

Isaac and Ishmael



Genesis 21:9 "But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, (the child) whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. So she said to Abraham, 'Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac.' The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son."

As I told you in last week's sermon, you are not going to want to miss Church this summer, because the theme threaded throughout the Old Testament readings from last week until the middle of November, are lives of the Patriarchs; the great

stories of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and then Joseph and then Moses. So that if you listen to the readings each week this summer you will hear the greater part of each of the Patriarch's stories. You will hear stories they didn't tell you about in Sunday School when you were younger, like this one today, the banishing of Hagar and Ishmael out into the desert.

So as we noted last week, God promised the great Patriarch Abraham and his descendants an inheritance in the land of Canaan, if they just believed in God's promises. Only Abraham and his wife Sarah didn't have any descendants, and they were already old, having left their home in the Ur of the Chaldees when Abraham was already 75 years old, and at a time when Sarah 'had ceased to be after the manner of women,' as the Bible says. Abraham's and Sarah's willingness, however, to believe this promise of God, that God would give them a new land for them and their descendants forever, and to act upon that promise in their old age, is a shining example of great faith and trust in God.

But after a while Abraham and Sarah began to doubt God's promise that Abraham would be the father of a great nation. In a story not told on Sundays, which occurred before last week's reading, before the arrival of the three mysterious visitors, Sarah had given to her husband Abraham, her servant, Hagar, so that he might conceive a son through her, who would then be Abraham's heir, all in order to fulfill God's promise (Later as

observed previously Jacob's wives Leah and Rachel will both do the same thing when they believe they are infertile). The doubts of Abraham and Sarah about God being able to keep his promise of children to this very old couple seem perfectly reasonable at their age. And Hagar did indeed give Abraham a son, named Ishmael, and Abraham, we are told again and again, loved Ishmael very much. We should also note from Genesis chapter 17 that when Abraham was 99 years old, he received from God the sign of the Covenant that God had made with Abraham and his descendants forever, namely, the practice of circumcision. 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 them, and Ishmael was 13 years old at the time of his circumcision, we are told.

Then as we saw in last week's familiar story from Sunday School, three mysterious strangers stopped at the tent of Abraham and Sarah on their way to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, and one of them promised that Sarah would be pregnant when he passed by again in the following year. Sarah, of course, laughed, but the last laugh was on her, for she who was thought to be old and barren, gave birth to Isaac during the next year, when she was 85 years old.

Which brings us to today's reading. Here Abraham has organized a feast to celebrate the day that Isaac was weaned.

Then we are told that Sarah saw Ishmael playing with her son Isaac. Now I always thought that the two boys were of similar age here, half-brothers simply playing together. But a careful reading of the Scriptures tell otherwise, for Ishmael was a teenager by this time, and Isaac only a toddler, a baby just weaned. Moreover the verse that reads "playing with her son" is problematic. The prepositional phrase "with her son" appears in the Greek Septuagint translation, but not in the ancient Hebrew texts we have. Moreover the Hebrew word translated here as "playing" is ambiguous, and can and often is translated as "mocking" in English. So did the Septuagint translator read the Hebrew word as "playing" and innocently added the clarification "with her son", while the original Hebrew suggested instead that the teenage boy Ishmael was mocking his much younger half-brother, bullying even. If so, then one better understands Sarah's response in today's reading. Sarah became immediately protective for her child, and protective of his inheritance. So she said to Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac." The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son, Ishmael, whom he loved very much. Yet Abraham gave into Sarah's requests and rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and

sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba, with few provisions to sustain them. Remember also that it is to Beer-sheba that Abraham returns after the attempted sacrifice of Isaac in next week's reading, while Abraham after that never returns to Sarah and his home with her by the oaks of Mamre in Canaan. Meanwhile, Hagar and Ishmael would have died there in the wilderness of Beer-sheba had God not interceded to save them both. And God promised Hagar in today's reading that Ishmael would become the father of a great nation, and Ishmael did indeed grow up and lived in the wilderness of Paran, on the northern edge of the peninsula of Saudia Arabia, and become the father of a great nation, the desert people, whom today we call the Arabs.

So the Patriarch Abraham in the end became the father of two great nations, one through Isaac, from whom Jews and Christians claim their inheritance, and one through Ishmael, through whom Muslims claim their Abrahamic inheritance. Indeed, the Prophet Mohamed is a direct descendant of Ishmael. And though little more is said of Ishmael in the Hebrew Scriptures, the Quran has lots of stories about him. For instance, according to the Quran and according to pre-Islamic tradition, Abraham took the child and his mother to Mecca and left them there assuming that God (Allah) would take care of them. Later Abraham and his son Ishmael will build a simple structure there, the

Ka'ba (literally 'the cube') as a center for the worship of God, a "House a pilgrimage for all men" devoted to Allah, which remains the focus of Islamic worship in Mecca to this very day. Nor, according to Islamic exegesis, is Ishmael bereft of his father's love and care. Indeed, Abraham came to visit Hagar and Ishmael a number of times according to the Quran. The Islamic version affirms that Ishmael was never rejected in favor of his younger half-brother Isaac

Isaac and Ishmael, who are seen here together in today's Hebrew Scripture reading, are not mentioned together again until they come together to bury their father Abraham in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron son of Zohar the Hittite, east of the oaks of Mamre, buried there next to his beloved wife, Sarah. But that is not the last we hear of Ishmael in the Hebrew Scriptures. Later in the stories of the Patriarchs, Esau, the son of Isaac, and brother of Jacob, will marry one of the Ishmael's daughters. And a generation later, Joseph, the son of Jacob, will be sold into slavery by his brothers to a wandering band of Ishmaelites.

So the banishment of Hagar and Ishmael marks the beginnings of the Islamic tradition and is accepted as the action of an unfathomable and all-knowing God/Allah. Sarah's harsh treatment of expelling Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness alone borders on cruelty. And Abraham, by accommodating her wishes, became an

accomplice to that sin. That is why God heard the voice of the boy Ishmael, as Hagar lifted up her voice and wept. In Genesis 16, after the birth of a son to Hagar, the angel of the LORD said to her, "Now you have conceived and shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael, for the LORD has given heed to your affliction. He shall be a wild ass of a man, with his hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against him; and he shall live at odds with all his kin." And Ishmael's conflict with his kin, between the Jews and the Arabs, continues to this very day, in the land which God promised the descendants of Abraham.

In next week's story. Abraham has a dream that tells him to go sacrifice his only son, but just as he was about to do so, God stops him. You will remember that one from Sunday School. Yet one of the key differences between the Hebrew Scriptures and the Quran concerns exactly which son it was who was to be sacrificed. Though the Quran never names the son, the Islamic tradition insists that the only time God could have talked about Abraham's "only son" was before the birth of Isaac, when Ishmael was Abraham's only son. Isaac, the Islamic tradition notes, on the other hand, was never Abraham's only son. And so the story and the struggle goes on, and you don't want to miss next week's chapter. Amen.