

“Multiple Messages Worth Hearing”

Genesis 21:8–21

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There are those who believe that any good sermon or speech will have one central message, and there is some wisdom in this line of thought. It certainly beats a shotgun approach wherein listeners walk away wondering what the point was or if there even was a point. But the best stories have multiple messages and many layers of meaning.

Children’s stories and films are often like this. They have a simple level of meaning the target age can follow, yet also another level that communicates to parents who are along for the journey. The film “Babe” is an example of this reality. On one level, it is a fun tale about a cute little pig who is raised with dogs and learns to herd sheep. Yes, Babe becomes a sheep-pig! But on another level, it is a story about overcoming prejudice and building bridges between divided parties. In the best stories, there are multiple messages worth hearing.

This is case with biblical stories, including the one we have read today from Genesis 21. It is a familiar story that disturbs and comforts. It is a story about God’s providential care yet also unsettling injustice and perhaps even interfaith possibilities. A wise preacher might focus on just one of these themes, but wisdom comes in different forms, and there are multiple messages worth hearing in this story.

On the most basic level, this is a story about desperation and hope. The message echoes the hymn we have just sung, “His Eye Is on the Sparrow.” Our lives are in God’s care, the text proclaims. No matter how desperate our circumstances may seem, our lives are in God’s care.

As the story begins, Sarah sees Ishmael, the son of Hagar, Sarah’s Egyptian slave, playing with Isaac, her son. The Hebrew root for the word “playing” — *mesaheq* — is the same root for the word “to laugh” — *sahaq*. Laughter has been a theme of Isaac’s life, his name means “one who laughs,” but what happens next is no laughing matter.

Seeing the boys together and feeling something less than noble — perhaps jealousy, though she pushed Abraham to have this child; perhaps concern for her son’s inheritance — Sarah tells Abraham to cast out Hagar and Ishmael, saying the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with her son, Isaac. Abraham is distressed, he loves both boys and mothers, but God tells him to do as Sarah says. It is not Sarah’s best moment, and at this point, one has to wonder what God is thinking!

Hagar and Ishmael are sent into the wilderness of Beersheba with just a little bread and water. It is a desolate place. It is not long before they run out of food and water with no hope of replenishments. Hagar prepares to die and sits down a good way off, about that of a bowshot from Ishmael. She doesn’t want to see him die.

It is a brutally harsh situation, but this is not the first time Hagar has been treated poorly. She is a slave, after all, and just after she conceives Ishmael, Sarah treats her so harshly that she decides to run away. But God sees her distress and speaks words of comfort to her, promising her that her son will be the father of multitudes. So, Hagar calls God, *El-Roi*, “the God who sees,” and she returns home.

In this second experience of desperation, God recognizes Hagar’s need again. In fact, God has already repeated the promise of Ishmael becoming the father of a great nation to Abraham. Ostensibly, it is why he agrees to do as Sarah says. Now, God hears Ishmael’s cry for help.

We should note that the name Ishmael means “God hears.” And the Hebrew word *shema* refers to more than passive hearing. When Israel is called “to hear” that the Lord is our God, the Lord is one (Deuteronomy 6:4), more than just hearing is implied. The people are called to act upon what they hear. In like manner, when God “hears” a child’s cry of despair, God comes immediately to the rescue.

As with modern-day miracles, God does nothing magical. God opens Hagar’s eyes so that she can see the well. Mother and son drink, and their desperation turns to hope. They thought they had been abandoned, but God was there. God’s eye is on the sparrow.

We aren’t told much more about Hagar, other than that she finds Ishmael a wife, and he becomes an expert with a bow, and, of course, survives to start a nation.

The message for us is that our lives are in God's care. No matter how desperate our circumstances may seem, our lives are in God's care. We may question why we struggle as much as we do. Why does God allow Hagar and Ishmael to think they are dying? And sometimes there are realities of life that even God's care cannot change. People we know and love, like Chrissy Hardy, die far too young, even though we pray for them to get well. But God is with us and for us, even when the worst happens. There is nothing, not even death, that can separate us from God's love. And God will see us through the worst.

Often God does this the same way God helps Hagar and Ishmael, not by some supernatural act of magic, but by giving us eyes to see the possibilities that already exist. In his book *Who Needs God* Harold Kushner underscores this reality (pp. 28-29). God opens Hagar's eyes, he says, so that she can see the well, and thus a world that had seemed hopelessly cruel moments before becomes life-sustaining. The well has been there all along. The world was never as bleak as it seemed. But until God opens her eyes, she looks at life and sees only futility.

