

Abandoned to the Wilderness

Genesis 21:8-21

Second Baptist Church, Memphis

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We got lost last Saturday. Sam had a basketball tournament at Hamilton High School last weekend. Most of you know Hamilton High School is in one of Memphis's roughest neighborhoods.

That's not all that new for us. We've had lots of basketball games in all parts of our city. We've seen some rough places. I remember last summer pulling into the parking lot at one gym, and Sam asked, *Why is there barbed wire all around this parking lot?*

But trying to get to Hamilton High School last Saturday, we got lost right around the area of Lamar and Airways. The confusing directions we were using may have had something to do with our getting lost in the first place. I got my directions from Mapquest. We were going to Hamilton from the church. The directions said to take Walnut Grove. And then from there the directions read like this:

Turn left on East Parkway South.

Turn right onto South Parkway East.

Turn left onto East Parkway South.

Turn left onto U.S. 51 and left on Person Ave.

Just the part about turning left on East Parkway South and right on South Parkway East and left on East Parkway South is confusing enough.

But then you have to throw in this little twist. When you are turning from East Parkway onto South Parkway, you might need to know that the street sign there at that intersection says "Spottswood" and not "South Parkway". That's where the street changes names from Spottswood to South Parkway.

And then when you get to what was called U.S. 51 on my directions, you might need to know that that street is also called Elvis Presley Blvd. And you might further need to know that when you get to the intersection of East Parkway and the street known as U.S. 51 and Elvis Presley Blvd., that the street sign may say "Bellevue Blvd", because that is where Bellevue changes its name to Elvis Presley, also known as U.S. 51.

Even when you think you know where you're going, as Kyle Matthews sang earlier, the pathway is broken, the signs are unclear.

I'm imagining that this may be how Abraham was beginning to feel. He was on this journey that God had laid out for him. Remember God's first words to Abraham: *Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land I will show you* (Genesis 12:1).

But the directions were from here to there were never all that clear or straightforward for Abraham. Just when he thought he was on the right road, it changed directions or changed names on him. And it was everything he could do to not get lost.

He was supposed to be the father of a great nation. But then it turns out his wife Sarah couldn't have kids. So Sarah told Abraham to take her servant. Sarah says to Abraham, *The Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my maid servant; perhaps I can build a family through her.*

And in those days such a plan was acceptable, because Sarah owned Hagar, and so she would also own Hagar's child. In her desperation this seemed to Sarah like the next best thing, a fitting consolation, and a human way to fulfill the divine promise.

Abraham did as Sarah said and Hagar soon became pregnant, which made it clear to everyone that the couple's inability to have children for all these years was Sarah's fault, not Abraham's, and so Hagar looked down on Sarah, and talked badly about Sarah, and angered and shamed Sarah to the point where she fought back and in turn mistreated Hagar so badly that the pregnant woman fled into the wilderness.

But God sent an angel to meet Hagar there in the desert. The angel promised her that her son too would be the father of a great nation and told her to name the boy Ishmael, meaning "God hearkens", or "God listens".

And then the angel sent her back to live with Abraham and Sarah. And things settled down for awhile, until the day finally arrived about 14 years

later, when Sarah, at the age of ninety, finally conceived and bore her one and only child, Isaac.

And here is where we pick up the story today.

You might remember a few years ago Bill Moyers did a big PBS series on the book of Genesis, where he gathered a collection of scholars and they talked about the stories of Genesis. Speaking about our story today, Bill Moyers said:

Sometimes the details of the stories we are discussing from Genesis sound like pulp fiction. In this one we come to the first triangle: Two women share the bed of the same man. The squabbling gets mean. Everybody gets hurt. The stuff of a cheap novel and a fast read. But peel back the layers and the Bible is Tolstoy, Shakespeare, and Faulkner.

The themes in this story are deep and painful - a woman's infertility, surrogate motherhood, class differences, and the price human beings pay for God's will to be done. And something else: This triangle does set off fireworks, and by the dawn's early light Judaism and Islam go their separate ways.

