

**Genesis 21:8-21**  
***"It's Time for Fulfillment"***

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These days, preaching has become singed. I don't know that preaching has ever not been singed. Sometimes I hear people ask for pure preaching. "Just give me the word of God straight up. Read the words on the page and tell me what it means, and not what you think it means." We have this notion that scripture ought to somehow function as a north star, unwavering in the sky, unchanging in its meaning and location. With everything else around us constantly changing, from our bodies that grow older every day, to families that fill up with babies and then get smaller when loved ones die, to jobs that come and go, along with children who come and go, so much is constantly changing. And then there is the changing tide of our country—politicians get voted in and out of office, new laws get made and those who didn't used to have equal rights with all the rest of us now do, or new laws don't get made, and either way we have to figure out what it's going to mean for us to all to continue sharing this American land we live in. And when our understanding of one another is so impacted—if not explicitly then implicitly—by the views we hold on so many questions: Are we pro-choice or pro-life? Pro-2<sup>nd</sup> Amendment or pro-gun reform? Pro-Black Lives Matter or pro-All Lives Matter? Pro-free market globalization or pro-Made in the U.S.A.? And when our answers to these questions might not remain the same throughout our whole lives—how many of us can say that what we think today is the same as what we thought even 3 months ago, let alone 30 years ago?—then we look for something, just one thing, that won't change on us—a north star. If for you that's the word of God and the preaching of the word of God, then you are going to be fundamentally uncomfortable, if not opposed, to hearing a preacher, a pastor, include such questions and things in the Sunday sermon. "I don't come to church to hear comment on socio-economics, or on national involvement in war, or on race in America. I come to hear the word of God." Fair enough.

This past Monday evening though, as part of a Deacons meeting I was having on Zoom, I was forced to admit that part of my own struggle with scripture is that it is terribly silent on so many fronts. Word for word, it has nothing to say about LGBTQ rights, or Black Lives Matter, or white privilege, or which is God's preferred economic model for humanity. And yet we still dare to say, "This is the word of God." I think what makes us say this is that it is our story. For all of its ambiguity, for all its questions, contradictions, and silence, in this way the Bible, cover to cover, is our story. It reflects all that is good and hard about our human experience. It exposes what is so about us—our contradictions, along with our great ability to heal and to wound, to unite and to divide—and it declares that God is in our midst, working alongside us in the power of the Holy Spirit and in the person of Jesus Christ to redeem all things in love. If the Gospel is good news, the good news must be that the word of God is not pure art form. It is singed with the stories of our lives, which is the story of God's life.

This is why most preachers prepare their sermons with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. It does not mean that we need to have something to say about everything on every page of the Bible or of the newspaper. Nor does it mean that I believe churches ought to take positions on every question being raised in Washington and on our

city streets. And you'll never hear me support or condemn a political candidate. But it also doesn't mean we can afford to stay silent where human dignity and justice are concerned. Our Christian witness to the incarnation of God in Christ requires us to engage the matters of our world.

Which brings us to Hagar and her son Ishmael in our text today from Genesis 21. They are out in the wilderness of Beersheba wandering about, where Abraham, Ishmael's father, has sent them. What Hagar thinks, because no one has given her any reason to think otherwise, is that she and her son have come there to die. To understand how they got here, we need to go back to Genesis 16 where we first get introduced to Hagar.

In Genesis 16, Abraham and Sarah have been waiting on God to fulfill a promise God made to them a long time ago. The promise was that Abraham will one day be the father of many nations. Now it must be said that Abraham would have settled for being a father of just one family. After all, the whole point of getting married in those days was to have a family. He and Sarah always wanted a family. The only problem was, Sarah was barren. No matter how hard she and Abraham tried, she couldn't get pregnant. Then, one day, long after they've given up trying anymore, God tells Abraham, "You're going to be the father of many nations." Abraham, and Sarah too, laughed at God, probably not because they thought God was being funny, but because they wondered if God wasn't being mean. "You've said that before God. And yet we still can't get pregnant. At this point, I'd take just one kid. Father of many nations my foot. Why should we believe you this time?" You know what's worse than one failed promise? Two failed promises. It was enough to make Abraham and Sarah cry. Except they didn't see the point, so instead they laughed.

Ever had this happen to you? You've been disappointed so many times that you've come to expect it, so that next time disappointment comes knocking, you have to laugh just to keep yourself from crying?

