

**November 27, 2016 (Journey)**

**TEXT: Genesis 21:5–14, 20–21**

**TITLE: Sibling Rivalry and Binary Thinking**

*By Rev. Dr. Randy Bush*

I love doing crossword puzzles. A common clue is to give you a word and then put a line next to it, which when you fill in the blank gives you your answer. So if you saw a clue that said “Sibling (blank)”, you’d likely know the answer is “sibling rivalry.” Not sibling joy or sibling harmony, but sibling rivalry—something so common that it is a standard phrase. When I was little, my brother, sister and I used to fight over who got the first glass of milk out of the gallon milk jugs. We called it the “glug-glugs” since the first glass poured seemed to make that noise. I’m sure that drove my parents nuts, just as it did when we fought over window seats in the car, pecking order for taking baths, and a thousand other silly things.

We’ve just heard part of the story about the two sons of Abraham—Ishmael and Isaac, son of the slave Hagar and the son of the wife Sarah. When the bible talks about brothers, it usually talks about sibling rivalry. Think about Cain and Abel, Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, the Prodigal Son and his angry elder brother. Perhaps that is one way to think about the story of Ishmael and Isaac—two sons who are ultimately rivals for the favor and inheritance of their parents. But what’s different in this story is that here Isaac is still an infant and there’s nothing in the passage to suggest that Ishmael had a problem with his younger brother. No, this sibling rivalry is thrust upon the two boys by their mothers and by their father Abraham. It’s a messy story of power, of succession plans, and about who should be the recipient of God’s favor. And it’s easy to read it as a story of a winner and a loser. But just as in real life, things are more complicated than that—and God doesn’t desire sibling rivalry but rather sibling harmony, if we listen to God’s word with ears of faith.

To talk about Abraham’s sons, Ishmael and Isaac, I need to say a few words about world history and world religions. First, both Judaism and Islam honor Father Abraham, although the Jewish scriptures are much older. The stories of Judaism come from an oral tradition that goes back to 2000 BC, while the stories of the Islamic Qur’an are more recent, dating from the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD. Second, these stories explain how there got to be so many different tribes of people living in ancient Palestine. Who you are is often shaped by who your ancestors are. So the story arose about Abraham whose one son became the patriarch of the tribes of the Arab people and whose other son became the patriarch of the tribes of the Semitic people. Both received a blessing from God in the book of Genesis. But deciding which one is more favored depends on which set of Holy Scripture you read. For example, Abraham is revered as the person who stepped away from idol worship and polytheism to worship the one true God and start monotheism. As proof of Abraham’s loyalty to this one God, he was willing to sacrifice his son—a grim ritual that at the last minute involved switching out the son for a

sacrificial ram. Now in the Qur'an, it is Ishmael who is placed on a sacred stone and almost sacrificed. In Genesis, it is Isaac who is the child of this act of faith. So how we understand the story of this ancient family depends on who is telling it to us. Islam honors Abraham and his eldest son, Ishmael, who will father a dozen tribes and end up in the land of Mecca awaiting in time a prophet and a holy book about submission. Judaism and its sibling religion Christianity honor Abraham and the miracle child Isaac, born to Sarah late in life—a child who will also father a dozen tribes and move from captivity in Egypt into the Promised Land of Judea, and from whom will later be born another child of wonder, whom we call Jesus the Christ, the Messiah.

Two sons go forth from a common father to populate the world – sons whose stories are told in different sets of scripture and worshiped by people of different faiths. I fear too much has elapsed over the centuries to bring the two sons back together into one faith. But perhaps there is hope for mutual respect and peace if we lift our gaze off ourselves as Jews, Christians and Muslims long enough to see our connection to our common ancestor, Abraham—and look even further back to the One God who made a covenant with Abraham that insists we are all children of a heavenly Father who seeks the best for us and all nations. We need to remember that being siblings worshiping the one true God does not automatically mean we must be sibling rivals. Nothing in our stories calls us to sibling rivalry—so why do we insist on such a thing?

