

The Third Sunday after Pentecost—Proper 7—Year A
Genesis 21:8-21
Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17
Romans 6:1b-11
Matthew 10:24-39

Boy, what a tough set of lessons! **The expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael, Paul's talk of dying with Christ, and another load of interpersonal conflict in the gospel.** What are we to make of all of this?

Let's start with **the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael.** I am grateful to Jeffrey Eastman for putting me onto an article by Aron Pinker who tackles this passage from a Jewish perspective. Suffice it to say, this passage has been as puzzling and problematic for rabbis and scholars throughout the ages as it is for us who hear it this morning.

In a nutshell, Pinker understands this story through the lens of *Hagar as a scorned woman* who makes destructive choices that endanger Ishmael, and she does this as *an act of revenge*, aimed especially at harming Abraham.

In this view, *Sarah* understands *Ishmael to be a threat to Isaac's claim to Abraham's inheritance.* Sarah seeks to remove that threat by asking Abraham to banish Hagar and Ishmael.

Abraham seeks to place Hagar and Ishmael nearby with relatives—this helps make sense of the fact that Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael off with limited provisions—they weren't going too far.

In Pinker's analysis, it is *Hagar* who takes a wrong turn in the desert, a self-destructive turn that she takes because her heart is broken. Yes, she was a maid-servant, but she had lived in Abraham's household for well over a decade now. She had won a piece of Abraham's heart—and now, she has to leave and know that the security that was to be hers and Ishmael's through Ishmael's claim to Abraham's inheritance, she has to leave and know that security *is gone?*

Broken hearts can turn bitter and brittle, and resentment can compel us to do unimaginable things, destroying us and those whom we love.

For Pinker, it is *hate*, pure and simple, *which makes Hagar take a turn in the wilderness*, moving deeper and deeper into this lost territory. Her provisions run out, and the deepest wound she, in her scorned state, could inflict on Abraham *would be the death of Ishmael*, whom Abraham loved. It's an awful scenario.

In this view, *Hagar disconnects from her deepest maternal instincts*, willing to forfeit her son to get *revenge.* **She can't look on the death of the child;** she distances herself from him, calling her son **"the child."** **Now, it isn't just Ishmael who needs saving, but Hagar as well.**

But *God won't let her go.* **God reaches out for her** and pulls her back into life, **tells her not to be afraid, tells her that he hears the cry of the boy. God calls her back to her boy, calls her to lift him up and hold him fast with her hand. God reminds her of the great vocation that will be his.** God opens her eyes to see the well of water in front of them. She goes over and fills the skin with water and gives the boy a drink.

And then we hear how God was with the boy and how he grows up to become an expert with the bow, and how Hagar herself will get him a wife from the land of Egypt, which is all about his future and the generations that will follow.

Pinker has given us quite an analysis. There are a lot of questions still left unanswered. Why was Sarah so engulfed in scarcity that she couldn't stand the thought of Abraham's inheritance being split between Isaac and Ishmael? Why was Abraham not able to stand in a place of abundance and assure Sarah that all would be well and that there was more than enough? Why did Abraham navigate all these divided loyalties as he did? But let's leave these questions for another day. Let's just work with the possibility that Pinker is right about Hagar. What can we learn from her response and actions?

Well, when *our hearts are broken*, when *the future we thought we'd have takes an unexpected turn*, when those to whom we've given our heart **cast us out**, it can completely undo us. And as we **wander in the wilderness**, we are fully capable of taking **self-destructive turns** that jeopardize those people or things most dear to us. *The desire to inflict revenge is such a deep part of our human experience.* We can all go there. But God is merciful, and God won't leave us to our own devices. **God calls out to us, "Don't be afraid." God will open our eyes to see a deeper source of life and vitality that can soothe the hurt we feel. God will gently reconnect us to our deepest being. "Hagar, you are a mother; come, give the boy a drink; revenge is not the way."**

Where are you feeling **resentment** so deep that you could destroy the people and things you hold most dear? Where are you taking **self-destructive turns** in the **wilderness**, choices that are driving you deeper and deeper into a place where you feel utterly **lost** and your **provisions for the journey are running out**? And when you sense that all that you love is dying, and you just **can't keep your eyes open** any more, **can you keep your ears tuned in**?

Even if your *eyes* are closed, can you trust that **your ears are still open and capable of hearing the voice of God calling out to you**? Can you risk hearing that **there is a well of life in front of you**, if you can just **lay your resentment and desire for revenge aside**?

Can you **allow God to gently reconnect you to your deepest being and take up that vocation again**?

Can you dare to believe that **a wide open future does indeed stretch out ahead of you, though not the future you thought you'd have**?

Can you allow God to **bind up the wounds in your broken heart and redirect that heart** in a new direction? Can you let that **old self**, full of resentment and revenge, **die**, so that you may be **raised with Christ and walk in newness of life**? Can we **die to sin, die to all those narratives and dramas inside of us that want to block the love that longs to flow through us**, can we **die to this sin** so that we might **no longer be enslaved to those patterns that seek to destroy others**?

The price of newness of life is only the willingness to die to the old one. Paul is right, **the old self has to be crucified** if we are to **discover our resurrected self**. This is the paradoxical

mystery that Jesus is trying to get us to understand today—**“Those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”**

*That’s what **Hagar** had to discover out there in that **self-destructive wilderness**; that’s what we have to discover in the **wilderness** that is ours to wander, and it doesn’t matter whether this wilderness is imposed upon us or of our own making.*

Even if we are blind to our piece of the madness, **God will whisper in our ears, “Do not be afraid. There is a way forward.” God will open our eyes to the waters that can reconnect us to our deepest meaning and call.**

And in time, that **wilderness will be the place where we can thrive**. It was the very place where **Ishmael discovered that he was expert at the bow, and Hagar got to watch that transformation unfold**. It was the very place that **Hagar got to reclaim that part of herself that she was willing to destroy**, and in reclaiming that part of herself, she did her part to stitch back together that complicated fabric of relationships with Abraham and Sarah and Isaac and Ishmael that had gotten so torn. **When Abraham dies, Isaac and Ishmael will stand side-by-side to bury their father in the cave of Machpelah where Sarah had been buried years before.**

Who knows what might happen in our lives when we let **God lift our resentments and desire for revenge**? Who knows what **new life** might be born in us? Who knows what **relationships** might be **reconciled** and **restored** somewhere down the road?

Nothing is impossible with God, and even in our darkest, most vengeful nights in our deepest wilderness, **God won’t ever let us go**. Amen.

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