

“Can the children of Isaac and Ishmael live together in peace?”¹

Genesis 21:8-21

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Today the lectionary moves us from last week’s mirthful announcement of Abraham and Sarah’s pregnancy to the upsetting and disturbing story of what then happens with Abraham’s other family.

And the child grew and was weaned, and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. Now Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, mocking. Therefore she said to Abraham, "Drive out this maid and her son, for the son of this maid shall not be an heir with my son Isaac." And the matter distressed Abraham greatly because of his son. But God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed because of the lad and your maid; whatever Sarah tells you, listen to her, for through Isaac your descendants shall be named. "And of the son of the maid I will make a nation also, because he is your descendant."

So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave them to Hagar, putting them on her shoulder, and gave her the boy, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beersheba. And the water in the skin was used up, and she left the boy under one of the bushes. Then she went and sat down opposite him, about a bowshot away, for she said, "Do not let me see the boy die." And she sat opposite him, and lifted up her voice and wept. And God heard the lad crying; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, "What is the matter with you, Hagar? Do not fear, for God has heard the voice of the lad where he is. "Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him by the hand; for I will make a great nation of him." Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water; and she went and filled the skin with water, and gave the lad a drink. And God was with the lad, and he grew; and he lived in the wilderness, and became an archer. And he lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

¹ Title taken from article by Rabbi Arthur Waskow in Preaching the Word, Soujourners Magazine, September 1982.

At first blush, this is a story of the impossibility of keeping two women happy at the same time. It seems strange and foreign. It is a story many of us can hear and say, “this is why I am glad we live in a society that doesn’t legally sanction polygamy.” When we look a little closer, though, this account of Sarah and Hagar, of Isaac and Ishmael, isn’t so foreign after all.

It can be argued that millions of Americans experience what amounts to serial polygamy. There probably isn’t a person here who has not witnessed jealousy between wives and ex-wives. There isn’t a person in the room who hasn’t heard of rifts between half-siblings. There isn’t anyone with a heartbeat who hasn’t heard of inheritance squabbles between children born of different mothers. And the drama is not just reserved for the wealthy or celebrities. Tensions can run high in such families, as they do here in the biblical text.

This text obviously has something to say about personal jealousies and relationships, but if we stopped at that, we would be selling it short. There is a much larger association with this text. For centuries, it has been thought to reflect something much broader, something that continues to be a hot-button issue today. This text is believed to be related to the roots of the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict.

We begin with some points of clarification. Especially because feelings run high and also because many of us (myself included) know embarrassingly little about the history, politics, and culture of the Middle East. Although I have tried to be more informed about this lately, there may be members of our congregation more qualified than myself to speak on this topic. But if we waited for an expert on important current topics, we would never begin to dialogue. So I venture forth and ask your forbearance ahead of time for any ignorance I might display.

Isaac is a fixture in the Jewish faith. He is revered as one of the fathers of the faith. (The God of Abraham, Isaac, & Jacob. . .) When we speak of the roots of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the association of Isaac with the Jewish faith is pretty clear. But when we begin to speak of Ishmael, Abraham’s first son, the waters become more muddy. This is because there is both an ethnic association and a faith tradition linked with Ishmael. Islam claims Ishmael as a father in faith, and believes he was the ancestor of the great prophet Mohammed. At the same time, many modern Arabs consider Ishmael to be the father of the Arab people².

Here is where it gets a little confusing. It is important to realize that not all Arabs are Muslim. At one time as many as 25% of Palestinian Arabs were Christian. Many have since left Palestine. And it is equally important to realize that not all Israelis are religious Jews. Many Jewish Israelis do not practice their faith at all, their Jewish identity being cultural rather than religious.

² P. 373 in Brueggeman et al., Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary

When we talk about the Arab-Israeli conflict, we consider not only geopolitical conflict, but also religious, and even cultural, conflict. To further complicate the already confusing picture, we add the overlay of current Christian-Muslim misunderstanding and the terrorism diatribe.

However, if we can set aside our own confabulation of the Christian-Muslim-terrorism issues with the Arab-Israeli conflict (even though this in itself is a somewhat artificial distinction), if we can save that for another discussion, it will help us focus on the biblical text.

What is fascinating about the biblical text is what it does not say. It does not say that Isaac was superior to Ishmael (though this is often the impression people have, given the hints of illegitimacy about Ishmael). But even our modern perception of illegitimacy is skewed. The practice of a male head of household taking a servant to bear children for him was common and acceptable practice in Abraham's day, much as it might seem distasteful or strange to us. A child born of such union was considered a legitimate heir.

