

Date: June 19, 2005

SUNDAY: Ordinary 12

SERMON: The God Who Hears

Text(s): Genesis 21:8-11

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Unless you're a person who, on principle, absolutely never watches television, you will surely have seen the Verizon guy with the cell phone to his ear, walking around asking, "Can you hear me now?" I suspect that I'm not the only one who, after seeing those commercials for about the hundredth time, is ready to throw a shoe through the TV screen.

I also suspect that most of us have found ourselves in situations at various points in our lives, where we'd like to ask that same question, not to the person on the other end of our cell phone conversation, but to God. "God, can you hear me now?"

That's one of the important questions at issue in the part of Abraham and Sarah's story that we encounter today in our Old Testament lesson. Does God hear us? Does God care about us? And does God care about everyone, or just a chosen few?

Now, I have to confess that this isn't my favorite part of Abraham's story to preach on. It's pretty hard to get excited about characters who act as badly (by our lights anyway) as Sarah and Abraham do in this story. What spiritual truth can we hope to get out of a story where a woman convinces her husband to **make love to** her slave girl to get a surrogate child, and then, is so consumed by jealousy that she bullies her husband into banishing them to the desert to die? I've seen some of that Sinai wilderness, and it's hard to imagine anything but lizards surviving in it. The difficulties are only compounded when we know that the generations of Jews and Christians who came later, including our New Testament writers, consider Abraham and Sarah as great examples of faith. (As I was preparing this I was sympathizing with Mary who has to preach from an even more appalling part of the

story next Sunday.)

Making sense of this story doesn't get easier when we realize that we've got two different versions which, in the final editing about 2500 years ago, were woven together so that they appear to be two different episodes in one story. The other version of this story is found in chapter 16, where it now appears as an episode in between God's original promise to Abraham that he and Sarah would become the ancestors of a great nation and the fulfillment of that promise in the birth of Isaac that we looked at last week. It's in that earlier version or episode, where we hear of Sarah's scheme to help God's promise come true by giving her personal maid to Abraham to have a surrogate child, and we learn the name of this other son of Abraham—a name that God gives him, Ishmael, which means "God hears."

It helps me, when faced with some of these bizarre, and to our modern ears, sometimes quite troubling stories, to remember that people in any era think and act the way their culture and customs prepare them to think and act. So, in a sense, if we're to understand this story we have to be willing to try to imagine ourselves in the characters' skins, seeing the world as they do rather than as we do from our vantage point in a very different culture and world view.

In Sarah's and Abraham's culture, for example, if a woman could not produce a male heir it was a perfectly acceptable, culturally and legally, for her to choose one of her female slaves or servants to become pregnant by her husband. Then when the servant gave birth, the child would be considered the child of her mistress. It would still be of the same blood as the husband, and thus be able to carry on the family line, which was the whole point.

So Sarah took Abraham aside one day and said, "Look, this god of yours who's always making grand promises seems to have turned his attentions elsewhere, so we need to help him out. I'm already 90 years old, and since miracles don't seem to be in abundant supply right now, here's

my servant girl Hagar. She's young, healthy, and likely to be able to have children. Do your best to get her with child, and if she does have a son, then that son will be our son, and so the Lord's promise will come true."

Abraham doesn't appear to have protested too much at this proposal (big surprise!) and soon, Hagar does conceive and have a son by Abraham, who is named (by God no less, according to the earlier version of the story) Ishmael, and Sarah and Abraham consider him to be their own son and heir.

Culture and world-views may differ radically, but human nature and its basic drives remain largely constant. And soon, those familiar old friends, jealousy and pride and social status, are playing a role in driving the story. Abraham's delight in his new son just is one more piercing wound in Sarah's sense of self-worth which, in her world, was so tied to the ability to produce sons. Our storyteller suggests that Sarah just couldn't stand the thought that her surrogate son Ishmael might be the legitimate heir, since they've now had their own son, a true miracle child, a laughably impossible child Isaac, whose name means "laughter." It's Isaac through whom God had promised to give them many descendants and become the source through whom all the families of the earth would be blessed. But Sarah isn't taking any chances. Ishmael must be disinherited.

For Sarah, as we might expect, making that decision is no problem. Ishmael is not her son. Her son Isaac is the child of promise, therefore Ishmael and his mother Hagar have to go. For Abraham, however, the choice is not so easy. He has grown to love Ishmael, for Ishmael is his own flesh and blood. The narrator says "*The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son.*" He's in a real quandary, a quandary that persists to this day in the seemingly intractable struggle between Arabs who trace their ancestry to Ishmael and Jews who trace theirs to Isaac. This story is at the very root of

that ancient and persistent conflict. For both communities, it is a foundational story, a myth of origins, which underlies centuries of conflict, competing claims, and bloodshed. If you've ever wondered what motivates those radical Israeli settlers who insist on building new settlements in the West Bank, you need only realize how seriously they take this story. Stories can be dangerous things. The stories we tell ourselves and our children about who we are and where we came from and who our friends and enemies are, are incredibly powerful. They shape us, give us our sense of identity, and drive our behavior, whether there is any factual basis or not. In my own family, my great-grandmother told us a story that was so powerful that some of the older members of my extended family have never completely recovered from it. She was a Protestant from northern Ireland, from Belfast, and she drilled into us the dictum, "Never trust a Catholic." We have to be careful with stories.

