

Week 5, Sunday: The Birth of Ishmael
Genesis 15:7-21; 16:1-16

For Journaling or Discussing with Another:

Read Genesis 15:7-21

There is a formal covenant-sealing ritual going on here. Notice that Abram prepares for the ritual (he gathers the animals, cuts them in two, and keeps birds of prey away); however when the actual ritual is performed, God is the sole actor. This is a one-way covenant; Abram will be blessed with land and a future because God has promised. Later, however, God will also make a two-way, “if-then,” covenant with Abram’s descendants through Moses. If they keep God’s commandments, then it will go well for them, otherwise not. The Israelites will live in the tension of these two covenants. Yes, they will fail at times and face consequences, (epitomized by the Babylonian exile); however, no matter how far they stray, God keeps seeking them out and bringing them back into right relationship, (epitomized by the return from exile).

- Baptism may also be understood as a covenant-sealing ritual where God is the enactor of a one-way covenant. What does God promise us in baptism?
- How do we also live in a two-way, “if-then,” relationship with the risen Christ who calls us to follow?
- What might be consequences for seeking to go our own way?

Read Genesis 16:1-6

This is a troubling story. Hagar is not consulted; she offers no consent. Hagar is treated as property, an underlying sin of patriarchy. Also, notice how Abram continues to waver between trust and mistrust. There is a pattern: when God shows up and speaks words of promise, Abram trusts; but then as soon as God departs, Abram’s faith begins to waver. In this story of mistrust, Abram and Sarai are taking matters into their own hands. How foolish, as it brings pain to Hagar, and messy complications in all their relationships.

- How do you judge Sarai’s behavior? And Abram’s?
- Who are the ‘Hagars’ of the world now?
- What do you consider to be the underlying sins of patriarchy?

Read Genesis 16:7-16

The angel of the Lord instructs Hagar to return to Abram and Sarai, but then speaks words of promise declaring that Hagar too shall be blessed with a multitude of descendants. Hagar will eventually be sent away for good (chapter 21); and therefore, her child and descendants will grow up “outside” of the Israelite community and the Jewish faith that will grow through Sarah and Abraham’s offspring. Many consider Ishmael and his mother Hagar to be ancestors of certain Arab peoples, including the prophet Muhammad. Thus, Jews, Muslims and Christians all trace their ancestry to Abraham.

- What do you believe to be God’s promises to all people?
- What do you believe to be God’s promises to Jews, Muslims, and Christians?
- What do you believe to be God’s promises unique to Christians?
- What do you believe to be God’s promises unique to Christians who seek to follow Jesus, rather than simply their own way?

Continued blessings engaging Genesis, Tom Maehl, First Lutheran Church, Waltham, MA

Week 5, Monday: Named

Scripture: *When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, 'I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.' Then Abram fell on his face; and God said to him, 'As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you, and to your offspring after you, the land where you are now an alien, all the land of Canaan, for a perpetual holding; and I will be their God.'* (Genesis 17:1-8)

Reflection: God appears to Abram again; it's been 24 years since God first appeared when Abram was seventy-five. Once again God restates the promise of a child; yet this time God gives him a new name. He was Abram, meaning "exalted father," now he shall be Abraham, "Father of a multitude." The promised child still has not been born, and Abraham will not see a multitude of descendants in his lifetime (just a few), but the name that God gives him will now powerfully shape his identity.

Other names in the Bible will also convey meaning: Moses means "to be drawn out of water," David means "beloved," Jesus from the same root as Joshua means "to deliver" or "he saves." There is something of our identity that can be conveyed in our names and titles; at the same time, they do not completely define us. When Jesus was baptized, he came out of the water and heard God declaring his core identity, "*You are my beloved in whom I am well pleased.*" God still declares these words in the waters of baptism. You too, at the core of your being, are God's beloved.

To Ponder:

- How does your name (first, middle, and/or last) convey part of your identity?
- How does your identity as God's beloved also influence your sense of being?

Prayer: We give you thanks, O God, that through water and the Holy Spirit you give us new birth, cleanse us from sin, and raise us to eternal life. Stir up in [me and] all your people the gift of your Holy Spirit: the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord, the spirit of joy in your presence, both now and forever. (Affirmation of Baptism, ELW page 237)

Week 5, Tuesday: Marked

Scripture: *God said to Abraham, 'As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. Throughout your generations every male among you shall be circumcised when he is eight days old, including the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring. Both the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money must be circumcised. So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male who is not circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin shall be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.'* (Genesis 17:9-14)

Reflection: God declares that the ritual of circumcision will mark Abraham's descendants as belonging to the people of promise. Note, although physically it will mark the male descendants only, culturally it will mark everyone as the whole community, male and female, will be identified as the people who practice circumcision.

