

**June 22, 2014**

**TEXT: Genesis 21:8-21**

**TITLE: God Hears**

When I was in Detroit for the General Assembly last week and I sat down to read and think about this Genesis passage for this sermon, I remember asking myself, "Now why did I choose this scripture?" This is a messy story about Hagar, Sarah and Abraham: a slave girl with no power but a body capable of producing an heir; a wife who later finds herself pregnant with a child of her own; and a husband seeking to be faithful to God and his conflicted family. There is jealousy in this story. There is pain in this story. And there is a deep tension described here between a present crisis and a future hope. For all these reasons this messy story is also our story.

Stand with Hagar for a moment. We meet her in Genesis 16 when she is literally handed over by her mistress to produce a child for Abraham and Sarah. She bears a son, but this act also gives birth to tension between Hagar and Sarah. Through the birth of Ishmael, Hagar gains a higher authority in the household. In response, Sarah becomes jealous and falls into the trap of seeing her servant as being "uppity." These prejudices are as sad and old as time. Finally the tension boils over so that Hagar and her child are stripped of their position in the family and cast out into the desert likely to die. Hagar was oppressed and abused; she felt abandoned by people and by God. In truth, at times we have felt like Hagar.

Stand with Sarah for a moment. Sarah and her husband Abraham both laughed when told they would bear a child. But God's promise was stronger than their doubts and Isaac was born. However, this couple had a tendency to take matters into their own hands. Needing a descendant, Sarah put Hagar in Abraham's bed. Later, seeing Ishmael playing with Isaac, Sarah decided she needed to kick Hagar out of Abraham's house. Let's be honest: living in a male-dominated world, Sarah lacked real power except what came to her through her husband and son. When she grew jealous about Ishmael, Sarah's maternal instincts led her to take matters into her own hand. She loved God but was impatient with God's timing and told Abraham to cast out Hagar and Ishmael. Jealous, self-centered, impatient - yes, at times we too have been Sarah.

We make choices every day. We are acted upon by others every day. Sometimes those actions beat us down and seem unfair, as happened to Hagar. Sometimes those actions involve fear and jealousy and instincts for self-preservation, as happened with Sarah. There is a messiness to everyone's life - tough choices, health struggles, money troubles, things that wound us emotionally and spiritually. The hard truth is that life necessarily contains a messiness that not even God can take away. But God came to us in Christ to be with us in our troubles and to fill us with a resurrection hope that moves us from fear to faith, from death to life. God is near to us, hears us, and always acts to save us. That is the good news in Hagar and Sarah's story, and in our story, and in the Presbyterian Church's story, as this past week again made clear to me.

While we were in Detroit, all the commissioners and guests at General Assembly were encouraged to worship last Sunday in Presbyterian congregations out in the city. I providentially ended up at Calvary Presbyterian Church - an African American church led by pastor Kevin Johnson. The General Assembly arranged for a bus to take us there. That trip took us past abandoned factories, decimated neighborhoods, and city blocks where only one house stood surrounded by urban jungles of weeds, brush, and saplings. What happened to Detroit was no environmental disaster, but a human disaster - caused by people, caused by racism, caused by a nation's indifference to other's pain. Calvary Presbyterian Church was not a cathedral, nor was it in a rapidly redeveloping neighborhood like East Liberty. It had a fenced-in parking lot and a security guard - as did several other churches I saw in that part of Detroit. In his sermon, Pastor Johnson spoke pastorally and prophetically on the subject of gun violence. He told about sitting in a restaurant and being surprised to overhear two grandmothers behind him comparing notes on how to clean their pistols. Grandmas cleaning pistols - life in a violent city. Pastor Johnson named his desire to own a gun, so as to be protected from "knuckleheads" (to use his words); yet he would not get a weapon since by faith he trusted in God, not guns. To quote Pastor Johnson again, he claimed "America is stuck on stupid when it comes to the Second Amendment," to which I agree. He also said that Detroit had more registered guns than registered voters. I don't know if that statistic is true for Pittsburgh, so I want one of you to find out between now and next Sunday and I'll share your findings next week in church.

