

“Seeing from Another Perspective”

Rev. Dr. Karen Blanchard
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, June 25, 2017
Third Sunday after Pentecost
Celebration of the Lord's Supper

Readings from Scripture: Romans 6:1b-11 and Genesis 21:8-12

What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life.

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin. For whoever has died is freed from sin. But if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Romans 6:1b-11

Isaac grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. So she said to Abraham, ‘Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac.’ The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. But God said to Abraham, ‘Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named after you. As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring.’ So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beersheba.

When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, “Do not let me look on the death of the child.” And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. And God heard the voice of the boy; and the

angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to 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." Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink.

God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness and became an expert with the bow. He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

Genesis 21:8-21

Let us pray. Gracious God, your living word has the power to transform us, to offer us wisdom and truth, to guide us and to challenge us. Be with us this day as we consider your challenge for us in the week to come. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

The book of Genesis is filled with the stories we learn as children: Noah and the flood, Jacob and the ladder to heaven, Joseph with the coat of many colors. There are stories about persistence and hope and love in the face of adversity, but if we are honest, we know when we dig deeper, we find that there are stories about deceit and jealousy, barrenness and banishment. Difficult accounts of people who love yet commit devastating acts. Maybe that's why the stories draw us in. They are about the good and the bad and the ugly. They speak to us of people who struggle to be faithful, just like you and me.

This morning's passage connects to a long string of chapters that lead up to this point. Abraham and Sarah have responded to the call of God. They left their homeland and went forth to a new land. Yet they still await the promised child that God has told them about. And when this doesn't happen, Sarah takes it upon herself to tell Abraham to have a child with her slave, Hagar. A child is born and grows up. But then there is a visit from three strangers and Abraham and Sarah learn that they will have a son. And now they are the parents of Isaac, the one named for laughter, because when Sarah heard the news, she laughed--and at her age who could blame her?

But this morning we are led to believe at first this celebration is going to continue because Isaac has arrived at the age of weaning. But Sarah is no longer laughing. She doesn't want Ishmael around anymore, nor Hagar. She tells Abraham they must go. He doesn't want to do this, but oddly enough we read that God says 'do what Sarah wants'. So Abraham sends them out, knowing well he may be sacrificing his son and Hagar in the desert wilderness. Interestingly enough it parallels the story about Isaac, for in the coming chapters, Abraham gets the idea that God wants him to sacrifice his son, Isaac, as proof of his faithfulness. I don't like reading this passage around teenage boys. It is not a pretty story and I am so grateful when it ends with the ram being sacrificed instead.

So what is this chapter about? We could start with Abraham and wonder why not only once, but twice he is willing to sacrifice a son. His actions are kind of odd. And you wonder, is it time to call DFS (Department of Family Services)? What about Sarah? Jewish and Christian scholars go over this passage very carefully and some theorize that what might be behind Sarah's sudden change of heart is that she knows Ishmael is jealous of Isaac. They say he does target practice with his arrow awfully close to his brother. But there is nothing to substantiate that theory. What we are told is that she is jealous and doesn't want Ishmael to inherit what would be due to him as the eldest son. So is this just another story about sibling rivalry, inheritance, jealousy and favoritism? Or is Sarah simply guilty of the fact that when she finally gets what she wants, she discards the one she no longer needs?

But in both stories something happens. God enters into the mix. It is then that things begin to move in a different way. The unexpected ram that appears in the thicket changes the ending of the story of the sacrifice of Isaac. God enters in by giving permission to Abraham to proceed. And while it makes me unsettled, some scholars gave some interesting insight. Life with Abraham and Sarah wasn't supposed to unfold this way. God promised them that their son would be the founder of as many people as the stars, but Sarah went to meddling. When no child was born according to her time frame, she tells Abraham to bear a child by another. And she treats a woman named Hagar like a piece of property in order to fulfill her dreams. So years later when Isaac is born, it causes a conundrum—two sons loved in the eyes both of God and Abraham. There cannot be two sons in the same household who are heirs to a people and a nation. So what's to be done? What happens to the child who was not expected, but is still the child of Abraham? God will not allow him to die. God moves him in a different direction.

