Third Sunday after Pentecost – Proper 7A – Sunday 21 June – Genesis 21:8-21 – Webex

If you had an opportunity to read Ponder and Skyrocket this week, you already know that I do not think either Abraham, or Sarah, or God comes off looking particularly well in this episode.

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But Abraham *often* fares rather poorly on my “is there seriously *no* other way you could have done this?” scale, so I do not necessarily expect a lot from him.

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For her part, Sarah gets cut some slack because she suffered more than a little herself from her husband’s curious-to-questionable responses to things – say, for example, when he passed her off as his sister to Pharaoh, who then made her one of *his* wives – and let’s just note that was only the first of three times he pulled *that* little trick.

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God, of course, has plenty of redeeming characteristics; not to mention that God is God, whose ways are not my ways nor thoughts my thoughts; I highly doubt my raised eyebrow here bothers God one little bit.

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Generally, however, we do not *like* to raise our eyebrows at God, or even “Father Abraham” or the great matriarch of nations, Sarah.

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As a result, much ink been spilt over the Hagar-Ishmael incident in an effort to explain exactly why they *deserved* to be sent off into the desert; much of it pretty classic victim-blaming.

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But hey, it all ends up just fine, so really, what’s the diff?

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Mmmm.

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There is strong reason to believe that there are a couple of different traditions of the Hagar/Ishmael saga spliced together in Genesis; whether or not this is correct, there are way too many data points and “what if-s” in the story to address here. But some do need to be highlighted.

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Hagar was an Egyptian woman, a slave presumably purchased while Abraham and Sarah were in Egypt to serve as Sarah’s personal attendant.

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Sarah was aware of God’s covenant promise – innumerable descendants, vast quantities of land, divine blessing – *aaand* she was aware of the fact that she had no children.

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As I noted last week, it is hard to have innumerable descendants if you do not have that first one.

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But Sarah remained childless. For years. And years. And years.

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So she decided to use Hagar as a surrogate, and passed her off to Abraham for that purpose. Legally, any child born to Hagar would be Sarah’s – problem solved.

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Data point – Sarah was complicit in creating the very situation she now finds untenable.

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Well, Hagar conceived.

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Some trouble around the relative position and status of the women ensued – Sarah was the official wife, but Hagar was the mother-to-be of the presumptive “official child.”

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Sarah’s response was to start treating Hagar so badly that Hagar fled into the desert.

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God came to her there in the wilderness and told her to return to Sarah and put up with the abuse for the time being; which she did.

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Data point – Hagar was a woman who was obedient to God.

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Hagar’s child was born and given the name God told Hagar was to be his – Ishmael, which means “God hears.”

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Thirteen years went by. Isaac was born.

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A couple *more* years went by; Isaac was now able to eat “strong meat,” and so was finally weaned.

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This was a big milestone, and we read today that Abraham threw a big feast to celebrate.

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In the course of the festivities, Sarah saw Ishmael – doing – something. The word used can mean “mock,” “play,” or “laugh.”

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If you are a translator looking for some reason to blame Ishmael for his own banishment, you will – as the version of the Bible we are using this month does – come down on the side of “mock.”

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But he could just as well have been a teenager playing with his toddler half-sibling, or even laughing with delight at some silly thing the younger child was doing.

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Data point – there is nothing in the text itself that suggests any bad intention on Ishmael’s part.

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Dennis Bratcher points out that it has taken only a few short verses for Sarah to move from being overwhelmed with joy at receiving an incomprehensible gift from God, to trying to possess that gift entirely and claim exclusive privilege as a uniquely worthy recipient.

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But, lest we cluck our tongues too loudly, he goes on to remind us that we ourselves duplicate Sarah’s behavior in all sorts of circumstances, in all sorts of ways.

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The tendency to try to control God’s abundant and boundary-crossing generosity for our own purposes, and limit God’s free gifts of grace to our exclusive benefit, neither began nor ended with her.

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This story, told at the very beginning of our salvation history, warns us that it has always been only a short step from celebrating God's miraculous provision for us amid the impossibilities of our lives; to using those gifts as the means to claim special status over against others; and finally, to turning them into instruments of subjugation.