For Christians, circumcision is no longer required, we are freed from the demands of Jewish law. At the same time, we too have a ritual of incorporation into the community. We are identified as the people who practice baptism. Through our ritual, we do not end up with a physical mark in our own bodies; however, in a way we are marked. Recall how the resurrected Christ bore marks in his body, scars in his hands and feet. As part of the Christian community we become part of his scarred body.

The location of the physical marks bears significance. For the descendants of Abraham, the physical mark will be on the male organ of reproduction. For them reproduction will be essential for survival, as they are (in the world of the Biblical story) but one competing tribe among many. So too, reproduction will be essential for the fulfillment of God's promise of numerous descendants.

For the body of Christ, the physical marks are on the hands and the feet. For us, hands and feet are essential. In the Gospel stories, it is through human hands that God in Jesus touches and heals the sick and suffering; and it is through human feet that God in Jesus crosses borders. We are now the body of Christ. It is our hands Christ seeks to use in order to touch and heal, and our feet to cross borders.

To Ponder:

- To whom might God be calling you to reach out?
- What boundary might God be calling you cross?

Prayer: Jesus calls us, o'er the tumult of our life's wild, restless sea,
Day by day his clear voice sounding, saying, "Christian follow me."
In our joys and in our sorrows, days of toil and hours of ease,
Still he calls, in cares and pleasures, "Christian love me more than these."
(“Jesus Calls us; O’er the Tumult, text by Cecil Francis Alexander, ELW #696)

Week 5, Wednesday: Waiting

Scripture: *God said to Abraham, 'As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall give rise to nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.' Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed, and said to himself, 'Can a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?' And Abraham said to God, 'O that Ishmael might live in your sight!' God said, 'No, but your wife Sarah shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. As for Ishmael, I have heard you; I will bless him and make him fruitful and exceedingly numerous; he shall be the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation. But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this season next year.' And when he had finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham.*

Then Abraham took his son Ishmael and all the slaves born in his house or bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's house, and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskins that very day, as God had said to him. Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. And his son Ishmael was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin. That very day Abraham and his son Ishmael were circumcised; and all the men of his house, slaves born in the house and those bought with money from a foreigner, were circumcised with him.
(Genesis 17:15-27)

Reflection: When the story began, Abraham was 75 (Genesis 12:4). Now he is nearly 100. For Abraham and Sarah it has been 25 years of waiting. "Trust me, and keep waiting," is God's repeated word. Think for a moment of life in increments of twenty-five years; that's four quarters should one live to be one-hundred. In the first quarter we move from childhood through adolescence. This quarter is marked by our dependence upon our parents or guardians, and by schooling. In this quarter, even as we hopefully rejoice in life, still we are waiting to see if God will give birth to a fruitful adulthood.

The second quarter of life, roughly between 25 and 50, is marked by leaving home and engaging a vocation. This is also the quarter when we tend to accumulate: house or apartment, perhaps a partner, maybe children, furnishing, hobbies, etc. In this quarter, even as we embrace the joys and complexities of life, still we are waiting to see if God will give us some sort of stable mid-life.

The third quarter, roughly between 50 and 75, is when, if spiritually mature, we start letting go. In this quarter, even as we may mellow and savor life, still we are waiting to see what is going to happen to aging bodies. This is the time we also begin thinking more about death, and the question, "*Will I die having lived well?*" is now part of our waiting. Then, finally, in the fourth quarter, everything is eventually let go of or taken from us. For those who have done their spiritual work in the former quarters, they are no longer worried about their own life, it is so wrapped up in God; even as, with deep concern for those who will follow, they may patiently seek to pass on some of the wisdom they have received. Now they wait for death.

God's promises come to fruition every day. Still, waiting upon God's promises is our life work.

To Ponder: What aspect of your future do you lift to God in prayer today?

Prayer: Soon we'll reach the shining river, soon our pilgrimage will cease; soon our happy hearts will quiver with the melody of peace. Yes, we'll gather at the river, the beautiful, the beautiful river; gather with the saints at the river that flows by the throne of God.

