

Genesis 21:8-21

⁸The child grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned.⁹But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac.¹⁰So she said to Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac."¹¹The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son.¹²But 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, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you.¹³As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring."¹⁴So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba.

¹⁵When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes.¹⁶Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, "Do not let me look on the death of the child." And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept.¹⁷And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is.¹⁸Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him."¹⁹Then 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.

²⁰God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow.²¹He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

When the Water Runs Out June 25, 2017

When Anna and I got married, I was a single dad with two teenage daughters. Let that sink in for a moment. For a while she jokingly referred to herself as, "The Step-Monster." My children and I had been living together for a good while and had our own ways of doing things when this beautiful, but new person came into our lives. I can tell you quite honestly there were some struggles as you can well imagine. I often felt like Abraham, not knowing where my loyalties should be, which caused me no little amount of anguish. We worked it out of course, but I appreciate the conflict that Abe must have been going through. Fortunately, I didn't have to send my daughters out into the wilderness to fend for themselves...but...there were days it crossed my mind! Teenagers!!!

If there is one thing that gives me comfort in this story about Abraham and his kin is that, if this is the first family of faith in our covenantal life, then wow, I feel so much better about myself and my own weird and dysfunctional family, don't you? Talk about a dysfunctional moment in the life of a family! This is better than an episode of *Maury Povich* or *Days of Our Lives*!

Author, Bill Moyers, says of this particular biblical story, "It's the stuff of a cheap novel and a fast read." After all, it's all there – two women sharing a bed with the same man, betrayal, moral indifference, desertion, class differences. I daresay not even Nora Roberts could come up with such a saucy, intriguing, page-turner of a story." And those are the kind of books that are usually free on your kindle.

This melodrama began when Abraham and Sarah were unable to conceive a child, which is a problem if you're going to be the parents of a great nation. So, in keeping with ancient Near Eastern tradition, Sarah gives her favorite slave, Hagar, to Abraham, to procreate by proxy. Sure enough Hagar gets pregnant and bears a child named Ishmael and then things get interesting. Things soon erupt out of control and what once seemed like a

good idea suddenly becomes a hotbed of jealousy, and according to *Rev. Laurinda Hafner**, “they become the *Mean Girls* of ancient times.”

And then, as if the story isn't complex or intriguing enough, Sarah gives birth to the miracle child Isaac and begins to treat Hagar even more harshly. Now that Sarah has her own son she doesn't want her family to include these foreigners. And this is the straw that breaks the camel's back. I am sure each of us can remember a family gathering when a lifetime of family dynamics and politics finally hits the fan. For Sarah, it was at the weaning ceremony of Isaac. That was it. Her jealousy and fear that her husband's first-born son, Hagar's child, would take something away from her and her son, and it drives her to demand some really ugly things.

And of course, she knows how to push Abraham's buttons. So, Abraham simply shrugs his shoulders and leaves Sarah to resolve the dispute. In the midst of her jealousy Sarah really loses her moral compass I think, becoming physically and psychologically abusive. She distances herself from her favorite slave and from her surrogate son. She dehumanizes them, and then decides that there is no room for Hagar and Ishmael in her life with Abraham, and she tells him to cast them out. Basically, “Get them out of my house and out of my sight!”

It wasn't until I read this story a little more closely that I went back and read about the birth of Ishmael. Did you know how old he was when this happened? Ishmael was 14 years old when Isaac was born. He was a teenager and I think it is safe to say that his father loved him. He taught him to hunt and gather, to survive in the land, to care for flocks and crops, to be a leader and even a warrior when necessary. He was the first-born child of Abraham and was included in the covenant that God made with his people. I am willing to bet that Abraham cried a lot during this difficult moment in his life. But you may notice that by the time we get to this part of the story Ishmael is only referred to as, ‘that child or the child of Hagar.’ He no longer seems to have a name. I think that speaks to the distance that Sarah and even Abraham were putting between themselves and these two children of God.

Abraham doesn't exactly shine as father of the year in this chapter of his life either. So, with a pathetic gesture, Abraham gives Hagar a little bread and water and leads her out into the desert with her son. In that wilderness the inevitable happens. The bread and the water run out. The young boy Ishmael starts to die of dehydration. Hagar will eventually die too, but Ishmael is going to die first, in her arms. As the crisis approaches, Hagar cannot bear it. And I can't think of more passionate and tragic words than hers when she says, "Do not let me look upon the death of my child...Let me not see or hear his dying." Words we can hear almost daily on our world news. So, the scriptures tell us she carefully lays her child under a bush and sits down about a bowshot away, so she doesn't have to hear her boy cry or see him die.

A bowshot away. Now I don't know much about using a bow and arrow – my last memory of using one was as a youngster when my dad bought me the ones with the rubber suction tips on them. Of course, we took those off and sharpened the ends in the pencil sharpener, as any wild young boy would do! I don't remember the distance of a bowshot, but I've heard it's about 100 yards, or three hundred feet - about the distance of a football field. At 300 hundred feet you can see a person at the goal post on the other end but you can't hear them, especially, I imagine, if they are weak from thirst and hunger.

