

Stories usually have a beginning, a middle, and an end. But today for our OT lesson, we heard a chunk smack dab in the middle of the story of Abraham and his sons. We heard some things today. We heard other pieces last week. But because Easter was so late, we didn't hear the earliest pieces of the story of Abraham and his sons, Ishmael and Isaac.

So today we basically read part 3 of a 4-part story of the childhood of Abraham's sons. We heard part 2 last week. We'll hear part 4 next week. But we missed part 1.

So let's do a flashback.

The overarching theme of the story of Abraham is that God makes a covenant with Abraham.¹ God promises that Abraham will have descendants that will outnumber the stars in the sky.² And he promises that those descendants will be given a homeland.³

Those are wonderful promises. Here's the problem. Abraham and his wife Sarah⁴ are old. And they are childless.

Plus, God's promises are a little vague. Lots of descendants, God says. But he doesn't say how. Sarah is post-menopausal. And Abraham is no spring chicken.

And so Sarah does something we often do. She decides to take matters into her own hands. She doesn't wait for God. She just blazes on ahead.

We find the story in chapter 16. Sarah has an Egyptian slave-girl named Hagar. So she tries to force the issue of children for Abraham. She gives her slave-girl to Abraham to be a concubine. Instead of waiting for God to act, Sarah pushes her slave girl Hagar into Abraham's bed to be a sort of surrogate mother.

Hagar conceives, which is what Sarah originally wanted. But there are unintended consequences. The pregnant slave-girl in some ways now has more status in the family than her barren mistress. The tables have turned. The teenage and pregnant Hagar begins to look down her nose at her elderly and childless mistress. Sarah in a real way has gotten exactly what she was trying to get. But she doesn't like it.

And so out of jealousy, Sarah begins to be abusive to Hagar, and Hagar runs away. She flees out into the desert. And God appears to her there. The God of Abraham and Sarah will also be the God of Hagar. He takes notice of the mistreated slave-girl. She may be low on the totem pole, but God notices her. He asks her to return and bear her child. And he promises that through her child, Hagar too will have a multitude of descendants.

¹ At this point still named "Abram"

² Genesis 15:5

³ Genesis 15:18ff

⁴ At this point still named "Sarai"

And so Hagar returns, and gives birth to a son. Abraham names him Ishmael, which means, "God hears."

Fast forward to our OT lesson last week. God appears to Abraham again, and promises that Sarah herself will eventually become pregnant and bear a son, even though she's around 90 years old. Sarah laughs out loud at such a promise. But within a year she gives birth to a son, and he is named Isaac, which means "Laughter."

Which brings us to our OT lesson today.

Isaac grows up, and is weaned. And one day Sarah looks out at Isaac playing with his half-brother, Ishmael. And we're told that Ishmael is laughing. And the word is ambiguous. It could mean innocently laughing with Isaac. Or it could mean scornfully laughing AT Isaac.

Either way Sarah begins to see Ishmael as a threat to her Isaac. She tells Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac."⁵

God tells Abraham to go along with Sarah's request. God promises that the line of the covenant will extend through Isaac's descendants.

Nevertheless, because Ishmael is also Abraham's son, God also promises to make his descendants into a large nation.

In fact, Isaac's descendants will become the Jewish people. Ishmael's descendants will eventually become the Arab people.

So Abraham gives Ishmael and Hagar bread and water, and sends them out into the wilderness. And there we have an extremely poignant scene. The water runs out. Hagar can't stand to watch her child die of thirst. And so she sets him in the shade of a bush and goes off a little ways so she doesn't have to see his agony and death.

And again, as he did when Hagar was pregnant and in the wilderness, God notices Hagar and her son. And God speaks. God reiterates the promise to make Ishmael into a great nation. And he shows Hagar a well of water to sustain them in the wilderness.

To the Arabic people this is a hugely important moment. And later it would become an integral part of Muslim ritual. Good Muslims are required, at least one in their lives, to try to make a pilgrimage to Mecca. And part of that pilgrimage at Mecca involves a personal reenactment of Hagar searching for and finding water for Ishmael. To this day in Mecca, these pilgrims drink at the well they believe sustained Hagar and Ishmael.

After the wilderness, Genesis says that Ishmael grew up. His mother found him a bride from her people. And he continued to live in the wilderness, as would his descendants for millennia to come.

⁵ Genesis 21:10

What I appreciate about this story is all the human mess and dysfunction, as well as God working through it all. These are not sanitized, airbrushed stories. These are messy, gritty, really human stories.

If we were perfect people, maybe such stories wouldn't be important to us. But I find great comfort in the fact that our ancestors in the faith have all the flaws and foibles of real human beings. And yet, they seek to be in relationship with the God who seeks them out to be in relationship with him. And God wants to be in relationship with them, in spite of their messy lives and the mistakes they make.