So Hagar and Ishmael are sent away from the tribe, to find their own way in the desert. The problem is solved. . . or so Abraham and Sarah think. But in all their doings and manipulations, they forgot that the God who had made such gracious promises and acted so faithfully toward them is a God who acts just as graciously and faithfully to all people. They forgot that Ishmael was not just the child of Hagar and Abraham, but in a very real sense a child of God as well. So when Hagar and Ishmael come to the end of their resources, facing the hostile desert alone without water or food, when they feel as though they will die of thirst, and when Hagar cries out in her hopelessness, God hears and comes to the rescue. The narrator says, "*And God heard the voice of the boy (there's that play on the name Ishmael; it means "God hears."); and the angel of the Lord 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. Come lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.'*"

Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water.” The God who could cause a 90-year old woman to have a son is a God who can supply a well of water in the desert, a God whose will to bless is not finally able to be thwarted by the unworthy human motives and maneuverings that created the mess in the first place.

Why did the Israelites tell this story to themselves so often that it eventually became part of their sacred scriptures and ours as well? Even if the details weren’t shocking to them—the notion of slavery and concubinage, for example—Abraham’s and Sarah’s behavior must have seemed as bad to them as it does to us. It’s not a particularly flattering story to those that both Jews, Christians, and Muslims consider their common ancestors in faith. Sometimes, Abraham and Sarah appear to be people of great faith, willing to take risks to follow where God leads them. But there are also the embarrassing and rather shameful episodes like this one where they take matters into their own hands because they doubt God’s ability to keep his promises in the way they think God should keep them. So why remember the story this way? Why not paint Abraham and Sarah in rosier hues? Why show them to us “warts and all?”

Well, perhaps it’s because if the stories of our ancestors are to have any significance for us, it can only be as we see them as real people, facing the real problems that we all face, many of which are problems of our own doing. How could their story connect with us or with anyone if they always made the right decisions, always were faithful, always were strong and wise and pure and good.? We’re certainly not; there are not many angels in any of our family trees.

But real people, people who have faith one minute and then the next are so lacking in faith that they connive and manipulate and act spitefully while convincing themselves that they are doing God’s will— people like that we can relate to. Like Sarah and Abraham, we scheme and make plans and manipulate situations and

other people to make it happen as we think it ought to happen. Oh, we pay lip service to wanting God’s will for our lives. We say we want to do God’s will. But we’re not terribly persistent or faithful in seeking that will. We pray, “Thy will be done,” and immediately begin doing everything we can to bring about the picture we hold in our minds of how God’s will ought to be done. We have very definite ideas about how we want God’s will to be fulfilled, but we really don’t trust ourselves to God to the point of letting go of our need to control and manipulate and work it out for ourselves. Sarah and Abraham, and we, much of the time, live by the old proverb, “God helps those who help themselves.” That’s a proverb, by the way, that is found nowhere in Scripture, and quite frankly, it’s pretty bad theology. Because what we’re really saying when we live by that old proverb is that we don’t really trust that God hears us. We’re like that guy with the cell phone at his ear, “Can you hear me now?” And when we don’t get an immediate response, we conclude the connection is no good, and off we go to make it happen ourselves.

But the result of our doings is that we land ourselves in a muddle and sometimes the more we do to extricate ourselves from the mess, the deeper the muddle becomes. We finally reach a point of desperation where the only way out is to stop doing and allow God to begin undoing.

And that’s the real point of this story. God is a God of undoings. No matter what we do, no matter how faithless or self-serving or manipulative we are, God is always faithful to us! That’s the good news! God is gracious. Like Abraham and Sarah, we are slow in learning that lesson. We are slow to believe that God cares enough about us to keep faith with us. But the story is not ultimately about Abraham and Sarah’s or our lack of faith and our ill-considered actions. Rather it is the story of God’s patient, steadfast, never-failing faithfulness to those who trust that God hears our cries for help. We may

not be able to trust ourselves as much as we think we can, so our storyteller appears to be saying, but we can trust God. We can trust God, not only to do what he has promised— to bless us and make us a blessing— but we can trust God even to undo the wrong that we do and the messes we get ourselves into. The God of Abraham, of Sarah, of Hagar and Ishmael is a God who hears and cares and whose mercy and compassion for us is as vast as the universe. Jesus tells us the same thing in our gospel lesson: *“Not a sparrow falls to the ground without your Father’s knowledge; so do not be afraid, you are of more value to God than many sparrows. Even the very hairs of your head are numbered.”*

Abraham and Sarah are models for us, not because they were always faithful, but because they ultimately kept going where God led them, despite their lapses of faith. In spite of their impatience with God’s timing, their self-serving motives and desires, their manipulations, they kept moving on from their mistakes to follow God’s leading. So their past mistakes, their past failures, their past sins could not ultimately harm them or prevent them from receiving the promise. For the promise did not depend on their faithfulness to God, but on God’s faithfulness to them. And so it is with us as well. Just as God heard the cry of Ishmael, the child of the slave woman, so God hears our cries. God knows our needs. As God was faithful to Hagar and Ishmael, as well as to Sarah and Abraham, so God is faithful to us. Ultimately, that divine faithfulness is the only firm ground on which we may build our lives.