

For the Uniting Church Anniversary

Genesis 21:8-21

Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17

Romans 6:1b-11

Matthew 10:24-39

In all of our readings today there is so much we could unpack, and the biggest question is what direction to take. If we were not so familiar with these readings, if we did not know them as coming from the Bible, we would be horrified. The Gospel reading, which is tame compared to Luke's version, has over the years been misused for cults to tell families that those who leave the cult must also be expelled from the family. It has been used to manipulatively gain power and control.

But what about the Old Testament reading? The story of Sarah and Hagar would be shocking to modern ears if we weren't quite so used to hearing it. It is a story that illustrates the multiple layers of power and control in the ancient world; these multiple layers is something that we are still struggling with today.

Sarah, the senior wife, has her worth bound up in her ability to have children. Because she cannot have a child, she gets her husband to sexually abuse her slave to have a surrogate child. Hagar has no say in this arrangement. When Sarah has her own child, she realises that, as the older son, Ishmael will have a greater claim on the estate and so wants to get rid of him. Abraham, at least, has a conscience about sending Hagar and her child into the unknown.

However, this story makes a number of important points. Ishmael's birth might not have been part of God's plan, but God still recognises him as a child of Abraham – even if the senior wife does not want this relationship acknowledged. Ishmael will also be blessed and be the progenitor of a great nation, just as Isaac is, and this is because of the promise to Abraham. Indeed, after Sarah's death Abraham takes another wife and these sons are also the progenitors of nearby nations such as the Midianites. Through this story the people of Israel are reminded they are family with the other nearby nations, and family in the Ancient Near East, meant in theory they worked together for the benefit of all.

Another point this story makes is about the gift of freedom. Sarah sends away Hagar, the Egyptian, with the same words that Pharaoh later sends away the Hebrew slaves. Whereas the Hebrew slaves wanted to leave, Hagar as a slave wanted to stay. In the actions of their oppressors both Hagar and the Hebrews find their freedom.

However, this freedom is not without its difficulties. We hear of Hagar and Ishmael facing the lack of water in the desert. We can only imagine the distress of a mother who faces the death of her child (and herself) due to a lack of essential resources. Imagine for a moment the despair of Hagar as she puts Ishmael in the shade of a bush expecting to see him die of hunger and thirst.

But then there is hope. As one commentator notes:

God helps Hagar see the well and reminds her of God's promise. In the midst of life's injustices it is easy to lose sight of God's promises. The stress and strain of our predicaments can blind us to the deliverance that is available. Sometimes it takes an intervention from God to help us recognise the salvation at hand.

However, one final point about this story. It is a story that creates a bond between Isaac and Ishmael which goes beyond that of family ties. Both Ishmael and Isaac owe their life to God – Isaac through his miraculous birth and Ishmael because of the intervention of God when death seemed the most likely outcome. Ishmael may have been sent away from the Promised land, but this story also reminds us that God is also with him. God is not limited to one family, people, or even country.

So, what does this say for us today. I think as we reflect on mission to our community, it gives us hope. We may or may not make the right choices, but we know God will use what we do. Like Abraham, like Hagar, if we listen for God in our situation – whether it be in a place of comfort or a place of distress – and respond to that call, we too can look to a new future that takes us to places where we would not have expected to travel and into futures that we may not yet be able to imagine.

This story is relevant for us as a congregation, but it is also relevant for us as a Presbytery, Synod and as a whole church at this time where we are looking to our past and reimagining a new and different future. It will require change, that change may even create generational conflict (as we read of in the Gospel story) but at the end of the day the question will never be whether we have kept our history as it was, but rather how have we shared in the work of God by sharing God's love and hope.