

I have never preached on the reading which we heard just a few moments from the book of Genesis

A bit of background to begin with-

Abraham was 100 years old when Isaac was born. The Jewish people and those who call themselves Christians are each considered his descendants through Isaac. But Isaac although he was born to Abraham's wife, he was not the first born. Abraham had two concubines. One of these women Hagar had given Abraham a son Ishmael at least 14 years previously and the tradition of Islam is such that Muslims are Abraham's descendants through Ishmael. That's an added dimension here.

Our story tells us that Abraham gave a party when Isaac his heir was weaned which was when he was three years old. But it did not go very happily. Sarah made Abraham push out Ishmael and his mother Hagar. We are told that Ishmael laughed with Isaac and made Sarah very, very nervous. She appealed to Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away. And so, after getting the go-ahead from God, so the story teller says Abraham gave them bread and water, and sent them into the wilderness.

I have questions about this reading even before it ends

How can I not be angry at Abraham for listening to Sarah?

How can I not be angry at God for letting Abraham push Hagar and his firstborn son out of his life?

How God could allow what I perceive to be injustice, and selfishness, and manipulation on Sarah's part to have such an impact on the innocent?

But here's what I do take away from this story: When things happen in our lives, and the circumstances in which we find ourselves seem incomprehensible, and we find ourselves standing with our little dust fists to the wide open sky screaming, "WHY???" whether it's at injustice, or unfairness, or out of grief, or helplessness.... God hears!

Why did Abraham send them away? The story doesn't say that Ishmael was awful to Isaac. Some versions, say that Ishmael 'laughed with' or even just 'played with' his little brother. Ishmael was seventeen, Isaac was three. How do seventeen year olds play with three year olds?

Why would this upset Sarah? Who wouldn't want their son loved by his older step-brother? Sarah's issue was with inheritance. Abraham had been promised blessings, and land, and countless descendants. From him would come a great nation. And Sarah didn't want to share. She said, 'The son of this slave woman will not inherit along with my son Isaac.' Ishmael was the son of a slave, you see; worse, his mother, Hagar, was Egyptian. She wasn't 'one of us'. So, Sarah had them sent away.

If Isaac had grown up alongside Ishmael, and loved him, even worshipped him as a hero – well, what then? Would Isaac have received the whole inheritance? Would he have accepted it? Or would his love for his brother have driven him to share the blessings and split the inheritance? Sarah didn't know. She wanted to be safe. So, she agitated to get rid of Ishmael, that potential threat to the wealth of her son.

Many families can tell a story or two about inheritance: inheritance lost or swindled away, inheritance given to one side of the family, or to one brother. Passing down property, and land, and blessings can cause terrible conflict and envy in a family: too many of us know exactly what this story is about.

What Sarah didn't understand is God's generosity. God had promised that great nations would descend from Abraham. Isaac became the father of a great nation, just as God promised... and so did Ishmael. We are told that God met Ishmael in the wilderness, and stayed with the boy as he grew up, and made him the father of a great nation, too.

So, this story about the inheritance of a man, and his children, and their children is also about the inheritance of nations. The line of Abraham to Isaac to Jacob began the Jewish line. Ishmael, on the other hand, is considered the forefather of Mohammed.

In the story, the joke was on Sarah. She sent the threat away, but God met Ishmael in the wilderness and stayed with him and gave him a blessing, too.

This is very challenging.

In our reading from Matthew, Jesus tells us exactly how difficult it is. The text has often been used to justify bringing swords and guns and bombs to wipe out the other: the Jews, the Arabs, the Orthodox, anyone who disagreed with whatever interpretation of Christianity the weapon-wielders held. But this is not what Jesus was on about.

We know from the rest of the gospel that Jesus was never a warmonger. His difficult words are a reflection on what it means to love our enemies. At his time, in his place, which was a crossroads for travellers and armies and generations of war, this meant loving people of all different stripes, all different religions, all different family and financial and political and ethnic backgrounds.

And Jesus said, loving the other doesn't always mean making nice. It means doing the difficult and controversial work of loving the Samaritan, and learning from him, and being hated for it. It means giving up the illusion that we own God's blessing, and inviting others in, and being despised for doing so. It means giving up our privileges, even our comfortable existence, to build a world that all can share.

And it means hearing Jesus' words that whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones will surely receive their reward

The news reports on conflict. And whether it's racial profiling of Muslim men, fundamentalist Christians raging against Muslims, fundamentalist Muslims raging against Christians, it's easy to believe that Christians and Muslims just can't get along. It's easy to fight over the blessing.

But this ignores the story from our shared origins, our genesis, where God blessed both brothers – Isaac and Ishmael, Hebraic and Islamic – and stayed with them both. And it ignores Jesus' call to love across every divide, no matter how difficult, no matter the cost.

Through the story of Ishmael, we know that no matter how we are treated by others, no matter how uncertain our future may look, no matter how hopeless things may seem- God hears...

And that when we are in that situation; when things have got so dry and parched and close to death that you feel like you can't bear to watch, and you just want to walk away because watching something you love that much suffer, or possibly die is just too painful--- God speaks... and tells us to hold on... and hold on tightly. We are to lift up those things that we think are *beyond* hope to the one who IS hope...

And truly, this is more difficult than it sounds.

Because when we are in a desperate situation, or a helpless situation, most of the time we close our ears and eyes and hearts to anything that could take our focus off what's dying in front of us. That's the challenge, isn't it? Because part of being in the desert is feeling deserted. If God loved me, then why? If God were here with me, surely this wouldn't be happening... If God knew me, God would know I can't take this much pain. If God loved me, God wouldn't let me suffer... How can I believe in living water when I'm dry as dust? I don't have easy answers... But I do believe this one truth... that the God who hears is also the God who sees... God is not just watching from a distance...The God of resurrection sees us understands us... is fully present with us...

Every day, God points us to a well in the desert. We can see it... if we look with our heart.

God hears the cry of the outcast, the victim, the one excluded. When the IN people symbolized here by Sarah and Abraham, push others out God is still there with them. God will be with and provide for the ones that the in-crowd say is not good enough. God is a God that works beyond our understandings, outside our fears and doubts. When we, those who claim God as Lord, exclude and push out the other, the one different, the one that our fear tells us needs to go for our own sake, God is still at work in their lives.

God is a God of embrace, a God of mercy, a God of healing and wholeness and reconciliation. But when we make a mistake and exclude and push out those that are different, even with the best of intentions, God is still there. Our own failings do not mean that God is less than faithful, just that we still have places to grow.

Who are we in this story? Are we Sarah and Abraham, fearful of what it might mean to take God's covenantal love seriously, wanting to push out those that threaten our places of comfort and security? Are we Hagar and Ishmael, the ones excluded, the ones pushed out into the wilderness with little to nothing to help us find our way? Could we be either one at different times and in different circumstances?

There is a word of comfort in our story: "Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is." God is faithful and just and hears the cry of those in need. We are not abandoned to the wilderness places of life, when it seems the world and those in it have turned their backs. It is in those times that maybe God is trying to get us to see a new way, a new path that we could not have imagined before.