Gun violence is a Hagar and Sarah issue. We hear from one group about times in which people feel helpless and afraid, when power is used against them violently. We hear from other groups who worry about losing their freedom, who feel the need to take matters into their own hands, who grow impatient with idealistic peace movements. Both these views, like Hagar and Sarah, exist in tension within the human family. However, the Genesis story, messy as it was, also included the God who knew both women and cared for them in their time of need. God heard Ishmael's cry and Hagar's prayer. God led them to water and to renewed life. That doesn't erase the earlier pain and brokenness, but it gives this story the resurrection hope that is at the core of our entire faith story. Similarly, in the messy story of gun violence, we recognize the tension that exists between human rights we value and the suffering we inflict on one another. Yet in the end our deepest allegiance is to Christ the risen Lord, the Prince of Peace, and not to packing a piece.

I've briefly shared some of the actions of the recent General Assembly meeting. The Presbyterian family story remains a messy story. But for the first time in a long time, I can say that our denomination is no longer "stuck on stupid" when it comes to discussing issues of sexuality and justice. No, we do not fully agree. Yes, there are still congregations who may leave our denomination because they object to LGBT full inclusion in our church leadership and object to allowing same gender couples to marry in our churches. There have been Hagar moments of oppression and Sarah moments of

jealousy and broken fellowship. But in Detroit, I mostly heard sincere, faithful conversations about pastoral ministry and Christ-centered mission ministry. For the first time in a long time, we talked more about mission, about the vital importance of Young Adult Millennials in our congregational life, about 250 creative, new worshiping congregations being formed across America, and about how the church exists to proclaim God, serve Christ, and act justly, always being led by the Spirit's transformative power.

One of the messier discussions we had at General Assembly was about divestment from three U.S. companies whose business supports the security checkpoints and dividing wall between Israel and Palestinian communities. As you likely read in the papers, this motion failed by two votes in 2012 but passed this week by only 7 votes (out of 630 cast). This is something over which our church remains deeply divided. On the surface it looks like a modern re-telling of the Hagar-Sarah story - an oppressed minority; a jealous, nervous mistress. Yet it is more complicated than those categories suggest. Our denomination tried to walk a fine line between affirming Israel's right to exist and the goals of a two-state solution while also challenging the practice of profiting from, for example, Caterpillar bulldozers specially outfitted with wide blades and armor so that they can be used to plow down Palestinian homes and orchards. When the General Assembly vote was taken, there was an initial gasp of surprise, a deep silence, some tears and prayer. This action compels us to remain engaged with both Jewish and Palestinian brethren and I will be recommending to session that we organize a Jewish-Presbyterian mission group to study together and then visit Israel in the coming 18 months.

I mentioned earlier that life contains a level of messiness that even God cannot remove. However, that does not defeat God nor diminish God's ultimate power. In the Hagar and Sarah story, God knew both women in their seasons of pregnancy and motherhood. Sarah laughed in surprise when told she would bear a son, so she named her boy Isaac, which means "he laughs." Hagar the slave had no one to protect her, but out of faith she named her boy Ishmael, which means "God hears." Later, when she and her son were cast out into the wilderness, dying of thirst, they cried to heaven and God did hear. God showed them a well of water and cared for them. Overarching the messiness of the Hagar-Sarah drama was the steadfast presence of God. God knew them always, heard and listened and sustained them always, and gave them lasting hope both in this life and for the life to come.

That is the good news of our faith. Bigger than the messiness of our life is God's love and power - the power that in the beginning created life, the power that by grace justifies us and washes away sin, and the power that brings to us resurrection hope that is stronger than death. It is all the same power: Creation, Redemption, Resurrection. It is the same power from the same God - Creator, Christ, Holy Spirit. That reality holds us together when life gets messy. That's the good news which we believe and by which we are saved. Now, if that is too big - too abstract for you, then hold on to simple idea found

in Ishmael's name and Hagar's story: God hears. God hears. When all else is crazy or broken or stuck on stupid, God hears. And in that hearing and that divine love and hope, there is perfect peace. Thanks be to God.

AMEN