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Colorado Springs, Colorado
June 27, 2010
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Our First Families of Faith Stories from the Book of Genesis IV. "What Was Meant for Evil...."

Genesis 21:8-21 and Genesis 50:20a 8 [Isaac] grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. 9But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. 10So she said to Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac." 11The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. 12But God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you. 13As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring." 14So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba. 15When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. 16Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, "Do not let me look on the death of the child." And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. 17And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. 18Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him." 19Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink. 20God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. 21He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt. 50:20a As far as I am concerned, God turned into good what you meant for evil.....

We continue today with our sermon series on our "first families of faith." And this fourth sermon in that series continues the focus on Abraham and his family. Last week we heard of God's intention to indeed follow through on his promise to Abraham and Sarah that they would have a son together, even at their advanced ages. Today we pick up the story several years later, after that child, Isaac, was indeed born to Abraham and Sarah as promised. Now, the Book of Genesis is fifty chapters long, and we can't begin to include all of its stories, even of this one family, in a single short summer sermon series. So it will be useful this morning to first remind ourselves of, as Paul

Harvey used to put it, “the rest of the story” to see how we get to today’s very disturbing scripture. So let’s do a bit of a recap of the story up to this point: Ishmael, you may recall from last week, is the son of Hagar and Abraham. Hagar was Sarah's slave. We heard last week how Sarah decided that Abraham should sleep with Hagar so that the household would at least have children in some fashion.– for it seemed to her that God had forgotten about His earlier promise of a child for she and Abraham and she was growing fearful for her future in a day when having a child who could take care of you was the only form of “retirement planning” there was. And however disturbing and distasteful we find this fact, because Hagar was a slave, the property of the household, any child of hers would become a child of the household and would be Sarah’s “property” and Abraham’s heir. Now, when Abraham heard Sarah’s offer to him that he should sleep with Hagar in order to get her pregnant, you won’t be surprised to learn that he accepted. But this was not a good idea. Duh! For Sarah, not surprisingly, hated the fact that Hagar became pregnant so easily and quickly resented Abraham for accepting her offer. You will also not be surprised to know that Sarah then becomes very jealous of Hagar. She thinks Hagar is getting a bit too cocky. Abraham, in what is not one of his finer moments, tells Sarah to do whatever she wishes with Hagar. So, Sarah makes life as miserable as she can for Hagar, so much so that Hagar runs away - pretty much what Sarah had hoped would happen. But during her flight, God comes to Hagar and tells her to to back, promising that God would bless her son Ishmael and make of him a great nation.

Now, that was thirteen years before our story for today. And Hagar indeed returned at that time and for the next thirteen years Sarah watched as Hagar raised Ishmael. For thirteen years Sarah watches Abraham enjoy and revel in Ishmael as his son. Sarah’s furor and rage continue to boil. No matter how miserable she tries to make Hagar's life it doesn’t satisfy her; she cannot get beyond the fact that Hagar has

borne Abraham a son and she has not. Then, as we heard last week, the miraculous happens: Sarah does believe in God's promise and she and Abraham re-commit themselves to it and indeed Sarah becomes pregnant. When their son is born, she gives him the name "Isaac" – which literally means "laughter" – to signify that her anger has now been replaced by laughter.

However, her anger is only banished for a little while. For when Isaac is about three, Sarah's anger comes back. Ishmael – who is about sixteen – and Isaac are playing together as big brothers and little brothers will do, and evidently Ishmael laughs at Isaac in a way that Sarah thought was mocking Isaac. Sarah cannot stand it – she will not continue to put up with this child of the slave girl acting as if he is an equal to her beloved Isaac, much less the slave child mocking the true heir. And so Sarah demands that Abraham send Hagar and Ishmael away – much to the chagrin of Abraham. He loves Ishmael and Hagar and does not want to lose them. But Abraham nonetheless does what Sarah demands and sends Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness, the desert, with only a skin of water and a loaf of bread.

Soon they face death from dehydration and starvation. You need at least a gallon of water a day per person in the desert to survive. Their waterskin quickly becomes empty. In what may be the most poignant and terrible part of a terrible story, Hagar helps get Ishmael under a bush because she cannot stand to watch him die. However, God has not abandoned them but leads her to a well of water. Ishmael then grows up in the wilderness under the care of his mother and becomes an expert hunter. When he is older Hagar goes to Egypt and gets Ishmael an Egyptian wife. Ishmael eventually has twelve sons who are later divided into twelve tribes – and yes, a great nation comes of them. For Ishmael's descendents are historically understood to be the Muslims – as Jan Haley reminded the children in her children's time last week – the

largest non-Christian religious group on the face of the earth – more than a billion people.¹

Isn't this a depressing, disturbing, disheartening story? There was an English television show back in the mid-90s entitled "*Men Behaving Badly*," but if one were trying to make a mini-series out of this story from Genesis it would be more aptly named "*Pretty Much Everybody Behaving Badly*." For, as we have seen, both Abraham and Sarah decided that their own ways were more trustworthy than God's ways, and it ended in a muddle and a mess. There are times in the relationships between men and women when you take each other at your word, and there are other times when you ought to know that you simply should not do so – that it's desperation or fear or anguish speaking rather than their true feelings. When Sarah offered Abraham the opportunity to sleep with Hagar, Abraham behaved both badly and stupidly by not hearing the fear and anguish that lay behind Sarah's offer – for sometimes words don't mean what they say, sometimes words disguise rather than illuminate – and instead of saying to Sarah "*No, but let's talk about what you are feeling, what is behind your offer*" Abraham simply said "*Cool!*" And Sarah behaved badly by not sharing straightforwardly, hard as that might have been, her fears about the future and what life might be like if they were to be old and childless and helpless. And after Ishmael was born – a wonderful child by all accounts even if his birth came about from behavior that could have been better – Sarah behaved badly by acting as if Hagar and her innocent child were the source of her troubles. And Hagar behaved badly by apparently reminding Sarah that she was able to have a child but Sarah was not; in this case sisterhood was not powerful! And Abraham behaved badly not once but twice – behaved like a coward, in fact, by sending

¹This summary borrows very heavily from a sermon by Robert U. Ferguson, Jr. <http://www.rockies.net/~spirit/sermons/a-or12-ferguson.php>

Hagar and her son – *his* son! – away, and it nearly killed them. Abraham should have known that whenever you seek peace at any price, that price is often hurting other people and staying silent when you should have spoken up, when you should have stood up for what is right and just even when it costs you.