Martin Luther King, Jr. wrote a book called “Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?” and in it he told the following parable. Some years ago a famous novelist died. Among his papers was found a list of suggested plots for future stories, the most prominent one had this premise: “A widely separated family inherits a house in which they have to live together.” King went on to say that “this is the great problem of mankind. We have inherited a large house, a great “world house” in which we have to live together - black and white, Easterner and Westerner, Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, Muslim and Hindu—a family unduly separated in ideas, culture and interest, who, because we can never again live apart, must learn somehow to live with each other in peace.”

I've been thinking a lot about this issue of sibling rivalry and social divisions and how to nurture King's “beloved community” where people of different views and faiths can live with one another in peace. I don't have an easy or simple answer to this challenge. Sibling rivalry, religious rivalry, political rivalry all seem to be built into our global DNA. But I do have one idea about a path forward and it comes to us from our friends and colleagues active in the gay and lesbian community. One of the more recent insights from those who study gender issues and sexual orientation is the suggestion that we are too locked into binary thinking, believing that, for example, human sexuality is simply a matter of two choices: male and female, when we know that sexuality and sexual identity moves through a spectrum of expressions, including heterosexual men and women, yet also homosexual, bisexual, asexual, and transgender identities. Only

by moving beyond a narrow either-or, mentality can we understand and talk about sexual identity.

In the same way, we are predisposed to talk about much of life in the language of binary choices – us vs. them, winners vs. losers, Ishmael's team vs. Isaac's team. Part of the reason we use this language is to understand who we are in terms of our family, race, tribe or clan—the people who supposedly are on our side, who will help us survive in a competitive world. We convince ourselves that all of life is a “zero sum” game—and either I'm winning and getting more than someone else, or I'm losing, which means someone else is doing better than me.

But if we read the scriptures carefully and faithfully, God calls us away from binary thinking and simplistic answers. When Abraham was first called away from his home in Haran, God said “I will make of you a great nation and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 12:2,3) God did not say “your family alone will be blessed—but rather in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. With God it's not a binary community but a beloved community.

Here's another example. In Paul's letter to the Galatians chapter 3, he talks a lot about Abraham and how through our faith in Christ we are made into Abraham's descendants. Then comes the famous verse 28: *There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.* Now we often hear these three sets of pairs as reinforcing our binary worldview—you are either male or female, slave or free, Jew or Gentile. But Paul's point goes deeper than that. He basically tells us to see the world through the eyes of Christ and stop putting people in categories in the first place—categories of gender, race, or economic status, categories of nationality or politics. A broader worldview has been revealed to us in Christ—one where we need to learn about Ishmael as well as Isaac since we share this one world, this one big house of the Lord's together. It is one thing to seek clarity about what others believe; it is a much different thing to seek victory over them and their beliefs. The binary model always looks for victory; the Christ-like model calls for us to seek clarity, to listen to others, to show respect, to work together with all for the good of all.

This is not just a bit of liberal rhetoric. Consider how in nature, places like the Amazon forest thrive, not because there are only two kinds of trees or mammals or insects, but because there is a rich diversity of species all living together and mutually dependent. In the same way, humankind is called to live in a society of diverse, intentional mutuality.

It's time for us to put aside all sibling rivalry, especially as it concerns those who live around us and with whom we are mutually called to protect this world's resources. And especially when it involves matters of religious faith and practice—both within the Christian faith family and in our interfaith relationships with others. To that point, the end of the Abraham story in Genesis actually gives

us a word of hope, letting us know that sibling rivalry doesn't have to be the defining quality of our relationships. We're told in Genesis 25 that Abraham died at the very old age of 175. When that sad day came, his two sons Isaac and Ishmael came together to bury him. The paths that had diverged in life converged again at the moment of Abraham's death. If that was possible back then, it is still possible now—for with God all things are possible. This Advent season, may we walk through God's open door and discover, with all our siblings, that we are called to be a blessing to others and to live as one beloved community.

AMEN.