

**Sermon by The Rev. Dr. Gloria Hopewell**

***"Tough Tales"***

**Texts: Genesis 21: 8-21, Matthew 10: 24-39**

It has been thirty-five years since the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer* made it customary to include four lessons in each Eucharist—A reading and Psalm response from the Hebrew Scriptures, an Epistle and the Gospel from the New Testament. Still, the norm is to preach from the Gospel, and I find that we remain less familiar with the Hebrew Scriptures. Sometimes we simply ignore them as irrelevant, sometimes we more boldly discount them with mistaken notions we picked up somewhere along the line: that with the exception of a few things like the 10 Commandments and a few prophecies that we have “commandeered” to point to Jesus as Messiah, we can safely disregard them as something that does not apply to us. Or we say the stories are about the “Old Testament God”—the angry God unlike *our* more loving “New Testament God.

It is a shame, really. Because the Hebrew Scriptures are rich sagas and stories of human beings and their relationships with their God—their faith and trust in the one God, their mistakes and stumbles, their returns. Broad, overarching themes of covenant, promises, and new chances.

This summer, we have an opportunity to gallop through the book of Genesis—big bites, but hardly the whole thing. More of a sampler approach. It began last week with the long narrative of God’s creation of our earth, heavens, and all growing things. Today, we jump right into the Abraham and Sarah story, and the really good news today is that our texts did not show up on Fathers’ or Mothers’ Day! Neither Genesis nor the Gospel reading from Matthew are the kinds of stories we think of when celebrating our families. They do not resemble what our society has come to think of as “family values.” They certainly cast doubt on the claim that today’s marriage and family models have their basis in scripture!

The circumstances in the times of the Hebrew Bible were very different from those today—“being fruitful and multiplying” was crucial for survival and for building a people. As we see today, that need overrode sexual monogamy—with men, anyway. And, in his time, Jesus had little to say about families—mostly, he lifted up the wider family of God over his own biological family.

And that is the very hard message he gives us today: “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and ones’ foes will be members of one’s own household...” Yikes!

Let’s remember that this is part of Jesus’ teaching his disciples how they are to go forth to carry on his ministry. And there is a real urgency here—an urgency because he cares so much about God’s world and people. An urgency because he needs the disciples to know that this is not going to be a picnic and that they need to be clear about their priorities. No doubt their leaving behind family and livelihoods has caused friction and division. Though discipleship today might be less dangerous, there is still division. Whenever someone is passionate about beliefs and acts on them, whether in the family or in the church, it disturbs the peace and the patterns of relationships.

Just last week, at Bexley Seabury, one of the Doctor of Ministry students told his story of being called to ministry late in life. It was quite a costly thing for him—and for his extended family, who depended on him financially. Instead of continuing with work that brought in the steady paycheck, he was shelling out big bucks for seminary tuition—in his case, he had to finish a bachelor’s degree before taking the seminary courses. And then, he became a priest responsible for three small congregations in the panhandle of West Virginia, at least one of which resents having to pay him at all. The family thought he had lost his mind. (And frankly, there are echoes of that in what my own family thought!)

But this was exactly what Jesus called the disciples to do. Leave their fishing nets, their tax collections, their farming. Take up their cross and follow him.

Our Genesis saga is not one of peace and prosperity either. We know that when God showed up at the 11th hour in the wilderness of Beersheba and rescued Hagar and Ishmael from certain death, it wasn't God’s first appearance. God's presence and promises were a continuous strand in the lives and history of the tribe of Abraham and Sarah. And, that presence may be what kept these stories from being just political scandals or soap operas that created excitement for a time and then faded into oblivion.

There are, to be sure, all the elements of scandal: can you see the headlines in the *TH* or the *Gazette*? "LOCAL LEADER BANISHES FIRST-BORN SON AND SON'S MOTHER." "WIFE WANTS WHOLE INHERITANCE FOR *HER* SON." And, to tell the truth, Abraham is more than just the local leader. He is head of this whole ragged tribe that left home on the strength of God's mysterious command to go far away to an unknown land to establish a nation. Abraham is the one that the tribe depends on for their survival; the solid one, the rock, the one with a vision. More important maybe, than the president of the United States or even the Pope!