The story of Hagar and Ishmael is tragic, it's awful, it's embarrassing. It shouldn't have happened, it didn't need to happen, but it did. And we have it here in the Bible, staring us in the face. And we can look away, or we can try to look it right in the eye, which is what I am trying to do today.

On the one hand, this story comes across as a primitive, ancient story. And it's a story that could be used to teach a history lesson. Abraham is the father of the three major world religions. Through his son Issac there is the beginning of Judaism and then on down to Jesus and Christianity. And it is through the other son, Ishmael, that tradition tells us is the beginning of Islam. It is an ancient story about the origins of the ancient world religions.

On the other hand, it is a painfully contemporary story. It's not just about our ancestors; it's about the mixed family that so many of us experience now—first wife, second wife, infertility, surrogate parenthood, children, conflict, rivalry. This story rings with a contemporary flavor with many of our blended families who talk about "your kids," "my kids," and "our kids."

Hagar may be the first to use a phrase we use a lot today: "the father of my children." Here we find what was perhaps the first single mother thrown out to survive on her own. It's the story of a boy who becomes alienated from his father. It's a painfully modern story.

[thanks to Mickey Anders for making this point in "The God of the Outcasts," First Christian Church, Pikeville, Kentucky, June 20, 1999]

One day, the scriptures tell us, Sarah saw Ishmael playing with her precious Isaac, according to some translations possibly mocking her precious Isaac, and all her old fears and all her old hurts rose to the surface.

She realized in that moment that not only did they not need Hagar and Ishmael anymore, Hagar and Ishmael were now a threat, because, among other things, the elder son was to receive most of the inheritance, not the younger son, Isaac. So Sarah told Abraham to send them away. *Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that slave woman's son will never share in*

the inheritance with my son Isaac.

It is a dark moment, and the weight of it falls hard upon Abraham, for he loved Ishmael as any father would love his first born son. In fact, there is a point early on where God comes to Abraham after the birth of Ishmael and tells him once again that someday Sarah will conceive and bear him a son, and Abraham tells God not to worry about it anymore, they have Ishmael now, let the Lord look upon him.

Ishmael was never second best in Abraham's eyes. He was the first born son of his house. And so Abraham was reluctant to comply with Sarah's wishes. But the Lord told him not to worry, only to do what Sarah said and that all would be well.

I wonder if you ever thought of this. I had never thought of this until this week looking at this story. When I think of Abraham, I think of the one son, Isaac, and then Isaac's son Jacob and all the others. And Abraham is famous in our tradition for being called on to sacrifice his son Isaac.

But Abraham had two sons. And he was called upon to sacrifice them both.

[thanks to Sarah Buteux for this and other insights into this story a sermon preached at the First Congregational Church of Hadley, Massachusetts, June 19, 2005]

In obedience to the Lord, Abraham woke up early, placed some food and water upon Hagar's shoulder, and then told them to go. Hagar and Ishmael were cast out—abandoned to the wilderness.

This is a story to avoid. We love to hear about God fulfilling his promise to Abraham, and thus to us, by giving Sarah a son named Isaac. And if fulfilling the promise for us means Hagar and Ishmael are collateral damage, then we'd rather not think about that.

For those of us who feel, like Abraham and Sarah did after the birth of Isaac, that we finally have it all together, that things are finally as we would have them be, it can be really uncomfortable to come face to face with someone like Hagar, someone who now

has less because we finally have more.

In that sense our world is teeming with Hagar's, women and men who suffer to the point of not being able to sustain their own children, while others profit and live well. Hagar and Ishmael have less because I have more; they are sacrificed to fulfill my promise. And that makes this a hard story to hear.

Hagar's story is hard to hear. But for some of us, Hagar's story is our story and we need to hear it, because we can relate to her pain, we can relate to her sense of isolation, her feelings of helplessness, and we need to know that just as God did not abandon her in her wilderness, God will not abandon us in ours.

The truth is we all go through times in life where the pain of our circumstance is such that we do feel alone. People don't know how to help us, and we don't know what to tell them. It could be depression, unemployment, grief, illness, disability, failure, or divorce.

