

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**Genesis 21:8-14; 22:1-7, “Sibling Rivalry and Reconciliation”**  
**by Pastor Matt Johnson, 6/25/2017**

This week we take another step in this Genesis story,  
specifically through Genesis 21 and 22.

These chapters present two stories  
of the sons of Abraham, Ishmael and Isaac.

As we will see once we get into the text,  
these stories are parallels of each other in many ways:  
they both depict these sons of Abraham  
being brought to the brink of death,  
only to be saved at the last moment  
by God’s miraculous provision.

But before we get into the text,  
I want to break down the implications of these stories.  
As Christians, we trace our spiritual heritage  
back to Abraham through Isaac, the child of promise,  
and his son Jacob whose name later became Israel.

Muslims and Arabic people, on the other hand,  
trace their spiritual heritage back to Abraham through Ishmael.

And just as these two brothers are depicted as rivals in these stories,  
so we perceive that our religions should function as rivals today.

Not only are we religious rivals, but the nations that supposedly  
represent our religions are rivals.  
(Though many so-called “Christian nations” rarely act Christianly,  
I also suspect that very few Muslim nations  
act faithfully within the tradition of Islam).

So we can quickly move in our minds  
from Isaac vs. Ishmael, to Judaism vs. Islam,  
to modern day Israel vs. Palestine.  
Should the Israeli settlements be stopped?  
Should the Palestinians be punished for bombings?  
And so on.

In the same way, we can move from Isaac vs. Ishmael,  
to Christianity vs. Islam, to the United States vs. ISIS.  
When is it justified to use nuclear weapons,  
and who (if anyone) should have them?

All of these huge issues of our day  
have this basic family dynamic between Isaac and Ishmael  
at their center.

But we've gotten so used to it,  
that we deal with the contemporary circumstances  
without even thinking about their origins in Scripture,  
and what God has to say about those origins.

In light of all that, here's the shocking news that we get  
from these ancient stories of Ishmael and Isaac:  
God loves, supports, provides for,  
and is present with *those we fear*  
just as much as he loves, supports, provides for,  
and is present with *us*.

Now hear me clearly: I am not a relativist.

I do not believe that all religions promote love  
and that all spiritual pathways lead to God.  
I believe in the unique salvation of Jesus Christ  
for all people at all times and places.

But I will not equate that with some kind of cosmic favoritism  
on God's part that justifies our racism, nationalism,  
and our hatred of political and cultural rivals.

These things are simply anti-Christian,  
which makes those who practice them anti-Christ.

And when we in the church behave like anti-Christ  
(or rationalize the actions of those who do),  
then it doesn't do a lot for our witness  
when we tell people that we actually *worship* Christ.

They will say, "Oh really—you worship Jesus?  
That's strange, because the way you're living  
is completely different than the Jesus I read about in the Bible."

So with that as our background let's go to the text,  
and what I want to do is to point out several parallels  
that we see between the two chapters.  
As we do so, it's important to know that these parallels  
are not just coincidental.

The Bible came together in an aural culture.  
People heard stories read in groups,  
rather than sitting by themselves and reading privately.

One impact that has on storytelling is that repetition is crucial.  
Ancient people had an incredible sensitivity  
to patterns and repetition and cycles.  
So we see this kind of thing all through the Bible,  
and when we see it,  
we're being told something by the author  
that more is happening here than just one story  
followed by another story.

The patterns tell us that we are intended to read these accounts,  
and thus interpret these accounts, alongside each other.

So what kinds of parallel patterns do we find in these two stories?

**To begin with, both Ishmael and Isaac are sons of Abraham.**

Ishmael – born to Hagar as a result of Abraham and Sarah's  
lack of faith that God would provide a son for them.

Isaac – born to Sarah as a result of God's blessing  
in the face of their laughter at such a possibility.

It's interesting when we get into chapter 22,  
Isaac is constantly referred to as Abraham's "only son."  
Because he's not—Ishmael is also Abraham's son,  
but by the time we get to chapter 22,  
Ishmael is already so relationally disconnected from Abraham  
that it's as though like Isaac were his only son.

**Secondly, both stories involve God  
giving ominous instructions to Abraham.**

Gen. 21, Sarah is angry at Ishmael  
for mocking Isaac on the day he is to be circumcised.

She says, **“Get that slave woman and her son out of here.”**

Abraham is upset because Ishmael is his son.

But God says, **“Do not be so distressed.**

**Listen to whatever Sarah tells you,  
because Isaac is the child of promise.”**

And what had Sarah requested? Get rid of them.