Then one day Sarah gets an idea to give her Egyptian slave woman Hagar to her husband. Let Hagar get pregnant by Abraham, and Sarah can keep the baby. That's how it went back then, not so long ago really. Hagar was a woman, but first she was a slave to Sarah. Her only real purpose in the world was to do Sarah's bidding. If Sarah wanted a baby, Hagar needed to get one for her. So get one for her she does. Except when Sarah sees that Hagar is pregnant, it fills Sarah with contempt and bitterness, for not only can Sarah not have what Hagar now has, but Sarah cannot keep Hagar from having it. To see the scales of power tipped so wildly to the other side throws Sarah's whole world out of whack. Unable to reconcile with the change, Sarah does what only Sarah can: she deals harshly with her. In all likelihood, Sarah makes Hagar do things that are befitting a slave and not a mother. Sarah seeks to remind her of who she is in Sarah's world, where Sarah has the privilege of calling the shots, and where Hagar, an Egyptian slave, has to take it. And why is this the way it goes? I don't know. But it is so systemic, so institutionalized to the way things are in this world that, despite becoming pregnant *for* Sarah, Hagar still can't gain equality *with* Sarah.

Not believing things can ever improve for her, Hagar takes off for the wilderness and for a world she can call her own. Only when she gets there, God sends her back. Sends her back! What kind of God sends a slave back to slavery? The kind of God who wants to go toe-to-toe with oppression, the kind of God who wants to speak truth to power, who believes that freedom comes through struggle, that's the kind of God Hagar has, the kind of God we have. Consider for a moment: Hagar is to return to bondage, but the child in her womb, God declares, will be wild and free. If Hagar is going to be oppressed by the hand of Sarah, Ishmael will grow up to wage war against that very hand. If Hagar is going back to where she came from, she is going back to demand justice.

I need to rush on to my conclusion and to our actual text for today, which is what happens to Hagar when she does get back to Sarah; Sarah, who in time, finally ends up giving birth to a baby boy of her own. Presumably, now a mother herself, Sarah might go a little easier on Hagar. Instead, on the day she walks in to find her boy Isaac playing with Hagar's boy Ishmael, she tells Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son, for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac."

Why doesn't Sarah just cast Hagar and Ishmael out herself? Why does she insist upon Abraham to do the dirty deed for her? Isn't Sarah a master in her own right? I think the reason is twofold. One, Sarah has privilege. Whether she recognizes it or not, her ability to get someone else to act on her behalf against another person is the very definition of privilege. It's not just power, it's power times two. She knows she can't change the fact that Ishmael is going to inherit right alongside Isaac, because both boys belong to Abraham, and Ishmael was even born first. But between her and Hagar, she knows only one of them is a wife, and this means she can keep the scales tipped in her favor, and Hagar can't do a thing about it. That's privilege. When the system works in our favor simply on the basis of who we are. Consequently, it can become so inherent, so ingrained to our being that we do not recognize it in ourselves. When, in 1963, a group of white clergy wrote to Martin Luther King Jr. to tell him they thought he ought to back off in his campaign for civil rights, to not march so much, just wait and soon enough the tide will begin to turn, he wrote them back from a jail cell in Birmingham. "Lamentably, it is an historical fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily. Individuals may see the moral light and voluntarily give up their unjust posture; but...groups tend to be more immoral than individuals. We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed." If you ask me I will tell you that I believe the world will first have to become a lot more uncomfortable and disturbing for me in order for it to become more comforting and less disturbing for my black friends and neighbors.

The second reason why Sarah couldn't just cast out Hagar and Ishmael herself, and therefore had to go to Abraham to ask to him to do it, is that Sarah must have known how fragile her own privilege in the world was. Yes, she was a wife, which is more than you could say for Hagar, but like Hagar, she was just a woman, whose own protection, privilege, and power in the world at that time was totally dependent on a man. In other words, I like to think about how differently things might have turned out for Hagar and Ishmael if Sarah might have just seen in them a bit of her own fragile humanity.

But she didn't, and so Hagar and Ishmael end up in the wilderness wandering about without any water, on the verge of death. Which is the precise moment in the story when God steps in. Cast-off and put down, Hagar is not out, for God shows up in the wilderness with a promise for her that is the same promise God gave to Abraham and Sarah: it is the promise of family, of a future with full inclusion in a world where she shall belong to all and all shall belong to her.

Isn't it about time we started to fulfill the promise?