Which got me thinking about the distance we put between ourselves and those we don't want to hear or see. What is the distance that we put between ourselves and others so we don't have to hear their pain, their hurt, or see their differences, their needs? What is it? How far? Three hundred feet? Five miles? Across the railroad tracks? Across the street? Across the ocean? Distances of doctrine – rules – religion - stereotypes – assumptions – politics – nationalism?

Hagar is cast out, abandoned by the very ones she had trusted, the ones she had put her faith in. Left waterless in a desert where her young son Ishmael lies dying, she weeps bitter tears of hopelessness. And sometimes, tears are the only prayers we have left. But just then, we are told, God hears the cry of the child Ishmael. God tells Hagar to cross that distance, that three hundred feet that she has put between her and the suffering of her child, the suffering she felt she could not bear. God tells Hagar to lift up her boy, to hold him tenderly close to her heart. God then opens Hagar's eyes to the spring of water that was right there before her, the whole time, the water that will save her own life and the life of her child. She gathers the boy to her, and gently coaxes the water through his lips. She drinks the water herself. Her suffering is over; her hope is restored.

This is God's doing. This is how God's love works in the world. God comes to console Hagar and shows the far reach of God's compassion. And if I take anything from this story it is this. That there is no distance, no three hundred feet, no bowshot to God's love. God's love is not restricted by location, by ethnicity, by gender, by sexual orientation, by age or by class. Here is Hagar, a slave, unmarried, a foreign woman – she could not have been more marginalized in those ancient times - and Yahweh speaks to her! Isn't that wonderful?

To quote Bill Moyers once again, "The very God who saw the burdens and heard the cries of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt, the very God who came down to save them with a mighty hand, is the same God who sees the outcast child under the bush in the desert, hears his mother weeping, and tenderly brings them to water and promises that they too are highly regarded by God." They too, are of more value than sparrows, to echo Jesus' words. And as I've visited with those who are shut-ins or in the hospital they affirm this story in their own lives. That feeling alone in the wilderness, God has come to them as well, bringing comfort and solace, coming in the form of angels and saints...just like you.

God not only opens Hagar's eyes to the life-giving water she needs at that moment, but also makes an extravagant promise to her and her child: God will make of them a great nation. In the story of Hagar and Ishmael we hear that God's covenant blesses all the people of the earth; regardless of Sarah's conniving, Abraham's wimpiness, or Hagar's status, they were all included in the covenant. And regardless of who we are or where we are on life's journey, we too are included in the promises of God. God doesn't marginalize, and Jesus doesn't reject.

If Abraham and Sarah had just trusted God in the first place and been faithful and waited for God to act, they might not have been in that mess. And yet, even in the mess that they created on their own, God is present and turned their mess into something good and maybe that is the message for us as well. Because we are often in similar messes, aren't we? We think we know what is best and rather than wait for God to move before us, we jump in and create disastrous and ridiculous messes of our lives, and still God turns those into second chances, if we can see it. With God, creation stories abound. And when our efforts run dry just as Hagar's water did, why, God opens our eyes to see new water and new visions and new ways to live.

In her book, *Traveling Mercies*, Annie Lamott writes of her own second chance that came through the church. It came at a time when she was deep in the wilderness, in fact, she had slipped so low that she was convinced that even God couldn't love her. That is, until she received living water through the promise of a local priest, "Annie," he said, "God has to love you. That's God's job."

And isn't that the church's "job" as well? To offer living water to those in the wilderness - to the Hagers of this world – those living at a distance, on the fringes – at the margins? Those who've run out of bread and water, safety and haven, mercy and compassion. In his book, *In the Company of Strangers*, Parker Palmer puts it this simply: "In my view, the mission of the church is not to enlarge its membership, not to bring outsiders to accept its terms, but simply to love the world in every possible way--to love the world as God did and does."

And so I challenge us to consider, is it possible that we are putting distance between ourselves and those who desperately need to hear of God's love and mercy and grace? And are we doing the same in our own families? Because if this story is about anything today it is certainly about that. Are we listening and seeing each other?

The name Ishmael means, "God Hears" and if we are to love as God loves then perhaps we need to learn to do the same. To be those who hear. To be those who listen, those who draw near, those who bring living water to those for whom water and bread, literally and metaphorical, have run out. Isn't that what we are called to do as those who love God with all our hearts, minds, and spirits and our neighbors as ourselves? Not keep the world at a distance and not keep ourselves so insulated in our comfortable lives and churches that we can only 'see' those in need, but aren't close enough to hear or respond.

Maybe that is what will bring us that closeness to God that we so desire. Perhaps when we feel so alone and isolated, it is in our going out to serve, that we encounter the Holy God of Life. You may not be loved for it. You may even be hated for it, as Jesus often reminds us. But for His sake, get close enough to hear and see and feel what is going on in the lives of those living all around you.

In the closing worship service of the UCC's General Synod 28 in 2011, the Rev. Dr. Laurinda Hafner, Senior Pastor at Coral Gables Congregational United Church of Christ in Florida shared this closing prayer that I'll close with as well. She prayed,

"You call us to be your light in the darkness, your voice in the wilderness, your hope for the hopeless. You give us strength in our weakness, peace and gentleness, words and boldness, to proclaim more of you, and of us, less." Amen.

*"Three Hundred Feet: A Message for General Synod 28" by the Rev. Dr. Laurinda Hafner, Senior Pastor, Coral Gables Congregational United Church of Christ, Coral Gables, Florida