So Abraham does as Sarah tells him. And even though he knows they may die, he banishes them into the wilderness. You can imagine as a nomadic people who wander in the middle of nowhere, who knows when they will find someone else to help. Abraham does pack food and fills skins with water, but that soon runs out. Hagar cannot bear the thought of watching her son die and leaves him under one of the bushes to give him shade. She is distraught and begins to rail at God. She can't believe this has happened and who can blame her? And then an angel appears and tells her not to be afraid. I imagine her first thought was, "Oh really? You try this." The anger and the fist pounding continue, but then we are reminded that Ishmael's name means "God hears." In the desert the messenger tells her that God hears the cries of Ishmael. It's as if suddenly Hagar falls silent and sits still. When she opens her eyes, she sees a well. And she takes her son and gives him the life-saving water. All is not lost. They survive and we are told as the years unfold, they make a life. Hagar finds him a wife in Egypt and Ishmael becomes the father of another people, 12 tribes, in fact. And there is something more. Being banished into the wilderness turns into freedom for Hagar. She is no longer a slave, she is now free. Once bound to another she has a new life.

I think the turning point is the well. I don't think that a well blossoms there in the desert by some kind of magical hocus pocus. The clue lies in the fact that she had left her son under one of the bushes. Bushes need water. And a bush big enough to provide shade for a teenage boy would be fairly large. But I think so upset, so distraught, her eyes so filled with tears, she doesn't see it at first. But in the act of sitting still, opening her eyes and looking around, she finds what she needs. She knows that God has not abandoned them.

I think that's one of the points of this very unusual story. Trusting in God can lead us to see with new eyes, to consider new possibilities or even set us free. Like Hagar, we may find ourselves in the wilderness moments of our lives, struggling to understand and we rail at God. We are so distraught we cannot know what to do or see our way out of it. And we pound our fists. But God does not turn away or chastize. It is when we sit still we may find that the Spirit will lead us in a new direction. We may be freed from something that imprisoned us. Sometimes we just need to sit still and remember that God does hear.

I thought about the story of Lorenzo's Oil, a true story about parents who learn their son has a devastating disease and they are distraught and seek answers, but there is not much response or hope given to them. But they are driven. They study, they gather information and they construct a theory that olive and grape seed oils can create an acid that may stem the progression of the disease. They are ridiculed at times, cast out and stopped at every turn. But the love for their son prevailed

and they found some beginning points of a way to treat this disease. It's still very complicated and more work will need to be done, but they found a well of hope to move them on the way.

But it is also true, that there are times that the well we see does not bring forth what we hoped for. We seek to find a new way and don't know where to turn. We may find help in being still and knowing God is God and allowing the Spirit to help us find our way out of the wilderness again.

I read a story this week on Facebook about a balloonist in England who discovered a heart-shaped meadow in the midst of a forest. He was so startled by it, he followed up and learned the story of its origin. There is a farmer named Winston Howes who married the love of his life in 1962. She died suddenly of heart disease at the age of 50 in 1995 and he was paralyzed with grief. But he said he sensed a calling to create a lasting testament to Janet and the love they shared. He said, "I came up with the idea of creating a heart in the clearing of a field on my farm. I thought it was a good idea. It was a flash of inspiration." With the help of his family who kept it secret, he planted 6,000 oak saplings in a six acre field and left a perfect heart-shaped clearing in the middle. He said "Once it was completed, I put a seat in the field and sometimes I just go there and I think about things." It's a loving and lasting tribute to her that will be here for many years. And now, 20 years later those trees are very big. No amount of praying could bring her back, but he created a place of beauty not only for him, but for everyone else who sees it, a living way to express the love he still had, a new path in the wilderness of love and loss. ¹

Like Hagar, we are invited to trust and listen for the whispers of the Spirit moving among us and leading us. We may find the well of hope with the power of water's renewal or we may find comfort for our thirst. We may find freedom from the things that have held us imprisoned. May we be willing to sit still and know that God is God, so that we might find God's peace and wisdom to lead us through the wilderness times of our lives. Amen.

1 1) "Farmer Creates Heart-shaped Meadow in Memory of Wife, in How About That? Section from The Telegraph (UK) Friday June 23, 2017 originally from July 13, 2012.