

## SERMON FATHER'S DAY/ NATIONAL INDIGENEOUS DAY OF PRAYER

### “Even when we mess up” based on Genesis 21: 8-21

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This passage begins with a family celebration, I'm guessing it's a party. Isaac has been weaned—the transition of a child from nursing on breast milk to eating solid foods—and Abraham throws a great feast to mark the occasion.

What should have been a joyful day, however, quickly turns into a painful one. As its written:

*“But Sarah saw that the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham was mocking, and she said to Abraham, ‘Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that woman’s son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.’” (Gen. 21:9)*

Apparently, during the party, Ishmael did something that Sarah perceived as mocking. Either he did it intentionally or not, we don't know because the text does not tell us exactly what happened. The word is vague. Whatever Ishmael did, however, it touched a deep and sensitive nerve within Sarah.

And perhaps this was never really about one moment at the party. Perhaps it was about years of unresolved jealousy and insecurity. After all, Ishmael was Abraham's firstborn son. Every time Sarah looked at him, she may have been reminded of her own long years of disappointment.

What makes this situation even more tragic is that Sarah herself had set this chain of events in motion. If you know the story, you may remember that it was Sarah's idea in the first place for Abraham to have a child through Hagar.

Years earlier, God had promised Abraham descendants. But as the years passed and Sarah remained childless, her patience began to wear thin. Looking at her circumstances, she

concluded that perhaps God needed a little help. The God who created heaven and earth, the God for whom nothing is impossible, surely did not need her assistance—but Sarah thought otherwise. Instead of waiting for God’s promise to unfold in God’s time, she took matters into her own hand.

*"So Sarai said to Abram, "The LORD has prevented me from having children. Go and sleep with my servant. Perhaps I can have children through her." (Genesis 16:2) NLT*

What I found interesting here is that nowhere in the story we are told that Abraham and Sarah sought God's guidance before taking this step. They simply acted. They saw a problem, devised a solution, and moved forward with their own plan.

Now, I want us to pause and reflect here, isn't that often our story as well?

There are moments when God's promises seem slow in coming. We pray, we wait, we hope—and nothing appears to change. The waiting becomes uncomfortable. The uncertainty becomes exhausting. And before long, we begin to think that perhaps God needs our help. So, we take matters into our own hands.

We start pushing doors open that God has not opened. We rush ahead of God's timing. We trust our own wisdom more than His guidance. And we convince ourselves that our plan is the best way to accomplish what God has promised.

And unfortunately, often our attempts to "help God" create complications we never anticipated.

From the story, Abraham and Sarah's decision produced consequences that would affect not only them but also Hagar, Ishmael, Isaac, and generations to come. What began as an effort to solve a problem ultimately created new wounds, new conflicts, and new pain.

The story continues, and after hearing Sarah's demand to kick-out Hagar and Ishmael, Abraham is deeply troubled.

*"The matter distressed Abraham greatly because it concerned his son. But God said to him, 'Do not be so distressed about the boy and your slave woman. Listen to whatever Sarah tells you, because it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned. I will make the son of the slave into a nation also, because he is your offspring.'" (Genesis 21:11–13)*

Here we see God intervening. God assures Abraham that His covenant promise will continue through Isaac, but He also makes it clear that Ishmael has not been forgotten. God promises that Ishmael, too, will become a great nation because he is Abraham's son.

Yet even with God's reassurance, this story remains difficult to read. At least for me, I still find myself uncomfortable. Yes, Abraham is distressed. Yes, God has spoken. And yes, God has promised to care for Ishmael. But still, the scene is heartbreaking. A mother and her son are sent away with very little, no clear destination, and an uncertain future.

As modern readers—and especially on a day when we celebrate fathers—we cannot help but ask difficult questions. Why doesn't Abraham do more? Why doesn't he provide better protection? Why doesn't he accompany them at least part of the way?

And the text unfortunately does not answer all those questions.

Sure enough, no sooner had they left than they were confronted with a harsh reality: the little water they had was running out, and there was no sign of help in the wilderness.

