



SUNDAY SERMON

## It's Complicated

### Hagar, Abraham and Ishmael; Sarah and Isaac, too

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God's got the whole world in his hands, she's got the whole wide world in her hands. Hold us God, hold us all. Amen.

This past Thursday morning on NPR, Steve Inskeep began his segment saying – and I paraphrase – “these days, we don't just listen to the news; we live the news.” Living in a pandemic is the news, marching in protest – or opposing the protestors – is the news. These days, the news isn't about someone else; the news is about us, our lives. The expression, “we're all in this together,” seems no longer a trite nicety; it is true. We're experiencing our togetherness, our humanness, in startlingly tangible, physical ways.

Something is happening in our body, a physical upheaval. The coronavirus affects our bodies, the lock-down is physical, the perpetuation of racism, and the dismantling of racism, the Supreme Court's rulings affecting gender inclusion and DACA protection, the visceral polarization of the nation. These fundamental events are not prompted by ideas; they're physical expressions of something deep within or assault from without. These impulses, actions, and events are taking form and being addressed (or not) biologically, anatomically, viscerally. To offer protection under the law to someone who is trans, to shift the culture of race and racism: Both threat and promise is happening in each of our own personal bodies, and in our families as a body, and in our nation, as a body, and for some of these issues, globally as human beings.

Just as the upheaval is physical, I expect the resolution must be physical. Intellectually and emotionally we may be tired of the coronavirus, but this pandemic isn't resolved until it's resolved in our bodies. We can pass legislation – and we must pass legislation, and keep passing legislation – that ensures equity for all. All – full stop. But the inequalities and inequities such legislation might address – those won't be resolved until they're resolved in our bodies, in our felt, lived, embraced relationships and experiences of one another – trans, white, black, gay, from this nation or that.

In recent decades, a whole new field of science is making remarkable discoveries about how trauma is passed on generationally. First noted and studied among survivors of the holocaust and their offspring, then new understanding about post-traumatic stress – PTSD – for those who serve in military battle, and then genetic recognition of racial trauma inflicted upon African-Americans passed generationally from slavery, through ever-changing iterations of racial oppression.

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DATE

Pentecost 3  
Sunday, June. 21, 2020

PREACHER

The Rev. Ledlie Laughlin

My understanding of God's justice, as articulated first by the Hebrew prophets, and summarized by scholar Walter Brueggemann is this: "to sort out what belongs to whom, and return it to them." To do justice is to sort out what belongs to whom, and return it to them. This takes as given that at, present, things – access to goods and power – are not justly sorted, not equitably distributed. This justice neither requests nor requires retribution; it requires restoration. This is the basis for restorative justice.

And it strikes me that this current upheaval is an occasion for restorative justice. Is this the cry of our bodies calling out collectively, enough! I am not suggesting that God is the moving force behind the pandemic, but certainly may be present in the cries for racial justice. With so many of our set ways of living now dissembled as so many puzzle pieces on a table awaiting connection, doesn't this upheaval give us a chance once again to sort out what belongs to whom and return it to them? Come, Holy Spirit, come.

This may seem an unlikely leap, but much of what I've said this morning was prompted by the story we heard a few minutes ago about Hagar, Abraham, and their son Ishmael. How did I make that leap? Because the take-away from this story is that all God's people are descended from some wildly dysfunctional family arrangements. And as problematic and hurtful as those arrangements are, God sees each and every person and says, I've got you; I see you; I know your name; it's going to be okay.

And I'll tell you, I don't know how all our current physical upheaval is going to come out. But I believe, and I do declare that as even the hairs on our heads are numbered and known, God's got the whole wide world in her hands.

Since Hagar and Ishmael only show up in our Sunday readings once every three years, let me remind you very briefly of their story. Way back in the beginning of time God promised Abraham that God would make of Abraham a great nation with offspring as numerous as the stars in the heavens. Despite Abraham and Sarah's faithfulness over many years, Sarah did not conceive. So, Sarah proposed that Abraham take her slave woman, Hagar, and have a child with her. While this was a socially and morally acceptable solution at the time, it did not go well. As you might imagine, a triangle like that is .. well, fraught. Hagar got pregnant and immediately "had contempt for her mistress." Jealous and resentful, Sarah threw her out. An angel came to Hagar, told her to return and submit. She did so and bore a son Ishmael.

The child grew, time passed, still no further offspring, Abraham fretted, God promised Abraham and Sarah would have a son to father God's chosen people. Ishmael was about ten when, at long last, Sarah gave birth to Isaac. Seeing the two playing together awoke her old jealousies and she again sent Hagar and Ishmael packing; this time for good. While overjoyed with Isaac, Abraham was deeply distressed to see his son Ishmael banished. God assured Abraham, I will look after the child and his mother. As we heard, God provided a well of water and spared their lives. In time, Hagar found a wife for Ishmael and from his offspring will come the father of the prophet Muhammad; thus the seed of Islam. Ishmael makes no other appearances until, long after Sarah's death, Abraham died. Together Isaac and Ishmael buried their father.

What to say? The entire story line is built around God's promise to create a new nation, the faithfulness of God to Abraham and Sarah, and their faithfulness to God. It is their son Isaac who will marry Rebecca who in turn will give birth to Jacob and the twelve tribes of Israel. We will follow that lineage for the whole of the biblical narrative. Hagar and Ishmael survive, only to exit stage left.

Yet Hagar... well, first of all, she is named; we know her name. When she was banished by Sarah the first time, an angel of the Lord sought her out, assured her of God's love, and promised that she would give birth to a son who would be the prince of many nations in his own right. And the second time she and Ishmael are banished, it is God who finds them. As if the text asserts, families and people can cast out their own kin, but God stands with them and says, that's okay; we're good out here. Where you chase my people, I will be them. Where they gather, I will be there.

And Abraham. Even as Isaac's primacy is assured time and again, the text is unambiguous about Abraham's love for both Isaac and Ishmael.

How do we carry this story in our bodies as a people? How do we carry the stories passed down through our own blood lines and family lines, the wounds we have inflicted, the wounds we have received? Yes, we're all in this together, but that's complicated. It is way past time to sort out what belongs to whom and return it to them. So, thank God, God sees each and every person and says, I've got you; I see you; I know your name; I've got the whole world in my hands. Amen.