

THE OTHER CHILD OF THE PROMISE

Scriptures: Genesis 21:8-19; Romans 11:17-24

Before I read our second scripture lesson, let me share with you a story. This came from *Presbyterians Today*, the official Presbyterian Church magazine, so I am not making it up.

While visiting a country where he did not know the language, the American visitor attended a church service. Not familiar with the order of worship and unable to understand the pastor's instructions, the visitor watched the man next to him and did as the man did: standing, clapping, praying, etc. It worked fine until late in the service, when the man stood, and the visitor followed suit. This time, however, only he and the man were standing. ...

Later the pastor greeted the visitor and said in English, "I take it you don't speak our language." "No, I don't. It's that obvious?" replied the visitor. "Well, yes," the preacher said. "I announced that the Acosta family had a newborn baby boy, and I asked the proud father to please stand up" (June, 2009, p. 11).

In today's scripture there is only one father. The problem is two mothers.

(Read Genesis 21:8-19)

There are several different sermons I could preach about this story. I could talk about Sarah's needless jealousy. Sarah had already been promised, more than once, that her child would be the chosen one. She did not have to fear that Ishmael would take away God's blessing from her own son Isaac. But she worried about it anyway, so she was determined to get rid of Ishmael. Sarah believed, as many people do today, that God has only so much blessing to pass around, and that if you share some of that blessing with others, you will lose it for yourself. That is one sermon I could preach this morning.

I could also preach a sermon about Abraham. Abraham sent Hagar and her child into the wilderness with no more provisions than she could carry on her back, and she had to carry her child, too. Did you notice that? Abraham did not even send a donkey with her to help carry extra provisions. It's like telling homeless people they have to make it on their own out on the streets unless the temperature goes below 15 degrees. 19 degrees isn't cold enough. It has to get down to 15 before the warming shelters are opened. I could also preach a sermon about Abraham.

But those are not the sermons I want to preach this morning, at least not the ones I want to start with. This sermon is not about Sarah or Abraham; it's about God. After all, it was God who told Abraham to go along with Sarah's demand. It is one thing for Abraham to send Hagar and her small child into the desert by themselves with only the provisions that Hagar could carry on her back. But the really disturbing thing is that God seems to have encouraged it.

This is not the only time God does something like this. Now open up the insert in the bulletin entitled Ishmael and Isaac. I have put these two stories in parallel columns so you can see how dramatically similar they are. In the story of Ishmael, 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.” This means sending Hagar and Ishmael into the desert where they are likely to die.

But look at the second column. In the next chapter of Genesis, God does something similar to Abraham’s other son Isaac. God said to Abraham, “Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains that I shall show you.” Ishmael, the slave woman’s child, is not the only child that God puts at risk. God also puts at risk Abraham’s son Isaac.

In both cases Abraham rises early in the morning to carry out God’s command. Do you see how similarly the two stories are? In both cases Abraham gets up early and makes preparations for the dangerous journey that lies ahead. Then in both stories there is a moment of crisis. In the case of Ishmael, they run out of water, and Hagar places her child under a bush and goes some distance away so she will not have to watch him die. Abraham gets right up to the point where he is ready to slay his son Isaac on the altar. And suddenly, in both stories God sends an angel at the last second to intervene. Finally, in both stories God provides for the children. In the case of Hagar in Genesis 21, verse 19 says, “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.” In the second story from Genesis 22, verse 13 says, “And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son.”

There is a huge question that needs to be answered in both of these stories: if God intended to save these children, why did God put them at risk in the first place? I will answer that question in two weeks when I preach on Genesis 22. Sorry, you will have to come back. But this week I want to point out something else. I want to point that both children—both Isaac and Ishmael—are children of the promise. Listen again to Genesis 21:13. God says, “As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring.” This is repeated to Hagar in verse 18. God tells her, “Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.” God gives the same promise to Ishmael that God gave to Isaac. God promises to make both of them ancestors of great nations.

