

Sermon: Hear Our Cry

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Reading: Genesis 21

Matthew 10: 29-35, 39

Well, well, so we have trouble with our readings today. Our trouble is that God does not seem to be acting with kindness. Our readings today do not fit comfortably with our ethical framework. We desire peace, we want harmony in our families. We want people to live together in community in peace, getting along. We are not keen on conflict. Families splitting up is a bad thing.

But our readings today are important.

Let's dive in to the story of Sarah and Hagar and their two sons. It is also Abraham's story, but you might have noticed in our dramatic reading that he does not speak. He just does as he is told, which is odd for the Patriarch ... he might be the boss but he is not leading here. This is a crisis moment for two women, and two boys, and it has been passed down to us as a crisis moment for two nations, the crisis at the very original of the conflict between the Jewish people and the Arab people.

Perhaps the most fascinating thing about this story is that it has been passed down to us at all, because it contains the story of both women, not just Sarah who won the victory, but Hagar who also stands proud as mother of a nation despite being cast out. Still she claims her voice. Still she tells her story about how God heard her cry, how God opened her eyes, how God raised her up and gave her a hope and a future, right at that moment when all seemed lost.

In Genesis 21 we join a family in celebration, because Isaac has been born, Sarah is exultant. She remembered her promise that God has given her laughter, and she invites the whole world to laugh with her, with joy and triumph.

Only one person is not laughing – Ishmael, the son of her servant – or maybe his was the wrong kind of laughter. Ishmael was teasing his baby brother. Maybe he was playing with him, or maybe he was bullying him, or mocking him. We run into trouble translating the Hebrew. Either way, Sarah was confronted with the fact that Ishmael was the eldest, he would inherit, and Isaac her son would always be the baby brother.

This poisons Sarah's party. That very night, after the wine was drunk and the guests gone home, she pins Abraham down with the harshest of ultimatums ... 'Get rid of them! Don't you see, it is the only way for Isaac to be your heir. Me, and my son, we matter, we belong. That woman and her son are now disposable. Throw them out.'

Abraham has a wee crisis, checks in with God who seems to be saying, yeah, OK, and Abraham does what Sarah asks him to do.

He chucks them out, first thing in the morning. He rejects them, disinherits his first born son, and sends them into the desert with nothing.

In any moral system, this was a wrong and terrible thing to do.

That God should endorse this action seems to undermine the very character of God.

When you imagine that moment, of him gently but implacably telling her to leave – of her walking away from the compound out into the desert, of Ishmael trying to run back to his Dad ... what do you feel?

They walk further from home, the food and water run out, and desperate pain, thirst and despair overwhelm them. The emotion in this are all too stark and obvious. And into this terrible suffering, God speaks. God hears their cry. God opens her eyes and leads her to water. God speaks hope. God

gives them a new start. Family is rebuilt. Community is remade, in a different way in a different place. Ishmael becomes himself a great Patriarch, father of a nation.

So, yes, God does bring good out of evil. No situation is so terrible that is beyond God's reach. But the question I sit with is – why did God let Ishmael & Hagar get treated so badly? Does God permit, or worse, plan, for terrible and unethical things to happen?

This question is so difficult for many people that they give up on faith. You must have had people ask you – How could you believe in a good God when people do such awful things to each other? How could God let my child die? How could God let all those faithful decent people in the Ukraine suffer and die?

This is the nagging question of theodicy: Why do bad things happen? If God is good, why is there so much suffering? Is God powerless, or not good after all?

No doubt you have sat with people in pain and asked this question, and I honour those points in your own story when things just don't make sense.

But faith cannot only be for people whose lives are ordered and free of tragedy. Faith must stand and hold at those points when, like Hagar, we can only sit on a rock and sob.

Hope that things will work out in the end is not enough in that moment. Like Hagar, we have to know that God hears, that God sees, that God is with us, there.

To me the most beautiful detail of the story is the hidden spring of water. It was near her but in her misery she could not see it.

To me, that's what faith does, that's the incredible gift of faith through the hardest times, it shows us the water that is so close to us if only we open our eyes.

What if, no matter what you go through, you knew with total confidence that God was with you and caring for you and re-sourcing you with living water no matter what? Doesn't that change how you sit with pain? Yes it still hurts but we need not fear the pain.

In our New Testament reading Jesus' words are harsh, Jesus at his most confronting – this is not Jesus meek and mild. "Don't assume that I came to bring peace on the earth." This is Jesus calling out from us more courage than we are comfortable with. This kind of courage of our convictions could even bring conflict into families, because following Jesus is not just a hobby, not just an optional tag-on that we can enjoy in the good times and politely ignore in the hard times. If we want the full resources of God to be available to us through suffering as well as through joy, we need to acknowledge Christ – this is what Jesus said. He sums this up by saying that we find our lives by losing our lives – losing our lives to Jesus.

So, what's the point? The point is ...

when bad things happen, as bad things do happen, and will happen even more in a warming world ... and we hold in our hearts the uncomfortable memories of bad things which happened in the past. When bad things happen, God invites us to sit in it, rather than running away ... and God invites us to cry out to him in our stress and pain. As Hagar and Ishmael cried out, God heard, God opened her eyes. God met them in their place of despair. So God meets us in the hard places, the rock of weeping, in the places where we fear we are losing ourselves, there God finds us, God meets us, and we find our true lives in Christ.