(*"Shall We Gather at the River*, text Robert Lowery, ELW #423)

Week 5, Thursday: Hospitality

Scripture: *The LORD appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them, and bowed down to the ground. He said, 'My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on—since you have come to your servant.' So they said, 'Do as you have said.' And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah, and said, 'Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes.' Abraham ran to the herd, and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared, and set it before them; and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.*

They said to him, 'Where is your wife Sarah?' And he said, 'There, in the tent.' Then one said, 'I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son.' And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, 'After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?' The LORD said to Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh, and say, "Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?" Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.' But Sarah denied, saying, 'I did not laugh'; for she was afraid. He said, 'Oh yes, you did laugh.' (Genesis 18:1-15)

Reflection: This story begins with two perspectives: the narrator's looking backward, and Abraham's looking forward. In verse one we read, "**The Lord** appeared to Abraham." The narrator, looking back, has come to understand that the strangers were in fact The Lord (Yahweh) and two angels (later identified in Genesis 19:1). In verse two we read, "*Abraham looked up and saw three **men** standing near him.*" Abraham is looking forward, and from that perspective what he sees standing before him are unknown strangers. Abraham and Sarah offer them hospitality, and in so doing the presence of God is revealed and they are blessed.

Opportunities for extending hospitality continually arise, new neighbors move in, guests appear in our churches, others come to our national borders thirsty and hungry. Surely we're not being called to lay down all other responsibilities and offer Abrahamic hospitality to everyone; but perhaps this story is calling us to look upon the stranger with new eyes and expectations. In every generation, God is revealed through acts of hospitality.

Over 100 years ago, in The Quest for the Historical Jesus, Albert Schweitzer wrote, "He comes to us as One unknown, without a name, as of old, by the lake side, He came to those who knew Him not. He speaks to us the same word: "Follow thou me!" and sets us to the tasks which He has to fulfill for our time. He commands. And to those who obey Him, whether they be wise or simple, He will reveal Himself in the toils, the conflicts, the sufferings which they shall pass through in His fellowship, and, as an ineffable mystery, they shall learn in their own experience Who He is."

To Ponder: When has welcoming a stranger blessed you?

Prayer: Spirit of God, descent upon my heart; wean it from earth, through all its pulses move,
Stoop to my weakness, strength to me impart, and make me love you as I ought to love.
I ask no dream, no prophet ecstasies, no sudden rending of the veil of clay,
No angel visitant, no op'ning skies; but take the dimness of my soul away.
(“Spirit of God, Descend upon My Heart,” text by George Croly, ELW #800)

Week 5, Friday: Prayer

Scripture: *Then the men set out from there, and they looked towards Sodom; and Abraham went with them to set them on their way. The LORD said, 'Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, seeing that Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? No, for I have chosen him, that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice; so that the LORD may bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.' Then the LORD said, 'How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin! I must go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me; and if not, I will know.'*

So the men turned from there, and went towards Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the LORD. Then Abraham came near and said, 'Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?' And the LORD said, 'If I find at Sodom fifty righteous in the city, I will forgive the whole place for their sake.' Abraham answered, 'Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five?' And he said, 'I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there.' Again he spoke to him, 'Suppose forty are found there.' He answered, 'For the sake of forty I will not do it.' Then he said, 'Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak. Suppose thirty are found there.' He answered, 'I will not do it, if I find thirty there.' He said, 'Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there.' He answered, 'For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it.' Then he said, 'Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak just once more. Suppose ten are found there.' He answered, 'For the sake of ten I will not destroy it.' And the LORD went his way, when he had finished speaking to Abraham; and Abraham returned to his place. (Genesis 18:16-33)

Reflection: Imagine haggling with God. The encounter is quite serious; in a world filled with injustice Abraham is calling God to act justly, instead of the other way around. At the same time, it's a bit amusing listening to Abraham haggle with God. The story invites us to ponder prayer.

We all must learn how to pray. Most learn by watching and listening to others, and then by trying out differing ways and seeing what fits. We each end up praying a bit differently; some more formally, others less so; some with lots of silence, others with many words; some are drawn to nature, art, music; others are drawn to devotional books or journals; and so on. We are *called* to pray, somewhere deep inside we know we *need* to pray, and we all must *learn how* to pray.

Learning how to pray is, in a way, a life-long endeavor. This passage from Genesis may serve as one of our teachers. It teaches us something about the one who prays and something about the God who listens to our prayers. As for the one who prays, notice how Abraham is both *bold* and *humble* at the same time. God does not rebuke Abraham's boldness, for God has chosen to be in relationship with him. Also note how God allows this relationship to influence decisions, Abraham's pleading changes God's mind and God's heart. Through Christ, God welcomes us into relationship. What was true for Abraham is true for us.

To Ponder: In what way do your practices of prayer include boldness, humility, and trust?

Prayer: Have we trials and temptations? Is there trouble anywhere? We should never be discouraged - take it to the Lord in prayer. Can we find a friend so faithful who will all our sorrows share? Jesus knows our every weakness - take it to the Lord in prayer.

(“What a Friend We Have in Jesus, text by Joseph Scriven, ELW #742)