

Sermon: Year A, Proper 7

Texts: Genesis 21:8-21

Romans 6:1b-11

Matthew 10:24-39

This week when I looked at the readings appointed for today, I suddenly realized just why it was that all the rest of the clergy on staff chose this time to be on vacation. It's not easy on a pleasant summer Sunday, when we are all inclined to enjoy a dose of summer's supple laziness to address the texts of the day: Hagar's exile and Jesus' stern warnings about the violence of the world and the seemingly harsh consequences of true love for God. The problem, however, is that we do claim that these are more than mere stories. We declare, if even by rote, that these texts are – that they offer us – the very word of the God, and thus, they can't really be conveniently dismissed, no matter what our mood or what's on our agenda. If the story of Hagar were just a short clip from the vast record of human history, something that happened long ago and far away, we could ignore it. If we were to read Matthew only to find a moral to the story, some rule or principle for our betterment, it could wait until another day. But these texts are Scripture, and therefore it is incumbent on us to spend a few moments pondering, perhaps, just what this means with regard to these specific passages. God is speaking to us here. How can we understand this?

I think, in part, hearing Scripture properly requires our adjusting our ears and minds to a different sense of dimension. The book of Genesis (and thus the Bible itself) begins with the dynamic description of the creation of the whole of our world. Time itself begins when the swirling chaos of nothingness is methodically transformed by God into an equally vast system of somethings, of everything that is. God calls forth. God divides, night from day, water from earth. God sets in place a spectacular, teeming array of creatures. And the point is clear: to be is to have distinction – form and identity. This is what is good, in direct contrast to formlessness, the inky, disintegration of things back into the void.

The whole of this story takes up two chapters. That's all. In a mere handful of verses the stupendous drama of cosmic ordering is fully concluded. Thereafter, there are no deep, sustained inquiries as to how and when, no painstaking investigations into the specific workings of nature and world. For almost immediately another drama takes over, and it is never displaced in prominence. The remaining forty-eight chapters in Genesis, sixty-five more books in the Bible, and 1500 pages of small print deal with this latter issue – which is the intensely uneasy relationship of God with the crown of God's creation. By the end of the third chapter of Genesis the essential crisis is revealed: we, who were to be the finest flower of all God's work, before a single generation had passed, became the chief dissemblers of all that is good. And with fairly exhausting predictability, our history has been the continuation of this rebellion: still, ever, we prove to be masters of degradation. The story of creation, in all its immensity, is drawn, thereby, into the even greater drama of salvation, the question of how this rupture between God and world will be resolved.

If we read the story of Hagar and Ishmael in this light, it ceases to be just an ancient story of tribal cruelty and banishment. Instead, it serves us as an profoundly archetypal reminder of our own present condition. The story is laced with human pettiness. Abraham, who had feared that he would have no heir with Sarah, fathered a son with Hagar, his servant. He had to preserve his

place as the chosen one through whom, alone, God would make a great nation. When Sarah gave birth to Isaac, by her demand, Hagar was sent out, to nowhere, to wander without connection. It was an action that resulted, finally, in her wrenching cries, lost in the wilderness, and in the pathetic cries of the child Ishmael, left to die alone because it was too painful for Hagar to witness his death. This is our lot. Their cries declare the suffering of humankind. They are our cries still. The strong still abuse the weak. The chosen still cut off others to secure their own place. In order to be someone, we still are inclined to deftly push others into the formless void of being no one.

Sarah's indifference and Hagar's despair, however, are countered by God. Hagar's cries do not fall to silence. They are heard. Just as Ishmael's cries, too, though altogether different, have been heard as well. God will not allow their simple disappearance. Abraham's election did not mean their rejection. God's love is not so bound and restricted. No. Rather, it is generous beyond all comprehension. Astoundingly, Hagar is told that a great nation will arise through Ishmael, too, breaking the logic that in greatness there can only be one who stands above all. God declares otherwise. There may be many. This is a generosity with which the whole rest of the Bible wrestles, which Israel struggles against, which we have trouble accepting still. But as Scripture, what this story announces is a reconciliation with God that exceeds even the scope of creation itself. Our most terrible anguish is answered by God who is able to do more than we can ask or imagine, redeeming where we, on our own, can see only exile and demise. We need this story as Scripture, as a powerful counter to all the ruptures in our own lives and in our terrorized world.

In like manner, when Jesus said that he did not come to bring peace, he did not mean by this that he came himself to wage war and, this time, with divine power, to contribute to the ruthless judgments of leaders. He did not mean that a religion that carried his name should set itself, violently, against the rest of the world, breathing threats of condemnation. True peace does not come by defeating others. It would come, said Jesus, only by his allowing others to expend their violence specifically against him. The sword that would be drawn would not be his own, but the swords of others raised in anger, raised by those who could not accept such generosity from God, shown in someone who dined with publicans and tax collectors, who cared for the least and the most despised, who claimed that they, too, despicable in the sight of others, were no less chosen and were, in fact, of the line of Abraham. In Jesus, God himself would be the one banished and abandoned, sent out to disappear. Here, in this one life, is the culmination of the entire, extended drama of the Bible: the creator, making himself vulnerable to the very creatures he created, is sentenced to absolute dissolution – to be buried as no one and as nothing. Which was done, but it did not finish the story.

Jesus' resurrection is the declaration of God's peace because, in him, violence has exhausted itself, without winning. Destruction doesn't accomplish its goal, nor can any form of degradation. For even death has been defeated, by the more resilient will of God to redeem every something that ever was called forth in creation. To read the Gospel as Scripture is to believe that Jesus' assurance that we need not fear anything is true of everything, no matter the circumstances. His salvation is the triumph of God for all of creation, for all time, without dissolution. This is the dimension that is hard to grasp, a redeeming that is so utterly comprehensive – because it was achieved so singularly, by God himself in the form of a single

human being. Yet this is the constant refrain of the Bible: not one servant, not one child, not one sparrow, not one hair from your head is as nothing. Each is an invaluable something to God.

Life is changed if we believe this in its fullness. We are given the freedom to honor the creation instead of abuse it, to embrace others instead of dismissing them, to love even our enemies, and, yes, on a lovely summer day, we are given the freedom, too, to settle deeply into the joy of laziness – which is to look around, at ease, and realize just how good and wonderful life is and how much we receive, generously, by God's providence – both now and, all the more, by the measure of God's eternity.

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