It is not true that God cares more about Isaac than Ishmael. It might look that way if you read only Genesis 21. In Genesis 21 God tells Abraham to keep Isaac and send away Ishmael. It sounds like God is favoring the Jews and throwing out the Arabs. But that is why it is crucial to see both chapters together. Ishmael is not the only child of the promise that God puts at risk. God also puts Isaac at risk. I will talk more about that in two weeks. But this is not a case of God favoring Isaac, the ancestor of the Jews, and rejecting Ishmael, the ancestor of the Arabs. God has promised blessing to both children, and in both cases God rescues that promise when it seems almost lost.

There is an amazing sermon about this story of Hagar and Ishmael in a book by Jonathan Kozol called *Amazing Grace: the Lives of Children and the Conscience of a Nation*. For this book Jonathan Kozol spent a year interviewing children and parents in the South Bronx of New York, the poorest Congressional district in the United States. Near the beginning of the book he describes the neighborhood:

The houses in which these children live, two thirds of which are owned by the City of New York, are often as squalid as the houses of the poorest children I have visited in rural Mississippi, but there is none of the greenness and the healing sweetness of the Mississippi countryside outside their windows, which are often barred and bolted as protection against thieves. Some of these houses are freezing in winter. ... In humid summer weather, roaches crawl on virtually every surface of the houses in which many of the children live. Rats emerge from holes in bedroom walls, terrorizing infants in their cribs (pp. 4-5).

In the middle of the South Bronx is a church called Bright Temple. Jonathan Kozol attends worship there on Mother's Day. He writes,

The pastor [Reverend Groover] introduces a white-haired woman, whom he asks to rise. Standing before her pew, she turns and nods. Then, searching the faces of the many younger women in the room, some of whom, it seems, have not been here before, she says, "I want you to know, if you don't have a mother living, you can find one here this morning in this church." ...

After asking one of the poorest congregations in America "to make offerings for those less fortunate than we," ... Reverend Groover returns to the altar and asks another woman, "Sister Eunice Turtle," to stand up, and then a number of other senior mothers of the church. Each is given a flower and fruit basket. One of the women, wearing a white dress and white hat with a black ribbon, weeps as she receives her gift. "We thank you, O Lord, for the gift of motherhood," the pastor says. "We pray you to have mercy for all mothers, even those who may be out there walking in the streets."

Then Barbara Ann Groover, the pastor's wife, a seminary student, rises to give the sermon. Her scripture reading is the story of Hagar and Ishmael.

"We're not going to worry about the sociologists today," the preacher says as she completes the reading of the lesson. "We're not going to talk about statistics. Hagar was a single mother. We know what the sociologists can tell us about *that*. I look to all the single mothers here today and those who will be mothers. You may not have an Abraham to stand beside you. But I want you to know God blesses every mother on this earth. I want you to know there is a song for *you*. I want you to know that Hagar went down on her knees beside the water in the wilderness and, like a tree standing by the water, she was not afraid, because God spoke to her and *told* her that He had engraved her child's name upon the palm of His own hand. 'Lift up the lad!' He said. And God opened her eyes and she saw the well of water and she went and filled the bottle with the water and she gave the lad to drink. ...

God cautioned her that Ishmael would not have an easy life, that he would feel hostility against his brothers. ... But God told her also she would raise up a great nation.”

With tremendous feeling, more than any other preacher I have heard in many years, she trembles and prays, “In spite of living in Hunts Point, I can still rise and praise my mother and the offspring of my loins. In spite of oppression, in spite of bigotry, in spite of violence, O Lord, I can still thank You for my children!” Looking out beyond the front rows to the younger women in the back she says to them, ... “Go back and tell your children that, even in the wilderness of the South Bronx, God *sees* a mother and a child! Your children may be drowning in despair today but I want you to know that they will rise in glory! I want you to tell your children there is a song for *them* as well! (pp. 225-228).

There is more than one child of the promise. If God cares about the future of Ishmael as well as Isaac, if God cares about the son of the homeless woman as much as the son of the land owner, if God cares about the children of the South Bronx as well as the children of Hamblen Park, then maybe we should too.

- Ken Onstot
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