

Text: Genesis 21: 8-21
Title: Leaking Grace
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Note: I am indebted to a meditation by John Buchanan for some ideas and flow of this sermon. There are a few lines that are his that I found particularly cumbersome to highlight in the preaching.

One morning, while getting ready for another day of high school, I needed to get into the bathroom to fluff my Greg-Brady-curly-do and brush my teeth. But, my younger brother was in the bathroom and reluctant to open the locked door. So....

I banged on the door.
I yelled.
I demanded.
I threatened.

He yelled back, I yelled louder. As our exchange escalated I had my face pressed to the crack between the door and the frame. Suddenly the door popped open and my brother's fist popped out – hitting me square in the mouth.

There was a split second of stunned silence.

My brother's eyes widened in terror; I touched my lip and tasted blood. I was a senior; he was a sophomore. I was going to go school with a fat busted lip – from my little brother. All of this sunk in as I whispered, "Call me Ishmael."

And in the name of all who are alienated, oppressed, and pushed aside, in the company of all those who are excluded, locked out, and abused I rushed toward him, cornered him by the tub, and pummeled him until he cried.

All of that is true except for the Ishmael part (my thanks to Herman Melville). But, it was one more chapter in the ancient struggle of brother against brother fighting for place and wrestling for blessing. One more story of

Cain and Able,
Jacob and Esau,
James and John,
Isaac and Ishmael.

You see, dear friends, we often read the story of Isaac and Ishmael as a narrowing of God's blessing.

One brother is included, the other is excluded.

One is blessed, the other is banished.

One is the child of divine promise, the other of human machination.

So, as the story unfolds we keep our eyes on the favored son, Isaac; while Ishmael fades from view. Scripture traces the line from Abraham to Isaac to Jacob to Joseph to Moses to David to Mary to Jesus to me and to you.

And Ishmael is an insignificant tributary to that line. He's outside the covenant, sent to the desert, and pushed to the fringes. Ishmael is sort of a sidebar....

But, I wonder if Ishmael serves an essential role as another voice that holds in tension, balances, wrestles with the main plot. It's a counterpoint in the chorus of scripture. If the story of Isaac is told from the top, Ishmael's story is told from underneath.

So, maybe this morning we can hear that other story.

And, maybe in that story we can hear something new for our story.

First the story...

God chose Abraham and promised him land and people. However, years passed and Sarah, his wife, didn't give birth. So, Sarah forced Hagar, an Egyptian servant, to sleep with Abraham - only to soon despise and abuse Hagar in her pregnancy. This caused Hagar to flee, but an angel of the Lord tracked her down in the desert, promised her descendants too numerous to count, and announced,

*You are now with child and you will have a son.
You shall call him Ishmael for the Lord heard your misery.*

And Hagar – the invisible slave girl – gave a name to the Lord saying:

You are the God who sees me, I have now seen the One who sees me.

Ishmael, which means “God heard,” grew up.

At 13 he's included in the covenant of circumcision.

At 15 he's joined in this world by his half-brother, Isaac.

At 17 he's at the feast celebrating the weaning of Isaac.

Only now he's seen as a threat....

Our text has it that Ishmael was “mocking” Isaac. And what 17-year-old boy doesn't occasionally mock his younger sibling? However, the actual Hebrew word has a variety of meanings, has the same root as Isaac's name “laughter,” and is even used in other places to reference a sort of playfulness or caress. But, whatever happened, Sarah wanted Ishmael and Hagar gone. (Notice that she doesn't even use their names – they become “that slave woman and her son.”)

Say their names.

Abraham is distressed, but God tells him not to worry, the boy will still be a great nation because he's Abraham's offspring. And the next morning Hagar and Ishmael are dropped off in the desert with enough water for a day.

Then in a scene as heart-wrenching as any in scripture: Hagar, a single-abused-refuge-mother wandering in the desert with her child, can bear it no more. She sobs:

I cannot watch the boy die...

But, God heard her, again, and an angel said what angels keep saying in scripture:

Don't be afraid....

God has heard the boy crying... (God heard the boy "God heard")

Lift him up, take him by the hand, I will make him a great nation...

God provides water, Hagar and Ishmael live, and the writer of Genesis notes:

God was with the boy as he grew up.

Now, Phyllis Trible in her book Texts of Terror writes that Hagar's story encompasses the experiences of all sorts of rejected women, she is

...the faithful maid exploited, the black woman used by the male and abused by the female of the ruling class, the surrogate mother, the resident alien without legal recourse, the pregnant young woman alone, the expelled wife, the divorced mother with child, the self-effacing female whose own identity shrinks in the service to others.

But, Hagar (an outsider, a woman of no account) is also
the first woman in scripture to be visited by a divine messenger,
the first person who dares to name God,
the first woman to hear an annunciation,
the only woman to receive a divine promise of descendants,
and the first to weep for her dying child.
She casts an eerie foreshadow of Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Dear friends, what if to read the story of Hagar and Ishmael is to be reminded that God is not bound by our vision of exclusion?

God turns social-spiritual convention on its head.

God is not framed by our notion of respectability and orthodoxy.

God is not limited by our parameters of grace.

But, to those who are excluded, forgotten, banished, demonized, and abandoned God keeps leaking grace, propping open the back door, and making provision.

You may know that while Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all lay claim to Abraham as the founding father of faith, Islam sees Ishmael as the ancestor of several prominent Arab tribes and a forefather of the prophet Muhammad.

Therefore, if it helps, be assured that the big story is Isaac.

His is the story of covenant...

But, the subversive rub of this story, is that from the very beginning the Bible keeps reminding us that God doesn't forget the ones who get pushed to the margins or pushed out of the dominant narrative. From the very beginning God is committed to the very ones that God's people exclude. It is as if God stands in judgment of the religious tradition that God inspired. *(John Buchanan)*

In the words of Walter Brueggemann,

God has this special commitment to Ishmael. For some inscrutable reason God is not prepared to yield to his own essential plot. God cares about this outsider whom the tradition wants to abandon.

Centuries later Jesus reached out to the very people who were being excluded by the customs, traditions, and laws of God's people.

He touched the leper,
ate with the tax collector,
befriended the prostitute,
welcomed children,
talked to women in broad daylight,
healed on the Sabbath,
and died with criminals.

And he told a story of two bothers – the one who stayed home and the one who squandered his fortune and ate with the pigs. Both welcomed to the banquet table.

I think it's really difficult to read scripture and deny or avoid the radical inclusivity of God's love. You can't claim the tradition without claiming the part that judges the tradition's exclusivity. You can't claim the name of Jesus and ignore his embrace of those that his own religion marginalized. *(John Buchanan)*

Dear friends, can we be encouraged – even today – that God hears the cries of his children? No matter who they are. Can we be encouraged – even today – that God remembers those who are abandoned by everybody else? Can we be encouraged – even today – that God shows up in whatever wilderness we wander and brings water for our deepest thirst and love for deepest need? Can we be encouraged – even today – to follow the way of God and the life of Jesus into that subversive story that keeps making provision for those that are cast out?

Amen.