There would be photos along with these headlines, of course, especially on the front pages of the *Enquirer* and the *Star*. One, perhaps of a youngish, exotic-looking Egyptian woman—the slave and an old, wrinkled dowager—the wife--staring daggers at one another. Another of the "lavish" tent home of Abraham and Sarah with the downcast Hagar and Ishmael walking away with only a back pack and small cooler. And the saddest photo of all: big brother and little brother playing games with each other, like best friends.

All that a juicy soap opera needs is here, too—all of the characters for this drama: the stately and commanding man (but not quite as strong as he seems). His wife—age doesn't look as good on her. She should be the matriarch but for so many years was barren and, therefore, diminished in status. The surrogate mother—younger and beautiful, fertile but, being a slave, powerless with no choices for her life or the use of her body. The older son— the son of Abraham and *Hagar*. In the customs and practices of the times, he is not illegitimate. He is Abraham's and *Sarah's* first born, entitled to all property and inheritance rights. Then, finally, there is the baby, the miracle son of an elderly couple, the child of the promise whose very existence finally upsets the apple cart.

The story line goes something like this: Sarah has despaired of having her own child. After all, she is well past menopause. She knows of God's promise to Abraham: descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. But years go by without any evidence of fulfillment of that promise. And they just get older and older. So, it is her idea to give her slave to her husband for the purpose of bearing a child, take things into her own hands, bringing Hagar into the mix. This is perfectly acceptable practice, but she probably doesn't anticipate what her emotions will be—how she won't feel uplifted by this child as she expects but feels even more demeaned as she comes to believe (or to imagine) that Hagar is contemptuous to her. She treats Hagar badly. Very badly. Things just get worse after her own miracle baby is born. After the initial joy and celebration, her jealousy and resentment increase—and, most significantly, her fear that Ishmael, not Isaac, will inherit everything and carry on the family name. The story then, is one of money and status, human jealousy and conflict, class and oppression. Not such an ancient story, after all.

But I said that this story is not a soap opera, not a political scandal. It is something else entirely. The difference is that God plays a major role—God's activity in the world and how people respond and react; how God's actions impact this messy family fight. How God's interventions resolve it—or don't.

God's activity is evident from the first appearance of Abraham in Genesis. The series of promises that sent Abraham out with his livestock, and his family through unknown paths to Canaan, through wars and famine, and a detour to Egypt and back. The promises that

Abraham would be the founder of a great nation, a blessing to all families on earth. And, indeed, the patriarch of a multitude of descendants. Abraham's story is, after all, the very foundation of the faith history of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Jews and Christians believe themselves to be descended from Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac. Muslims from Abraham, Hagar, and Ishmael.

The thing is—God never said just how these promises would be fulfilled or when. And here is the problem. Sarah's taking things into her own hands might be considered impatience or lack of trust in God's promise. Or human initiative—trying to help God out. God's promises do have two sides, after all—the promise itself and the human response to it. Whatever it was, Sarah's action set into motion some very nasty stuff.

Whether God approved or did not approve of Sarah's solution to the problem, God did not abandon Hagar, even though she was a slave and not technically one of the "chosen" people. When she was pregnant and mistreated by Sarah, Hagar ran away but was sent back by God to bear the child. God did not just send her back to abuse but made her a promise, too. A promise that her son would also be the beginning of a multitude of descendants.

Twenty-five years altogether passed since leaving Haran before the great day that the son named Isaac, meaning "laughter," was born. By then, Abraham was 100 and Sarah, 90. And as Isaac grew, so did Sarah's jealousy grow bigger and bigger until she demanded the removal of Hagar and Ishmael from the household and community. Strangely, God dismissed Abraham's concerns and told him to go along with Sarah's desire. God would handle it. And, here is the heart-wrenching drama: the mother and her child sent out into the wilderness with just a bit of bread and a skin of water. The mother who, in her despair, moves away from the child and closes her eyes so she won't see him die. Her tears, the voice of God, and the opening of her eyes to see the life-giving well open the way to the promise.

It is not a happy story. Sarah, who lacked trust in God's promise, exploited, betrayed, and oppressed. Yet, in the end, she got what she wanted. God's promise to Abraham was kept. Doesn't seem fair, somehow. But God was also there in the desert. God heard the cries of Hagar and Ishmael. And more promises were made and fulfilled. For them, and for us, God is trustworthy. We are not promised instant gratification or even that the gifts we receive are what we had hoped for. We are not promised lives without pain and sorrow. Discerning God's desire for us is not easy—we may lose heart. We may fail to hear. We may lose faith that the promise is true. But it is. Amen.