So it often goes for us. The end of a relationship creates a gaping hole in our lives, but other relationships still exist, all hope is not lost. The loss of a loved one creates an emptiness that cannot be filled, leaving little purpose in life, but over time God facilitates healing and points us in the direction of things that still give our lives meaning. The loss of a job or perceived career path can be debilitating, but it can also be liberating, a path to better possibilities, if only we have eyes to see.

But there is another level to this story, and thus another message for us. On a personal level, this is a story of desperation and hope. Our lives are in God's care, the narrative of Genesis 21 tells us, God works through our abilities and all of life. No matter how desperate our circumstances may seem, our lives are in God's care. But on a social and systemic level, the story reminds us that there is much injustice in this world, and God not only recognizes the injustice; God intervenes on behalf of the poor, the weak, the vulnerable, the marginalized. Perhaps it is the same message, just on a different level. We are still talking about desperation and hope, human suffering and God's intervention.

It happens over and over again in scripture, but in our story today an enslaved woman suffers many hardships. She has no real agency, and so she is treated harshly on more than one occasion. Scripture makes no effort to hide or deny this reality. But while the people in this system, including a great patriarch and matriarch of faith, create this injustice, God sees it and responds with compassion.

In her commentary on Genesis, part of the Smyth and Helwys series, Kathleen O'Connor notes that African-American feminist scholars, also known as womanists, find in Hagar both a model of their history as descendants of slaves and survivors of racial oppression as well as a figure of courage and survival (p. 301). The character Celie, in Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple*, embodies these same realities. We recognize the suffering and injustice as well as the heroic character of many who overcome such challenges, like Hagar.

But we also see in our story the recognition and intervention of God. God is always looking out for the people others neglect — the poor and marginalized; the stranger in the land, that is, the immigrant; the widow and orphan; the slave and outsider. So, of course, God is looking out for Hagar and Ishmael. God sees their need and hears their cry.

The question, as Carolyn Helsel asserts in her commentary on this text (www.workingprecaher.org), is — do we see and hear? Do we see and hear the neglected in our time — the poor and outcast, the hungry and homeless, the addicted and abused, the stranger in our land? Or do we look past them whether they are asking for help at a stoplight or waiting in a holding camp near the border, passed out on the sidewalk outside the church or safely housed in a facility far away?

We cannot help everyone in need. Even Jesus says the poor will be with us always. But he is quoting the first half of Deuteronomy 15:11, the second half of which says, “Therefore, open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.” We are called to see and hear what God sees and hears, really see and hear, in a way that leads to action.

But there is one other message in this story. It is a message about the possibility of people of different faiths finding common ground.

God extends compassion to Hagar and Ishmael not only by enabling them to locate a well of water, but by promising to create a great nation through them. The line of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob may be chosen, but so is the line of Abraham, Hagar, and Ishmael.

We're not just talking about a complicated family system. We're talking about the roots of major world religions, as Judaism and Christianity grow out of this first chosen nation, and Islam grows out of the second. It's why these faiths are all Abrahamic. There are certainly differences between our traditions, but there is common ground as well.

In the Qu'ran, this family is not fractured. Abraham sends Ishmael into the wilderness, but he goes with him all the way to Mecca. Other sources indicate that he helps Ishmael construct the Ka'ba. There is no animosity between Ishmael and Isaac. In Genesis, God seems to choose Isaac as primary, but in the Qu'ran, the individual must choose. Abraham is viewed as one sent to lead all humankind.

There is something hopeful in these details — the possibility of three faiths, often at odds, seeing each other as complementary ways of living in covenant relationship with God and thus part of one larger sacred family. This is not to dismiss our differences or distinctiveness. It is simply to say we have common ground.

Nor is it to offer a final word on who is included in God's eternal realm. The Christian Testament has inclusive and exclusive texts; but judgment belongs to God and God alone, no ifs, ands, or buts; and God's concern is always bigger than we think. As our hymn of discipleship says, "The love of God is broader than the measure of our mind," which is good news because it means even we might be included in this love.

In the end, all three messages express the same truth, just in different ways. God's love and compassion extend to all — to us in our times of need, to those treated unjustly by the people and systems of this world, to people of different faith traditions. God's love and compassion extend to all. That is a message worth hearing, in all the ways it is expressed, and one much needed in our time.