

Sermon for Proper 7A  
Sunday, June 25, 2017  
“God hears”

Text: Genesis 21:8-21

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

During Ordinary Time, the lectionary usually offers a choice between two sets of readings, and that choice usually determines what the Old Testament reading will be. One option presents the OT readings in a sequential fashion, regardless of what the other two readings are, and the other jumps around the OT so that there is some connection to the epistle and gospel readings. Normally here at All Saints, we follow the latter option, in which all three readings and the collect of the day complement each other. But today, we have chosen the Old Testament reading from the other option, because the guest preacher for the 11 AM Mass wanted to use this reading in her message to us for Women’s Day, since this passage involves two important women of the Bible: Sarah and Hagar. I’m taking the opportunity to speak to you briefly on a passage of Scripture that I would not normally get to talk about in our lectionary cycle.

This is a rich story with what I think is a useful message to us: that regardless of our circumstance, God hears us and takes care of us. The story begins right after the birth of Abraham’s second son, Isaac. That was a miraculous occurrence, because both Sarah and Abraham were up in years—they were old—and had all but given up on having children, until God finally answered Sarah’s prayers and blessed her with Isaac. But Abraham already had another son, Ishmael, who was the product of Abraham having relations with his wife’s Egyptian slave, Hagar. Now if you don’t remember how that story went, let me break it down because it relates to today’s story. Back in Chapter 16 of Genesis, Sarah (who was called Sarai at the time), believing herself to be barren was getting old, so, as the scripture tells us, Sarai “gave” Hagar to Abraham as a wife and she got pregnant. But then Hagar went and bragged about it—she flaunted her pregnant state; she looked with contempt on her mistress, Sarai, we are told. Well, that just ticked Sarai off, and ever since there was bad blood between Sarah and Hagar. Sarai “dealt harshly with her” and threw her out. And while Hagar was hanging out by a spring in the wilderness, an angel of the Lord told her that she was to bear a son and

name him Ishmael, but he also said that he would 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.”

Now fast forward to today’s story. After years of praying, and hoping, and eventually losing hope, Sarah (that was Sarai, but then God changed her name, as he often did), Sarah conceived, despite her old age, named him Isaac, which means ‘he laughs’ because God brought Sarah laughter and joy in bearing a child. Now as the story goes, the day Isaac was weaned, Abraham made a great feast. In Biblical times, it was common for infants to nurse for a few years and the day that a child was weaned was cause for celebration, as it represented a new stage of development, especially for a boy. So Abraham threw a party! Then the story says, “But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian...playing with her son Isaac.” You know when a sentence starts with “but” something’s gone wrong—something is awry. You see, Ishmael wasn’t simply playing with Isaac, he was mocking him, laughing at him, maybe he was even bullying him. Interestingly enough, the verb root that was translated as “playing” is the same root from which Isaac got his name. And remember there was already bad blood between Sarah and Hagar, so once again Sarah asked Abraham to throw Hagar out, which deeply troubled Abraham. Then, as he was helping Hagar pack for her departure, God spoke to Abraham, telling him to do as Sarah asked, because through Isaac, “offspring shall be named for you.” And, indeed, later in Genesis, Isaac will beget Jacob, who is renamed Israel who will have twelve sons, and the great nation of Israel will be born, eventually led by King David, ancestor to the Messiah. But God also told Abraham, “I will make a nation of [Ishmael] also.” His sons became tribal chiefs from Assyria to the north to the border of Egypt to the south, and it is said, particularly in Islam that Ishmael is the ancestor of the Arab people.

Now as the story continues, Hagar and Ishmael were wandering in the wilderness of Beer-sheba when they ran out of water and Hagar began praying to the Lord that her son would not die. Indeed, “God heard the voice of the boy” (remember, the name Ishmael means ‘God hears.’) He reassured her that he would make a great nation of Ishmael and then they saw a well of water, filled their empty water skin, and drank.

This story tells us something about God’s care for us and that, indeed, God hears. Hagar must have thought she and Ishmael were as good as dead, wandering about the desert with no water, but she cried out to God and he heard her, and they found water. Even when the way seems bleak or it seems like we’ve lost everything, God hears and provides. I remember hearing my grandfather say many times in his sermons: “God can make a way out of no way.” God can make a way even when we are in the midst of despair, anxiety, or feel like we’ve come to the end of the road. God’s answer to our prayer may not be what we expect and sometimes he seems like he’s taking his precious time, but Sarah prayed and prayed and bore a son, despite her old age; Hagar, dying of thirst in the wilderness prayed and found water. Their story is a testimony that when we call upon the Lord, God hears and he takes care of us.

Wherever you’ve been and wherever your journey of life might take you, whatever you’ve done or your circumstance might be right now—good or bad, whenever you feel alone, forsaken, despondent, or disappointed, remember that God hears—*yishema-El*—God hears. Amen.

### Resources

*Biblehub.com*

<http://biblehub.com/hebrew/6711.htm> (playing)

<http://biblehub.com/hebrew/3327.htm> (Isaac)

<http://biblehub.com/hebrew/3458.htm> (Ishmael)

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ishmael>