

Genesis 16:1-16 - “This Is My Son: Ishmael”

Midweek Advent II - 2022 (adapted from CPH series)

Last Sunday I spoke about one of Abraham’s more shining moments when he faithfully and humbly obeyed the LORD, who told him to offer his only son, Isaac, on a mountain in Moriah as a *burnt offering* (Genesis 22:2), trusting that the LORD could “*raise him from the dead*” (Hebrews 11:19). In this evening’s OT reading from Genesis, Abram did not shine when he listened to his wife, Sarai and fathered a son through their Egyptian servant, Hagar. Abram and Sarai, whom we know better as Abraham and Sarah, became tired of waiting for God to fulfill His promise ten years earlier that Abraham would be the father of many nations (which is what the name Abraham means, “the father of many nations”). They were 75 and 65 years old when God first made that promise, and now they were 85 and 75 years old and they weren’t getting any younger. Maybe they needed to take matters into their own hands.

So Sarah came up with a plan. Perhaps thinking that since the promise was made to Abraham, and she was barren, maybe the promise could be fulfilled through Abraham and another woman who wasn’t barren. So Sarah offers to Abraham her Egyptian servant, Hagar. Perhaps he could have children through her (which was an accepted practice among the people of that time). Abraham listened to Sarah, and Hagar becomes pregnant. It worked! Or so it seemed.

It didn’t take too long for it to become apparent why God intended marriage to be between one man and one woman. Hagar, who was blessed with a child, began to look with contempt upon Sarah, who was still barren. Sarah in turn treats Hagar “*harshly*” causing Hagar to “*flee*.” But the angel of the LORD convinces Hagar to return to Sarah, after which Hagar gives birth to Ishmael. But the LORD later made it clear to Abraham that despite Abraham and Sarah’s efforts to fulfill the LORD’s promise through Ishmael, Ishmael was not the promised son.

God deals with Abraham and Sarah’s sinful impatience in an extremely patient, and forgiving way. Even though their sinful actions would bring unnecessary pain and suffering to them and their future descendants in this world, just like Adam and Eve’s sin, their sins would not stop God from fulfilling His original promise.

In the next chapter God tells Abraham, “*Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac*” (Genesis 17:19). That promise was fulfilled when Abraham was 100 years old, and Sarah was 90.

When it comes to the blessings and promises of God, like Abraham and Sarah, think at times that we have to take matters into our own hands when things don’t happen as quick as we would like. At such times we may see ourselves as hero’s who will prevent the church from suffering and help it to grow. In reality, we often bring about more strife than we can imagine.

In the book of Galatians, Paul repeatedly demonstrated the foolishness of this thinking. “*For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse...Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for ‘The righteous live by faith’*” (Galatians 3:10a-11), not by what we see as our good works.

In our Epistle reading from Galatians 4, Paul adds to this truth with an illustration from Hagar and Sarah. *“Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these two women are two covenants. One is Mount Sinai [where the Law was given], bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar...she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother.”*

In other words, Ishmael was the product of what Abraham and Sarah considered their good works, their faith in themselves, which enslaves and condemns us. On the other hand, Isaac was the product of God’s promise, which sets us free. Ishmael was a natural child of man. Isaac was a miracle child of God.

God called Abraham and Sarah to trust in His promise and live not by what they thought was best, but by faith in Him. God would fulfill His promise His way, according to His plan, not ours. And though God’s plan seemed impossible, Sarah gave birth to the son God promised, Isaac.

Paul then explains, *“Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise...not children of the slave but of the free woman.”* The same is true for you and me. All those who live by faith, not by works, are also sons of the promise, sons of Abraham, and receivers of God’s blessings.

But it’s not faith in Isaac that brings the blessings of God’s salvation. It is faith in a future son of Abraham and the Son of God, Jesus Christ. Jesus birth was even more miraculous than Isaac’s, not through an old barren woman but through a virgin.

As we heard last Sunday, Isaac was lead by his father up a mountain to be sacrificed, similar to Jesus being lead by His Father up the same mountain also to be sacrificed. But unlike Isaac, God the Father didn’t stop those who nailed Jesus to a cross. Jesus fulfilled God’s judgement against our sins, including our sins of impatience. As Jesus said on the cross, *“It is finished!”* Our salvation is complete in Him. *“For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith”* (Galatians 3:26). And if we are sons of God in Christ, we are also sons of Abraham, and sons of the promise which God made to Abraham, and therefore part of the many nations who will be saved.

How do we as the saved sons and daughters of Abraham live our lives in relation to others? We keep on returning to God for forgiveness when it comes to our sinful impatience and pride. Then, being confident of God’s promise of forgiveness in Jesus Christ, we continue to serve God and others as humble servants who use the gifts God gives us in ways that demonstrate the same forgiveness and love of God. We don’t pound people with the words and ways of God like a hail storm, but we shower them with words and actions that are more like a warm, gentle rain, melting their frozen hearts through the love and promises of God, which are fulfilled in His Son.

All glory be to God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.