



*The Boy's Cries*

Third in a sermon series on Genesis

*Genesis 21: 8-21*

Third Sunday after Pentecost • 12th Sunday in Ordinary Time • June 25, 2017

First Federated Church, Peoria, Illinois

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Text:

*God heard the boy's cries ... (v. 17a)*

What a mess. What a royal mess? How in the world did we get to this point?

The story of Abraham is one of call; God's call to Abraham. It is a story of Promise; God promises to make Abraham the father of many nations or people. It is also a call to Faith; God asks Abraham to be faithful, to trust God with his life. And this is where the train went off of the tracks. Abraham couldn't be faithful.

No sooner had the old patriarch set out on his faith journey with God than we ran across the challenge of Abimelech, the king of Egypt. As Abraham, or Abram at that time, and his wife Sarai were about to enter Egypt Abraham came to Sarai and said, "You are a very beautiful woman, not only in my eyes but in the eyes of the world. I know how you turn heads when you enter a room. It makes me proud for people to wonder how I, Abraham could have such a beautiful wife. But in Egypt no one knows me. I'm just a face in the crowd. And when they see you and learn that you are my wife, they may kill me. So please, if anyone asks you, tell them that you are my sister."

Now I don't know how Sarai felt, but I can imagine. I bet that the women can imagine, too. Abraham certainly wasn't very noble. Nor was he very faithful. He didn't trust God enough to see him through a potentially difficult situation.

Sure enough, Abraham and Sarai hadn't been in Egypt very long when officials of Abimelech saw how beautiful she was and reported back to the Pharaoh. Pharaoh, not knowing any better, paid Abraham a handsome dowry of sheep, oxen and slaves, male and female. Abimelech married Sarah and on the honeymoon God intervened with a plague. Abimelech immediately went to Abraham and demanded, "Why did you do this to me?! Why didn't you tell me she was your wife?! Why did you lie to me?!"

All Abraham could say was, “Because I was afraid.” Interesting isn’t it, that the Egyptian Pharaoh Abimelech was more honorable than Abraham? Where was the faith, where was the trust?

Years passed. Abraham and Sarah were still without a child. The promise still had not been fulfilled. So once again, Abraham took things out of God’s hand and into his own. Maybe, Sarah suggested, Abraham misunderstood God’s call. Maybe Abraham should take Sarah’s handmaiden, her slave Hagar and conceive a child with her. Surrogate motherhood is as old as the stories of the bible.

Abraham did this, once again not trusting in God’s Promise. Hagar did conceive and bore a son named Ishmael, a name that means “God hears.”

Time passed and as you heard last week, Abraham was visited by three strangers. They tell Abraham that the time has come for Sarah to bear his child. This was astounding news because both Abraham and Sarah were well beyond childbearing years. It has been a long time since Abraham first heard God’s Call and Promise. Now, in his old age, the Promise would be fulfilled?

Sarah, eaves dropping on the conversation laughed at the news, at the possibility of the Promise about to be fulfilled. Yet, in due season she gave birth to her own son. He was named Isaac, a name that means, “Laughter” or “He who laughs”.

So how did we get here? How did Abraham get into this mess? He didn’t trust the Promise. Last week Zach<sup>1</sup> told you that “God’s promises are immutable.” God always keeps Promises. And the overarching story of Genesis is that God is faithful even when we are not faithful. God’s Word is never scandalous but it also never comes about as we expect.<sup>2</sup>

Sarah becomes the proverbial “wicked step-mother”. She does not want that slave woman’s son to have any part of Isaac’s inheritance. Abraham is torn, as any father would be. He loves his son, Ishmael, but he also loves his wife Sarah and their son Isaac. He is faced with a choice that no man or woman, for that matter, should have to make.

As God did with Abimelech, God intervenes again. He tells Abraham that Isaac is indeed the child of the Promise but that the old patriarch should not be afraid because

Ishmael is Abraham's son, too. Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael out into the wilderness desert to a fate unknown to him. He sent them into the morning sun with only a loaf of bread and a skin of water.

The desert wilderness is a cruel place. When the water ran out Hagar placed Ishmael under a shrub bush and walked a little ways away. She sat down and said to God or to herself, "Do not let me look on the death of the child?" The story is heart-breaking.

The French painter Jean-Baptiste Camille Carot painted "Hagar in the Wilderness" to portray the scene. The first time I saw it and nearly every time since it moves my heart as no other painting ever has done. The bleakness of hopelessness, the dying of a child, the cry of a mother.

How did we get here? We got here because of the feebleness of Abraham's faith, his lack of trust.

Whenever I wrestle with a story like this one I always look for the presence of Grace. Whenever I am in the bleakest of situations I look for the shadow of God's Grace. And in this story, Grace is seen in the cries of the boy.

Hovering above the scene is an angel, God's messenger. The angel asks Hagar why she is troubled and tells her not to be afraid, "for God has heard the cries of the boy". The angel opened Hagar's eyes and she sees a well.

The writer tells us that God was with the boy, Ishmael and that he became an expert with the bow. At the right time, he found a wife in Egypt.

God heard the cries of the boy. I truly believe that God hears the cries of all children. God hears the cry of the child on the streets of Mombasa who cries because he's hungry or abused. God hears the cry of the child whose daddy does not come home or whose mommy died. God hears the cry of the child who is bullied or who cannot read or who sees no hope of escape other than through a street gang. God hears the cry of the child who is sick.

God hears the cry of the least, the last and the lost.

That is why we who call ourselves followers of Jesus, who promise to take Jesus' seriously cannot sit idly by on the sidelines while others suffer. That is why Christians

built and continue to build hospitals, why Christians volunteer in soup kitchens, and food pantries, and in schools.

Christians know that all children are God's children; that all children are our children; that we are one big global family of God.

We who have willingly answered the call to discipleship in the name of Jesus and for the glory of God cannot not do the work of God's Kingdom here on earth.

Amen.

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1. The Rev. Zach Lysdahl, "*Promises, Promises*", the second sermon in the summer series of 2017, delivered at First Federated Church, June 18, 2017.
  2. Walter Bruggemann, *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, Genesis.
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