

Proper 7, Year A
June 21, 2020
St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church
Genesis 21:8-21
Rev. Sarah Chancellor-Watson

“God Hears”

Our scriptures are full of strange and just plain out there texts. One day just go look up the stories of when the prophet Elisha called upon a bunch of she-bears to maul children who called him a bald head, or when a man named Balaam abused his donkey and the donkey literally talked back to him, or when a mysterious hand wrote out an indecipherable message on a wall in the stories from the prophet Daniel. Our Old Testament lesson may not be quite as bizarre as some of these stories, but it's inclusion in our scriptures does seem a little out of place.

Today's lesson takes a detour from the main story of God's covenantal relationship with Abraham and Sarah and their son Isaac and focuses on an Egyptian slave woman and her son – the other son – Ishmael. Our scriptures could easily tell the story of God's faithfulness and unfolding plans for the redemption of creation without mentioning Ishmael and Hagar, and yet here they are, a seemingly insignificant part of the story taking center stage. Our faith's patriarch and matriarch certainly don't come off looking so good in this story. It begins with a big celebration, Isaac has made it through infancy and survived, a big milestone for the child who holds the promises of God's covenant to make of Abraham and Sarah a great nation that will be a blessing to all other nations. Sarah, instead of reveling in this joy, sees Ishmael, Abraham's son through her slave woman Hagar, playing with her son Isaac, not as a beloved and valued member of her family, but as a threat to her son and his inheritance and place of power within the family as the legitimate first born. Motivated by her fear and jealousy, Sarah implores Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away, to cast them out from the protection and care of the family. Abraham agrees to do this, along with assurances from God that Ishmael's story will not end here, and he sends them away with a few provisions of food and water to survive on their own in the desert wilderness.

When Hagar and Ismael finish the last of their water and can go no further in the vast and barren wilderness, Hagar prepares to die and prepares for her child to die by sheltering him underneath a shrub or a bush of some kind and walks a little ways away crying, “Do not let me see my child die.” Then we see that God is not indifferent to Hagar and Ishmael’s cries. God responds with the voice of an angel, telling her to not be afraid, as her eyes are opened, and she sees their salvation in the form of a well full of life-giving water.

This is not the first time God has answered Hagar in the wilderness. Years before when she was pregnant with Ishmael, fleeing abuse at the hands of Sarah, Hagar encountered God, and named him as the “one who sees.” Here again, God provides for her in her deepest moments of desperation and despair. It’s interesting and certainly significant that the name Ishmael means “God heard.” God heard their cries and God promises that God will also make of Ishmael a great nation. Once again God surprises us and reminds us that no one is left out of God’s plan. God’s blessings are for the whole world. Even Hagar and Ishmael are included in those blessings and plans. God continues to care for them long after, not only providing for their survival in this one instance, but for their thriving in the wilderness, watching over the child as he grows into a man.

The story of Abraham and Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael, and Isaac is layered with human brokenness. So again, I wonder why is this story here? What is being revealed to us, now, about God’s work of justice, mercy, redemption, and love, in this peculiar narrative? These chapters that tell their story in Genesis aren’t exactly warm and fuzzy bedtime reading, but in the midst of all this we can see God unraveling the brokenness and bringing about blessing. These stories show us how God is at work in surprising and unexpected ways and in doing so they are an invitation for us to listen for the stories, the voices, the cries, in our own world from the wilderness and the margins of society.

When I was 23, and fresh out of college, I traveled to a town nestled between the Andes mountains and the edges of the Amazon Rainforest in Peru. There I lived and worked as part of a year of service in our church’s Young Adult Volunteers program. My work was primarily with young teenaged girls who were survivors of sexual abuse, the vast majority of them at the hands of family members. As I grew to get to know these girls and in my comfort and

proficiency of the Spanish language I began to learn their stories, and their stories changed me. I may have taught them some games and songs and how to tie dye a t-shirt, but they taught me how to listen, listen with compassion and empathy and to notice and pay attention to the voices that may be silenced, but nevertheless need to be heard and amplified.

So whose stories are we listening to? Which stories need to be heard? How are we attending to the voices crying out from the margins? It shouldn't pass our notice that this lectionary text for this Sunday about a slave woman's liberation, all be it under troubling circumstances, also happens to fall in the same week our own nation marks the Juneteenth holiday, celebrating the end the slavery in our country with the emancipation of last remaining enslaved African American persons. Even in the midst of the brokenness of our own stories how can we attune ourselves to the ways that is God at work unraveling that brokenness to reveal blessings? Just as God hears, let us also hear and listen, listen to the stories of the Hagar and Ishmaels, and with open hearts and open minds let their stories change us for the better, change us more and more into the people God has created us to be.

Our confession today is an excerpt from the Confession of Belhar. It is one of only 10 statements of faith or confessions that is included in part 1 of our church's constitution *The Book of Confessions*. These statements, spanning hundreds of years of church history, constitute the foundation of our beliefs, as guided by Scripture and the Holy Spirit. The Confession of Belhar was written in the early 1980s, out of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church, in the midst of Apartheid in South Africa. The words of the confession lay bare the sins of racism and racial injustice. It reminds the church, the Body of Christ of where and with whom God stands and where our place is in God's work of justice and peace in the world.

Let us now say what we believe...