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How ironic that the first action with Isaac at its center – this child given *as* a blessing to one person to *be* a blessing to *all* people – is one of intolerance and oppression undertaken to limit access *to* that blessing.

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The human self-centeredness that results in this sort of arrogant exceptionalism – this tendency to collapse the miraculous gifts of God into personal privilege – is found all across our scriptures, and continues to confound our understanding of what it means to be the people of God today.

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But to claim special status for ourselves based on the gifts we have received is, Bratcher continues, a radical misunderstanding of their nature and purpose.

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God’s gifts are never given entirely for the individual – a particular person, nation, race, or culture – to horde and use for their sole benefit.

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“I will bless you that you might be a blessing,” is what God tells Abraham.

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“Chosen-ness” does not mean we can claim privilege for ourselves while ignoring our responsibilities to others.

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From the proclamation of the Prophets to the teachings of Jesus, God’s people have been warned time and again against thinking they were – we are – so privileged that God will automatically treat *us* as the oppressed.

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From the proclamation of the Prophets to the teachings of Jesus, God’s people have been challenged and condemned time and again for claiming special status for ourselves at the same time we are oppressing “that slave woman and her son;” those who are truly powerless, voiceless, outcast, and abused.

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We would do well to remember that our God is both “El-roi” – the God Who Sees – and Ishmael, the God who hears.

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Our actions – or lack thereof – do not go unheeded and unjudged, but are subject to evaluation against God’s mandate for compassion and mercy, self-sacrificial service, justice, liberation, humility, and love.

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That we have been given great gifts is undeniable; as is the truth that we too often respond to that fact like Sarah, claiming them as solely and entirely our own, enjoying our privilege while denying our responsibility.

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Sometimes, as Bratcher writes, this masquerades as "defending God’s intentions."

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We who have received a free and unmerited gift of grace decide we must “protect” it by excluding anyone who does not share our particular desires, preferences, worldview, or doctrine.

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We act as if God has only one gift to give, and assume that, as it is we who have received it, nobody else is worthy in God’s sight; nobody else deserves the treatment we expect for ourselves.

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We puff ourselves up in self-righteous certainty that we are, in *fact*, “defending God’s intentions” when, instead, we are working against God and what God would like to accomplish in the world.

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In our jealousy and fear we draw circles around what we presume to call our own, excluding, in the process, the very ones whom God has committed himself to see and hear, to protect, defend, and prosper; “that slave woman and her son,” the persecuted and vulnerable.

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We might keep this in mind as we react and respond to this week’s headlines, from the Supreme Court’s landmark decisions pertaining to protection under the law for our LGBT and foreign-born brothers and sisters; through efforts related to keeping populations most at-risk for Covid-19 safe, to words and actions addressing the scourge of systemic racism; blatant lies, fraud, and vindictiveness in our government; increased efforts at gerrymandering and voter suppression; and more.

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We are not the arbiters of God’s intentions. God does not need our protection. God has more than one gift to give. God sees and hears those we would persecute, banish, and consign to death so that we do not have to share the inheritance.

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Hagar was not the Mother of the Covenant – that gift was given to Sarah.

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But Hagar, the first person in Hebrew scripture to be visited by an angel, the first person to have the wisdom and courage to name God, was given the gift of a personal relationship with him.

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Ishmael was not the Child of the Promise – that gift was given to Isaac.

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But Ishmael received a Promise of his own, that God would make of him, too, a great nation.

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God’s grace, providence, protection, and blessing are never ours alone for the receiving, using, and keeping.

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We are gifted in particular ways to serve particular functions in God’s great plan, not that we might dictate or control that plan.

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We work against God’s purpose and impoverish ourselves when we fail to share our gifts as lavishly as God has given them.

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We work against God’s purpose and impoverish ourselves when we fail to “see” and “hear” in others the gifts the God who “sees” and “hears” has given them.

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We work against God’s purpose and impoverish ourselves when we squander God’s grace by trying to horde it. Amen.