passage. Again, we find family turmoil. It may be helpful to remember that by the time this gospel was written, the Jesus movement within Judaism had grown to the point where there were harsh conflicts between those who believed in Jesus the Messiah and Son of God and those who did not. This tension permeates Matthew's gospel. These deep religious disagreements would have split families.

Jesus is not against families. In fact, individuals, families, and the whole of society will thrive when the gospel's good news is heard and embraced. But until then, there may be times when loyalty to Jesus and to God's truth forces a decision – when we must take up our cross, despite opposition, even from family. Jesus himself faced this in his life and ministry.

For many of us the kind of pressure Matthew's first century readers faced from their families is unimaginable. Although perhaps catch a hint of this these days when deeply held religious values lead to differing political loyalties within families. Or when Christian denominations and families divide over the extent to which we affirm the inclusivity of God's

kingdom. The sword that Jesus brings is never meant to be a weapon of violence, but sometimes it is a blade that severs ties.

And yet, despite our apparent fractures, there is a *deeper* reality. In Romans, the apostle Paul shares his theology of baptism – and it’s all about connection, rather than division. The passage is full of expressions that are all about intimate connection – baptized into...crucified with...buried with...alive to...united with.” And the expressions are plural: “we have...We will.” The fellowship we have with Jesus is corporate. We are united, together, in Christ – and I’m tempted to add: “whether we like it or not.”

The divisions we experience now are not the ultimate reality. Jesus doesn’t instruct his disciples to wield the sword of division themselves. Rather he has already commanded them to “Love their enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt. 5:44). I also love Paul’s guidance later in Romans, “If it be possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all” (12:18).

Which brings us full circle to Ishmael and Isaac. Don’t believe everything you hear about conflict. Because Ishmael was the father of the Arabic peoples and Isaac the Jews, we may get the impression that they were hostile to one another. But that’s our own cultural or religious bias creeping in. There is zero evidence of hostility between them in the Bible. Quite the opposite, in fact. They settle near one another (Gen. 25:18). *[Note that the adjective is best translated “alongside of” not “in opposition to,” as some Bibles have it.]* Ishmael has a daughter that marries one of Isaac’s sons (28:9) and the last we hear of Ishmael, he is side-by-side with Isaac, burying their father Abraham with honor in the Cave of Machpelah (25:9).