

Preached by Dr. Carl Rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
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Genesis 21:8-21
Matthew 10:24-39

A VISION OF LOSING OR FINDING LIFE

Okay, let's be honest. Most of us came through those doors this morning and we expected certain things to take place in a certain way. We are accustomed to familiar elements in a service of worship. We like it when our music, our prayers, and even our reading of God's Word is done orderly and in a particular fashion.

That's why I didn't do it that way today. Because we do expect it and it's God Word whether it's read from the pulpit or the pew. I know we are open-minded and we're willing to put up with these sorts of little experiments or changes in our order of worship. I know we are open to a lot of worship styles. You would be just as comfortable if there was a jazz band up here, as if it were any other Sunday. But we like the familiar; we choose the familiar. This response, this choice, is one way that we learn to love God. It is not evil in and of itself. It is not good in and of itself. Only the love of God that we have felt in the past and that we long for in this service—the presence of God with us—only that is good. We worship, we serve, we seek to love, we want to express our faith because we have been loved and forgiven of so much, so we choose a response, a reaction.

Do you know that Paul refers to the whole Hagar/Sarah trauma in the book of Galatians when he says that Hagar and Ishmael are associated with the covenant of the law (he says Sinai, but he means a covenant of keeping God's love), while Sarah and Isaac represent a covenant of grace, a covenant of Jesus Christ? It is true that law and grace still define much of who we are as Christians and particularly as reformed Christians, practitioners of the Presbyterian faith. It is wide and broad and cannot be nailed down, but it is filled with law and grace. Law is what we expect; it's predictable. Grace, on the other hand, is always a surprise. It always catches us off guard. If you ever become comfortable with grace, you've lost your way and you are far from the Gospel.

This story about Hagar and Sarah is about God's blessings. God promises to make Abraham father of a great nation, a nation that would help other peoples of the earth. Remember back in Chapter 18 when Sarah first heard this promise? She laughed out loud. So guess what, when she finally gave birth to Isaac, she named him "son of laughter." That's what Isaac means.

Today we read the story of Sarah who is prone to temper tantrums. Sarah sees Abraham's first-born, Ishmael, and we're not sure exactly what the words mean in Hebrew because the text is sort of mixed up, but it either means she saw Ishmael laughing with Isaac or laughing at Isaac, teasing him, or she saw Ishmael being a little too much like Isaac. (Is there anything more terrifying than a tigress who is defending or protecting her children?) Sarah convinces Abraham to banish this perceived threat, Ishmael; banish him away so that she can protect her son. Only after God reassures Abraham that Ish-

mael will also be a father to a great nation, is Abraham willing to comply with Sarah's rants.

Do you remember your Sunday school lessons well enough to connect all of this together? Abraham has Isaac, Isaac has Jacob, Jacob has Joseph, and Joseph has a coat of many colors. Right? Do you realize at the end of Genesis, when Joseph is rescued by the Egyptians, it is Ishmael's family, his decedents? I know that lots of people like to draw lines and say that Ishmael is the father of Islam and that Isaac is our ancestral patriarch, but there can be no Israel without an Ishmael. For those seven years of famine surely had wiped out Jacob's family.

The intrigue and the similarities between the Ishmael story and the Isaac story help us today, and they're fun if you really look at the detail. Remember, Abraham is going to offer Isaac for a sacrifice. He's going to the wilderness. Hagar is sent to the wilderness. Remember the bush that has the ram in it for Abraham and the bush under which Ishmael lies? Remember the angel coming to Abraham and giving a promise? You read this morning the only time in the Bible that God ever makes a promise to build a great nation was to a woman, Hagar. That's the only time. It's always to the men that God makes these promises. This morning you read about Hagar receiving that promise, the only matriarch who has that message from God.

You see, Ishmael is as much a part of God's plan for our salvation as Abraham, Isaac, or Sarah. That message for us is about what we will trust. We still struggle with our trust in a God of law and grace. We're still confused and we still tend to choose one or the other. But what happens to our heroine this morning when she has given out her last drop of water in that skin to Ishmael. She cannot bear to see him die; and the last ounces of water she has in her body, she offers up as tears. She is completely without hope. The story is so similar to Abraham's and to ours. God speaks a promise, and we are given the choice to trust in the grace of the Holy Spirit. Sarah, Abraham, Hagar, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, even Joseph—they're all our spiritual heroes and they all have feet of clay the same way that we do.

So how will we respond to our next spiritual crisis? How will we respond the next time we feel enslaved by fear, worried about the future? Sarah is the epitome of God's grace in her life. She's the free woman, and yet she's enslaved by her temper and by the laws because she knows that Ishmael is just as entitled to the inheritance as Isaac. Or will we respond like Hagar—the exile, the rejected, the outcast—who though she was a slave, was set free to trust in God's promise? A promise of grace for her and her family when she looked up over her tears and saw that well, she saw hope for the future. Wells are found in communities, and Hagar found her son's future in the community associated with that well—the Egyptians that would save the nation of Israel. Here's the way it works: slaves and their children spend most of their time worrying about what not to do; but free women and their children, if they worry about anything at all, they worry about what is possible.

What defines your spirituality? Are you still enslaved to fear? Are you worried about what not to do, what not to be? Are you still worried about what will happen if your children trust in God's promises? We want them to know God's promises, but we're really

surprised when they do trust in them, when their values and their goals are so much higher than our own. What are the voices that you identify with? Are they the ones that lead us further and further away from the Gospel?

I'll admit it—I'm so excited about this new moderator of the 218th General Assembly, The Reverend Bruce Reyes-Chow, and the way he talks. I'm so excited that he's not afraid to be a real person. I see in this story this morning, and I see for the first time, maybe (I may be maligned for this), a General Assembly that has a hope for doing something positive. If we trust that the law has been fulfilled perfectly in Jesus Christ, then we can be free to dream what is possible for ourselves, for our families, for our congregation, for our community, and for our world. If we could just be free enough to trust that it is the grace of Christ that has perfected what the law intended, we no longer have to be bound by our worries and our fears. What a great day for Hagar and what a great day for Bruce Reyes-Chow and the Presbyterian Church. There is hope and God guarantees our future. Amen.