*"When the water in the skin was gone, she placed the boy under one of the bushes. Then she went off and sat down about a bowshot away, saying to herself, 'I cannot watch the boy die.' And as she sat there, Hagar began to sob." (Gen. 21: 15-16).*

As we hear this, I want us to look at the image on the slide, which captures this moment in the wilderness.

Abraham and Sarah's earlier decision to include Hagar in the story has consequences that now affect not only them, but also Ishmael. In one sense, Ishmael is not part of the line of promise as God's covenant purpose is carried through Isaac. But, that does not make Ishmael disposable. What Sarah tried to cast aside; God refuses to abandon. As it's written:

*"<sup>17</sup> God heard the boy crying, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What is the matter, Hagar? Do not be afraid; God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. <sup>18</sup> Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation."<sup>19</sup> Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. So she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink. <sup>20</sup> God was with the boy as he grew up." (Gen 21:17-20a)*

Thankfully, God listened and God cares.

Friends, here we see Hagar, a slave who becomes vulnerable the moment she is no longer useful to Abraham and Sarah. And this reminds us of something important: that the Bible does not pretend that its heroes are perfect. Abraham and Sarah were people of faith, but they were also flawed human beings, just like us. Scripture tells the truth about both their faith and their failures that cause Hagar and Ishmael ended up thirsty and scared in the desert.

Yet even when people hurt one another, even when human mess up, God does not walk away. God still sees. God still hears. God still acts. And even in the wilderness, God is present.

It reminds me of situations when we're following a GPS to reach a certain destination. Do you have experience when it tells us to turn at a certain street, and because we're not concentrating, we miss the turn and go off in the wrong direction? Or even worse, because

maybe we think, “This machine is wrong; I know a better route.” And we ended up lost or trapped in construction or bad traffic? We as driver messed up sometimes.

Thankfully, GPS have no electronic hissy fit and say “I refuse to work with human who don’t listen.” It just simply recalculates. It takes into account where you actually are right now, rather than where it wanted you to be, and it plots another route for you to get where you supposed to be.

And God has always been like that. Even when we wander off course, even when we make mistakes, God does not abandon us. God continues to guide us, work with us, and lead us forward. Abraham and Sarah are a reminder of that. The Bible does not present them as perfect saints or flawless heroes. It tells their story honestly—their faith, their doubts, their successes, and their failures. And that is good news, because none of us are perfect either.

Of course, that does not mean we excuse their failures. Abraham and Sarah's lack of compassion is not an example for us to follow, nor does it give us permission to act the same way. Rather, it reminds us that God's faithfulness is greater than human weakness. Even when people fail, God continues to see, to hear, and to act.

God is not waiting for perfect people with everything in order. Again and again, the Bible shows that God works through imperfect lives and messy situations—because that is the only kind of material the church has ever had to offer.

And as we close our reflection time today, besides Father’s Day, we also remembering National Indigenous Day of Prayer. And this story carries a particularly painful resonance. In Canada, history reminds us how often Indigenous families, especially in the era of the Hudson’s Bay Company, abandoned and mistreated. While there are faithful exceptions, too often the pattern reflects the same vulnerability we see in Hagar and Ishmael: lives held loosely, and people left exposed.

Yet the heart of the gospel is this: God is a defender of the widow and the orphan, the vulnerable and the forgotten. God does not overlook Hagar and Ishmael; God sees them, hears them, and provides for them. And in Jesus we see this even more clearly. He consistently draws near to those pushed to the margins: tax collectors, lepers, Samaritans, sinners.

So now, if God sees those whom others cast aside, if God hears the cry in the wilderness, then how can the church do anything less? Friends in Christ, we are called to refuse the logic of disposability and instead stand with the marginalized, the forgotten, and the wounded.

And perhaps the most searching question is personal: where are the Hagers and Ishmaels in our world today? The invisible people. The overlooked. The ones we are tempted to pass by. Jesus says, "Whatever you did to the least of these, you did to me." So as we go from here, may we learn to notice what we so easily overlook, to recognize the faces we have learned not to see, and to respond with the compassion of Christ when they are right in front of us.

Amen.