Literally she says to, “Drive them out,”

the same phrase used of Egypt when they  
drove Israel out of captivity into the desert.

So we see this inverse relationship:

the chosen family does to this Egyptian servant

just what the Egyptians will one day do to the chosen Israelites.

And like slaves being chased out of Egypt,

driving Hagar and her young son out into the desert was,  
of course, a death sentence.

God tells Abraham to go ahead with this death sentence—

but he also says, **“I will make the son of the servant into a nation also,  
because he is your offspring.”**

The implication is that, somehow, they will not die.

Then in Genesis 22 God again speaks to Abraham,

and he again tells Abraham to carry out a death sentence on his son.

This time it’s much more explicit,

**“Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—  
and go to the region of Moriah.**

**Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering  
on a mountain I will show you.”**

It’s the kind of request that we all believe

the God of the Bible would never make of us.

But here again, Abraham has a sense

that this will not end in Isaac’s death.

He tells his servants, **“Stay here, while the boy and I go on ahead.**

**We will worship, and then *we* will come back to you.”**

Isn't it incredible that Abraham  
had to go through this with both Ishmael and Isaac?

**Thirdly, both stories tell of Abraham setting out “early in the morning.”**

Early in the morning Abraham places food and water  
on Hagar's shoulders,  
and early in the morning the wood for the sacrifice  
is put on Isaac's shoulders  
as they head out for Mt. Moriah.

**Fourth, both stories tell of God's presence with  
and provision for those who are endangered.**

As Hagar and Ishmael finish the water they had in the desert,  
Hagar is so desperate she leaves her crying son under a bush  
so that she won't have to watch him die.  
But God hears the cries of Ishmael (who's name *means* God hears).  
And he enters into a dialogue with Hagar in the desert,  
ultimately pointing them to a water source so they could survive.

And it says that God was with the boy as he grew up.  
God was with Hagar and Ishmael,  
even though they were not the chosen family.

Then in chapter 22,  
Abraham is about to actually sacrifice his son  
when the Angel of the Lord speaks to him and tells him to stop.  
And when Abraham looks up,  
there is a ram with its horns caught in the thicket.  
God had provided for the sacrifice,  
and he was present with Abraham and Isaac  
during one of the darkest times imaginable.

So...Two sons of Abraham,  
two sets of ominous instructions, two early morning departures,  
two near death experiences,  
two instances of divine intervention and provision.

Now, what do these parallel stories *mean*?

The original author of this book clearly knows  
that the descendants of Ishmael  
are antagonistic toward the descendants of Isaac.  
It's already an established reality  
by the time this story is put down as we have it.

But even so, the author, by the inspiration of God's Spirit,  
takes great pains to show that the Living God  
treated both of these young men with great dignity.  
God heard them both. He provided for them both.  
He was with them and would bless them...both. It's an amazing fact.

There are a few things I think we can take away from these parallels:

To begin with, we will never experience reconciliation  
if we think that God is against those we fear or despise.

If God blessed Ishmael and Hagar  
in the midst of Sarah's fierce jealousy over Isaac,  
how could we expect anything less in our own lives?

God hears the prayers of those who frustrate us,  
those we don't understand, those who are of another religion,  
those who are of another sexual orientation,  
those who are of a different political stripe than we are,  
those of different cultural backgrounds.

How can we read these inspired stories and believe otherwise?

God hears the cries of *human beings*  
not "ideologies and rhetoric and stereotypes."

The people demonized by our home cultures  
are *human beings* whom God loves.

If we are to be people of reconciliation,  
we *must* let go of the idea that God has our kind of prayer,  
our kind of worship, our kind of language,  
our kind of people up on a pedestal. He doesn't.

If the neighbor you hate cries out to God, God will bless him or her  
just as quickly as he'll bless you or your family.

If we don't get that deep down,  
then we will never be able  
to *be a blessing* to that neighbor.

Second thing is that God is the one who provides for individuals  
and for communities during the darkest times of their lives.

When does God usually provide for his people?

Hagar and Ishmael were in the desert.

Israel wandered in the desert.

Jesus fasted in the desert.

But in the midst of those deserts,

God has also shown himself to be one who provides.

It may or may not be that you consider yourself to be in the desert right now.

But desert times come for all of us.

And the church in North America is facing what might be considered  
a kind of desert time.

When these times come to us, or to those we know and love,

or even to those we feel little warmth for,

let's look for God's invitation to life and blessing.

It's in these times that God's grace and love shine out the most,

and we find out that as children of God, we have more in common

with each other than we would ever imagine.