

Sermon – “Call Me Ishmael”

Scripture Readings – Genesis 21:8-21 and Matthew 10:26-31, 37-39

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Our first reading, Genesis 21:8-21 is one of many stories in scripture about a father and two sons. In this narrative, we are confronted with the painful reality of those who are not chosen in the biblical narrative. The joy and gift of Isaac’s birth to Sarah turned into oppression for Ishmael and Hagar who were banished from the family into the wilderness. There is great irony in this story. The oppressor’s are Sarah and Abraham, God’s people, and those in need of God’s liberating power are Egyptian servants, Hagar and Ishmael. In the Book of Exodus, we are familiar with the story of oppression, only the roles are reversed. This ironic twist underscores how oppression is inherent to humanity rather than specific classes, races or nationalities. The story also reveals once again the character of Yahweh who “heard the voice of the boy” and responds lovingly. The “other son” is not dismissed from the family of God. Like a mother who will not forsake her nursing child and like a father who runs to welcome the prodigal home, God is faithful (even when the people of God would disagree). Hear now God’s word.

*8 The child grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. 9 But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. 10 So 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." 11 The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. 12 But 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. 13 As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring." 14 So 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. 15 When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. 16 Then 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. 17 And 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. 18 Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him." 19 Then 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. 20 God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. 21 He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt. Amen.*

With Hagar and Ishmael’s story on our hearts and minds we turn to our second reading in Matthew’s gospel, chapter 10, verses 26-31, 37-39. Here Jesus, the One who embodied the character of the “God who heard Ishmael,” speaks honestly to his followers about what to expect (coming persecutions) and what is expected. The faithfulness expected is rooted in the faithfulness of God who watches over each child, even as “God’s eye is on the sparrow.”

The teaching on loyalty to God above one’s family is better understood in light of the Isaac and Ishmael story. Sarah’s fierce loyalty to her son caused her to become an oppressor of God’s “other son.” A human tragedy that is as relevant today as it has been throughout our history. Jesus calls us beyond “family values” to “God’s values” which honors and watches over all families, even as God watches over the families of the sparrow. Hear now God’s Holy Word.

*26 "So have no fear of them (those who persecute you); for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. 27 What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. 28 Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell. 29 Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. 30 And even the hairs of your head are all counted. 31 So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.*

*37 Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; 38 and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. 39 Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. Amen.*

The title of the sermon: "Call Me Ishmael"

The text: "And God heard the voice of the boy..." Genesis 21:17a

Let us pray: God of Compassion, thank you for hearing each of our voices in the wilderness of life. Forgive our cruelties to one another and open our hearts and minds to the hearing of your word. Amen.

*Call me Ishmael.* Herman Melville begins his nineteenth century novel Moby Dick with these words. Naming the narrator of his adventures at sea for the biblical character Ishmael has multiple meanings. Both "Ishmaels" find themselves alone in a wilderness of sorts, both discover water as the source of life, and both struggle as outsiders.

Moby Dick is the story of Pequod's voyage and a complete picture of the nineteenth century whaling industry; however, on another level, Melville has recreated the society of American culture within this community of whalers. When understood as a parable, Moby Dick reveals the painful truth about mid-nineteenth century America, which promised human equality but advocated slavery, racial discrimination and exploitation.

Within the novel, Melville reverses the social order of the whaler society implying equality of all humanity and exposing the hypocrisy and oppression within the white, Christian, American culture.

The sermon Ishmael hears before going to sea offers a key to the entire novel. Father Mapple, a former harpooner, preaches on the story of Jonah and the whale reminding his parishioners: "If we obey God, we must disobey ourselves; and it is in this disobeying ourselves, wherein the hardness of obeying God consists." (Chapter VIII, IX)

Melville believed that the human tendency was to approach life with a single purpose in mind "my way," whereas God recognized multiple purposes. In Moby Dick, the downfall of the captain of the ship, Ahab, was his sole purpose of asserting his nature above all others in seeking to destroy the "evil" whale. Ultimately, this caused his own downfall taking his ship and crew with him.

Ishmael recognized that this tendency toward a single purpose or one way of seeing life can be the downfall of us all. At one point, Ishmael proclaims:

*“...Heaven have mercy on us all—Presbyterians and Pagans alike—for we are all somehow dreadfully cracked about the head, and sadly in need of mending.” (Chapter XVII)*

The biblical story of Ishmael is a poignant reminder that we are all sadly in need of mending. Time and time again we see in religious people, in ourselves, what Sarah reveals in this Genesis story. In fact, in this narrative Sarah symbolizes the established people of God. As one who has been transformed through an experience of grace, Sarah was not unfamiliar with the wilderness of life. Her struggle of being unable to bear children led her down personal, lonely paths of sorrow and despair. Now by the grace of God, she holds the gift of life in her arms as she nurses her son Isaac. Within three verses in the biblical narrative her gratitude for this gift of life turns into greed on behalf of the life she has been given as she and Abraham drive Hagar and Ishmael out into the wilderness to die.

The story is told in this way to highlight how quickly we can come to understand God’s gifts of grace as legal rights of the chosen. This attitude reflects not only a misunderstanding of God’s gracious ways, but can actually turn us against God’s will. This is a story of God’s people failing to internalize God’s gift of grace and becoming at odds with God’s purposes. And this is a story of God’s grace reaching out in spite of God’s people.

Ishmael means “God hears.” The story of Ishmael affirms that God hears even the outsider who is abandoned by the tradition. These are the stories in scripture that teach us the most about the character of God. As the biblical narrative unfolds, Ishmael is a powerful reminder that even those who are “unchosen” within the Judea Christian tradition are treasured by God. Ishmael and Hagar’s story continues in the Quran and has significant meaning for our Islamic brothers and sisters, who are also children of the God of Abraham. One of the highlights of Westminster’s outreach these last five years has been the collaboration within the Children of Abraham Interfaith Fellowship as friendships are built across religious and racial lines, breaking down man-made barriers.

*Call me Ishmael!* May we never forget that the heart of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ is listening to the “Ishmaels” in our world with compassion, understanding and respect.

As a congregation with roots in the abolitionist movement during a time of renewed awareness of the pandemic of racial injustice, may we continue to join our voice with the voices crying out in the wilderness for justice and equity. The center of our identity as Presbyterians along with being in need of mending is being reformed and always reforming.

Matthew’s reading reminds us of the reformation that is possible within the wilderness experience when we join our brothers and sisters there and the grace of God who protects all of us on that journey. If Jesus was willing to journey this way, no less will be expected of those who choose to follow him. It is here where we have the opportunity to see God face-to-face, experience God’s grace, and develop the character that moves us beyond asserting ourselves above all others. In the wilderness, we will not be abandoned by the God of Sarah and Abraham, the God of Hagar and Ishmael, and the God of the Sparrow.

*Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father... So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.*

Thanks be to God. Amen.