About the only person in this story who doesn't behave badly is God. "*But wait,*" you might say, "*doesn't it say right there in verse 12 that God told Abraham to do what Sarah wanted?*" Yes, it does. But here is my take on that: As I said last week, God will not force Himself on any of us. God respects our free will, as mucked up as it can sometimes be, as badly as that free will is sometimes used. And I have to think that God knew Abraham's heart and Abraham's weakness; he knew that Abraham – due to whatever lack of character or the over-valuing of peace at any price – had already once before done nothing when Hagar's life was made so miserable that the desert looked like an escape, and that Abraham was going to do so again. I don't read this so much as God giving Abraham *permission* to do this, but God sadly realizing that *Abraham was going to do it anyway* – and so God made it known that however badly Abraham was going to behave, God would seek to bring good out of it.

Now, maybe that seems strained, and yet it is so very consistent with what happens at the conclusion of our story today. In fact, as I was thinking about and studying and praying over this distressing story, a verse from the very end of the book of Genesis wouldn't leave my mind, and even though it's from the story of Joseph, it is actually a very apt summation of how God worked through all of these members of our "first family of faith" throughout the book of Genesis, and how God is at work in today's story. It's from Genesis 50, and it says this: "*God turned into good what you meant for evil.....*" And that's the Good News to be found in today's tawdry and terrible story. My very wise seminary professors never tired of pointing out to us that every sermon, no

matter how troubling the scripture on which it is based, needs to find the Good News and proclaim it even in the midst of – and sometimes despite – the bad news that the story may also convey. So what IS the Good News of the Gospel in this story? Just this – ***God turned into good what you meant for evil.....***

I think there are two very specific things in this story that remind us that God is always at work to bring the good that is possible from evil. First, both times that Hagar found herself in the desert with Ishmael, God comes to her and tells her that Ishmael will not die, and that in fact, he will become himself the father of a great nation. Did you hear it?: God said to Hagar, *“Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for **I will make a great nation of him.**”* The good news in this is that our God is not a God who loves some and hates others. For, did you notice? God made the very same promise to Hagar and Ishmael that God had made to Abraham and Sarah and Isaac, and the point of that promise is this: God’s love is for everyone, not just some. And that means, my friends, that there is never, ever any justification for claiming some sort of divine hatred against any ethnic group. It means there is never any justification for the dehumanizing label, the racial slur, the nasty name, directed at any group. And, particularly in a time when our country is engaged in a difficult war against certain folks who would demonize and dehumanize us, there is nonetheless never any justification in blaspheming and slandering the name of God by demonizing and dehumanizing our Muslim brothers and sisters *as a group*. Moreover, there is never any justification for using a false and hateful stereotype of Muslims to defame and slander anyone and I hope that you will never fall prey to that insidious temptation that too many in our world, in our country, have fallen to in passing along those lies that get circulated on the internet and elsewhere. As Rev. Dan Clendenin powerfully puts the point, the story reminds us that *“Ishmael, the heir of Islam, cousin to Jews and Christians... signals a*

promise to **every** human being. God... sees **every** human misery, and that He hears **every** painful sob.”²

And that brings us to the second piece of the Good News, the Gospel, in this painful story, and I quote the Rev. Sarah Buteux’s words which are more eloquent than my own when she says this: “*Hagar brings us face to face with our God, a God who sees us, a God who hears us, a God who does not, who cannot, who will not, turn away from our pain. We know, through [Hagar’s] experience, that our cries do not go unheeded. And when we are suffering that is something we desperately need to know.*”³ She’s right, isn’t she? For like Hagar in the desert, when you or I experience pain or hurt or suffering, it tends to isolate us. We can even tend to think that no one understands, can’t possibly understand, even, and that there is nothing to do but bear it alone. For all of us at times have been or will be, “...*in our own wilderness places, where the desolating emptiness surrounds us.*”⁴ But even in the loneliest of our wildernesses, God does not abandon. Ever. For, my friends, again in the wise words of Rev. Buteux’s,

*In her hour of great desperation, God did not turn away from Hagar and [God] will not turn away from you. [W]here people [tried] to limit the promise, God extended it.... In the wilderness when hope had failed, God extended the reach of his providence ... for Hagar, for Ishmael, for you*⁵

and for me.

²<http://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20050613JJ.shtml> Emphasis mine.

³http://web.mac.com/revsarahb/Firstchurchhadley/Sixth_Sunday_after_Pentecost,_Year_A.html

⁴Susan Ivany, quoted in ibid.

⁵ibid.

[Ray begins softly playing “Precious Lord, Take My Hand”]

God reached out a precious hand and said to Hagar, said to Ishmael, and continues to say to any of us who are in a wilderness or hurting place *“Take my hand, take my hand – for what was meant for evil, I will seek to transform for good. Take my hand, take my hand.”*

Shall we stand and sing it? *“Precious Lord, Take My Hand,”* found on your insert.