God invites Abraham and his descendants into a special relationship, a relationship with God himself. Also, God blesses Abraham and his descendants so that through them, the blessing may extend much further. God blesses them so that they may be a blessing to others.

Now you'd think after such a wonderful divine gift and promise that Abraham and his Sarah would live in a very different way. But they don't. What I love about the story is how they're still very flawed and still very human.

God promises descendants. Sarah is old and barren. Abraham is old himself. So what do they do? Instead of waiting for God to act, in the very next chapter, they try to force the issue themselves.

This leads to friction between Hagar and Sarah. And, unfortunately, there would be friction between Hagar's son Ishmael and Sarah's son Isaac. And there would be friction amongst their descendants, even down to the 21st Century. Ishmael's Arab descendants and Isaac's Jewish descendants often find themselves in conflict to this day.

God originally intends to bless all peoples through the descendants of Abraham. Abraham and Sarah jump the gun by having him impregnate the slave girl Hagar. By jumping the gun, Abraham and Sarah make the whole situation more complicated and stressful.

In retrospect, they should have waited for God's promises to be fulfilled. But in spite of their actions, God is able and willing to get the covenant back on track. We might mess up plan A. God will move to plan B, or to plan C, or to plan D...

And this speaks volumes about God's care for and patience with us. He doesn't write us off. He seeks to remain in a relationship with us, and to do whatever he can from his end to maintain that relationship.

But that doesn't mean that things are always easy. It certainly wasn't easy for Abraham and Sarah and Hagar and Isaac and Ishmael. They all had to live with their family mess and dysfunction. They all had to live with the consequences of their action. And yet, God was with all of them.

Ishmael basically drops out of the picture after chapter 21, with one exception. And I find that exception a sign of great hope. The rest of Genesis will be about Isaac and his descendants, with the exception of one more appearance of Ishmael in one more verse of Genesis.

That verse is in the 25th chapter. Abraham dies. And Genesis tells us that BOTH his sons, Ishmael AND Isaac come together to bury him in the family tomb.⁶ Their relationship as children of Abraham supersedes the divisions they have experienced.

That tomb in southern Israel is still a shrine for both Jews and Muslims. They share oversight of it.

Yes, the story is not perfect. That tomb of Abraham is often a flashpoint in our world. There are sometimes protests and riots that center on that tomb. There have been shootings there as well from time to time, the most recent one a year and a half ago. The Jewish and Muslim children of Abraham find themselves simultaneously united and divided by their common ancestry. The dysfunction of Abraham's family continues to this day.

But division and dysfunction are not strangers in our world. We certainly have experienced a lot of it in our country in recent years. We find ourselves living in hyper-polarized times. But occasionally there are signs of unity and hope.

In the aftermath of last week's shooting during congressional baseball practice, I was very encouraged by many statements that were made from both sides of the aisle. One of my favorite moments came during a joint interview with the two coaches of the two baseball teams: Democratic Representative Michael Doyle of Pennsylvania, and Republican Representative Joe Barton of Arlington, Texas. Representative Barton was describing what it was like to be there on the field with his sons during the shooting. And then he started talking about the level of support he had received that day from his colleagues from both sides of the aisle. He started to get choked up and Representative Doyle gave him a reassuring squeeze on his arm.

And then Representative Barton said this:
"We have an R or a D by our name, but our title — our title is United States representative. And I'm very proud to be a member of the Congress. And I'm proud to serve with people like Mike Doyle."⁷

Moments like that encourage me. What we have in common transcends those things that divide us.

Yes, our country is polarized: blue and red, Democrat and Republican. But our common identity as Americans should transcend any differences we have.

⁶ Genesis 25:9

⁷ <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/rivals-baseball-field-congressmen-share-solidarity-shooting/>

Yes, there is strife in our world. There are three great faiths that trace their spiritual ancestry to Abraham. Christians, Jews, and Muslims do have disagreements. And there are extremists among us who sometimes act in reprehensible and unacceptable ways. And yet, we worship the same God, in spite of the fact that we don't always agree on who that God is or what that God calls us to do.

And yes, we live in families that experience strain and tension and dysfunction, some to lesser degrees, some to greater degrees. We sometimes make poor choices. We sometimes lead very messy lives. And we sometimes have to live with the consequences.

But the good news is that God still wants relationship with us. We may mess up plan A. But God is there with a plan B. And God calls us to live as agents of his kingdom, to be people of forgiveness, people of reconciliation, people of resurrection.

Yes, God calls us to live differently so that our lives might testify as to what it means to live in relationship to God.

But God also has the inclination and ability to get things back on track if and when we mess them up.

Seek God's ways.

Share in his work.

Be a blessing to others.