Nor does the text say that God rejected Ishmael once Isaac (the child of God's promise) comes on the scene. To the contrary. God continues to protect Ishmael, despite Sarah's spiteful plans to get him completely out of the picture. God hears Ishmael's cry and not only rescues him from certain death in the desert, but promises Hagar that Ishmael will also be the father of a great nation. Like Isaac, Ishmael goes on to father of twelve sons and a great nation (Genesis 25:12-18). Isaac and Ishmael are last seen burying their father as they meet again at his grave in Hebron (Genesis 25:9).

The story of Hagar and Ishmael is a picture of how inclusively God covenants. God covenants with Isaac, for sure, but God also covenants with Ishmael, too, with an equally important promise. Ishmael, whom Sarah tried to cast out, becomes the father of many. Ishmael and his family thrive. In this we are reminded that the God who watches over history also watches over outcasts.

Arguments have been made in Paul's theology that Isaac is the *only* child of the promise. Isaac was the only true heir to the promised land. This argument from Galatians has been used to reinforce the idea of God's promise to the nation of Israel, even today. This interpretation has sometimes been used as a weapon by those who claim the Palestinians have no right to any land in Israel, even today. But we can see when we examine the Genesis text that this simply isn't what it says. And we should also be suspicious when scripture is used as a weapon.

Can the children of Ishmael and the children of Isaac live in peace? This is a question that continues to haunt us.

Though we Americans often sit dumbly silent on the topic of Middle East peace, Presbyterians have been vocal about the Arab-Israeli conflict since the

creation of the modern state of Israel in 1948.

It has now been sixty years after the partition of Palestine to create the modern state of Israel. And it has been nearly sixty years of nonstop violence, bloodshed, and disregard of one peace agreement after another. And for sixty years our church has continued to argue over how it can contribute to just peace between Palestinians and Israelis.

The PC-USA has consistently advocated a non-violent solution in the Middle East that both guarantees Israel's security while providing an autonomous Palestinian state as well.

In 2004, with the Israel/Palestine situation deteriorating, the 216th General Assembly — at the pleading of Palestinian Christian leaders — voted to “initiate the process of selective, phased divestment” from multinational corporations the church believes are impeding peace in the Middle East.

Some of you may remember this action. It caused quite an uproar. It was thought to be instrumental in catalyzing similar actions by other mainline denominations. The thought was that we as a church should not be investing large sums of money in companies that profit from the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territory. Or that profit from the construction of the wall of separation around or even through Palestinian territory. This decision was affirmed in the 2006 General Assembly, with some changes in verbiage, and will be up for consideration yet again as the GA began to meet just yesterday in San Jose for the 218th time³.

And the arguments and the conflict continue, while people die.

At the very least, the inclusion of this text in our Bible and the fact that we share this sacred scripture with our Jewish and Muslim brothers and sisters demands that we ask some hard questions. At the very least, we cannot go on pretending that the policies of our own government *vis a vis* this conflict do not concern us as Christians and as people of faith in the world.

In another famous biblical story of bloodshed between brothers, the Bible says God asked Cain, the slayer, “Where is Abel your brother?” And Cain said, “I

³ The Mission Responsibility Through Investment Committee (MRTI) — which coordinates the church's involvement with companies doing business in Israel-Palestine — is recommending continuation of a policy approved by the 2006 Assembly “that financial investments of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) as they pertain to Israel, Gaza, East Jerusalem and the West Bank be invested only in peaceful pursuits.”

do not know. Am I my brother's keeper?" And the Lord said, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground. . ."
(Genesis 4:9-11)

Former President Jimmy Carter comments on this: "The blood of Abraham, God's father of the chosen, still flows in the veins of Arab, Jew, and Christian, and too much of it has been spilled in grasping for the inheritance of the revered patriarch in the Middle East. The spilled blood in the Holy Land still cries out to God---an anguished cry for peace."⁴

No matter our political persuasion, at the very least, this disturbing text should prompt us to learn more about this part of the world, to ask questions of our government representatives, to consider our faith position when we vote, to be question what we view on the media and network news, and to question economic decisions which might in some way impact this conflict.

At the very least, this troubling story of the casting out of Hagar and Ishmael should cause us to examine how we think about and what we do when we encounter outcast people---at work, in our neighborhood, and yes, even in our church. At the very least, we should be on our knees in prayer for peace between the children of Isaac and the children of Ishmael, who are, after all, our brothers and sisters, too.

⁴ From *The Blood of Abraham*, by Jimmy Carter.