As Sarah Buteux said in a sermon on this story, there are times in our lives when our pain is so raw, our

circumstances so dire, that other people are afraid to come near. They don't know how to help us. They don't know what to say. They don't know how to begin, and so like Hagar we find ourselves alone, worried about our ability to care for those we love most, unsure of how we will make it through the afternoon, let alone through tomorrow.

Abandoned in the wilderness and racked with thirst, Hagar casts her child under a bush and sits down a bowshot away so that she will not see him die. She sits and she weeps. And here God shows that he is concerned not only with the Abrahams and Sarahs and Issacs of the world. God also cares for the Hagars and Ishmaels—the outsiders, the dispossessed.

An angel of God informs Hagar that God has heard the child's cry, and that she should arise and take the child's hand, *for I will make him a great nation* (21:18).

And then Hagar's eyes are opened so that she sees a well of water nearby from which she and her child may drink. They are saved, and Ishmael grows up under divine protection, becomes an expert bowman,

marries an Egyptian woman, has twelve children and becomes the father of a great nation himself just as God promised.

Isaac was the favored one. But Ishmael, too, was a son of Abraham.

Thinking of Ishmael too being a son of Abraham, I remembered that there was another time when that phrase is used in the Bible: *He too is a son of Abraham*. Jesus said it. And Jesus said it of another outcast: *He too is a son of Abraham*.

It was when Jesus confronted one who was considered a notorious traitor to the nation of Israel, the tax collector Zacchaeus. Remember, Jesus invited himself over to Zacchaeus's house. And Jesus said to him, *Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost*.

Zacchaeus wasn't the last time God demonstrated that he came to seek and to save the lost, the outcast, the dispossessed.

When I realized Jesus had said this about Zacchaeus, I went back and reread a sermon I had preached about Zacchaeus several years ago. It turns out I ended the sermon with a story about a boy—he wasn't named Ishmael, but he was sitting lost, alone, and crying. A story about a boy and a man.

Kenny Wood was my oldest brother's youth minister at FBC Richardson, Texas. He is a sharp, sharp guy. Very talented. He has written lyrics for a lot of contemporary Christian songs. He's a great preacher and storyteller.

My parents contributed to a fund to help pay for Kenny Wood to go to seminary in California after he left our church. Kenny came back from seminary and became a pastor in south Texas.

He got in a car wreck one night a few years ago. He got in that car wreck because he was drunk. It turns out the car wreck revealed the fact he'd been abusing drugs and alcohol.

He nearly lost an arm in the wreck. It was terrible. Went through drug rehab. He lost his church. Nearly lost his family. Lost it all.

I heard him preach one time. He said that in the middle of this huge, terrible crisis in his life, he was walking through this grocery store. One of those Super HEBs in San Antonio, Texas.

All of a sudden the music over the intercom stopped—that music that you never notice until it stops. The music stopped, and he noticed. He heard a mother's voice. Obviously the mother had lost a child. And the mother was given the permission of going over the intercom and speaking to her child, because the store management realized that even in that huge store in that huge crowd, a child would know its mother's voice.

And this was what the mother said:

Honey, I know you're lost. And you can't find mommy. But if you will just stop walking around and sit down right where you are, Mommy will come find you.

If you'll just sit down. You will find that God will find you right where you are. That is what Ishmael discovered.

Whether you're up a tree or up a creek. If you find yourself abandoned and alone in the wilderness. Wherever you are and whoever you are...

Our cries do not fall into empty space. God hears your cries just as surely as God heard the cries of Ishmael and Hagar. You and I need to come to know deep down that no matter how desolate we may feel, we are not alone.

As Abraham and Sarah learned, anytime someone tries to limit the promise of God, God extends it. When Sarah wanted to close ranks, God widened the circle.

Abandoned to the wilderness, Ishmael discovered what his name means—God listens. Ishmael and Hagar discovered what you and I can discover—that God will always extend the reach of his mercy.