

HOMILY JUNE 25, 2017

The Bible has just about everything in it, from creation to destruction, from tales of love and faith to stories of jealousy and hatred, slavery and exile, and even murder! Our reading today is a complex story, starring Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar, and as I worked with it, I found myself thinking....what fun our Wednesday morning bible study class would have had analyzing this one!

The story in Genesis starts earlier than our reading, so let me give you some background: Abraham was originally called Abram, and when Abram was 75, God made a promise to Abram that he and his descendants throughout the generations would inherit a land. "Now the Lord had said to Abram: Get out of your country, from your family and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great..." And later, the Lord spoke to Abram again and said, "No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham...As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover I will give you a son by her."

Where we pick up the story in Genesis 21, many years have passed, and Abraham and Sarah have been obedient, but the couple is still childless. Getting older, and perhaps fearing both that she is past child bearing age, and that God may have forgotten the terms of the promise, Sarah decides to take matters into her own hands. She offers her slave-girl, Hagar, to Abraham as a second wife, a surrogate if you will. The **plan** was that Hagar would bear a child and take care of it, but the child would belong to Sarah and Abraham, and be accepted as their offspring.

What could go wrong?

First there was tension between Hagar and Sarah (umm...a very young woman was sleeping with her husband!). Then, Hagar becomes pregnant, but Sarah is barren...there had to be some resentment there! Later, a son, Ishmael, was born to Hagar and, though this **was** following Sarah's intention, it did increase her jealousy of Hagar.

Eventually, when Sarah was 90 and Abraham was 100, God's promise was fulfilled and Sarah bore a son, and Abraham named him Isaac. This was a wonderful blessing! There was much joy as this child Isaac grew stronger, and it became more certain that he would indeed be Abraham's heir.

What could go wrong?

Well, apparently, Isaac's birth upset the balance of power between the two wives in the household. For fourteen years Ishmael was seen as the future heir of Abraham, and as such, Hagar and Ishmael were accustomed to being treated with respect. But when **Sarah** had her own biological son, everything changed...and **who** would be Abraham's heir: the first-born son, of Hagar, or the son of the principal wife???

So Sarah (again), takes the matter into her own hands, and tells Abraham to "Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman **shall not** inherit along with my son Isaac." Now, in the custom of the time, Sarah had authority over the women of the tribe, therefore Hagar was under her jurisdiction, not Abraham's. And so, he was powerless to overrule Sarah, and the two were sent away. God hears their prayers in the desert, and makes a separate promise to Hagar that He *will* make a great nation of Ishmael.

This story speaks to me of faith and fear, and certainly of patience and trust. God had promised Abraham that he would be the father of many

nations, but when Sarah was past the normal child-bearing age, she was afraid and looked for her own ways to make this happen. She did not trust in God's promise enough to leave the matter in His hands, with His timing....she wanted to control the outcome!

The author Imbolu Mbue writes of a similar character in her novel Behold the Dreamers (which was our book group selection for June.) Jende and Neni Jonga are immigrants from Cameroon, living in Harlem, NY, when the threat of deportation looms large over their lives. Neni has adapted, fallen in love with America, and she becomes exhausted with worry over the possibility of leaving. Her fears are revealed in this passage....."**Once, on her way to work, she considered getting off the train to run into a Starbucks bathroom and have a good cry but she resisted the urge, because what good had all the tears done? What she needed to do was start sleeping better, stop staying up all night dreading the most horrid things that had not yet happened. 'We'll take it as it comes,' Jende said to her every day, but she didn't want to take it as it came. She wanted to be in control of her own life, and now, clearly, she wasn't, and simply thinking about the fact that someone else was going to decide the direction of her future was enough to intensify her headache, leave her feeling as if a thousand hammers were banging on her skull. This helplessness crushed her...."**

How I understand Sarah and Neni. They wanted to feel that they had some power to shape their fates and their families futures...***I get that!*** All too often I have struggled with my own will, trying to solve a problem or take charge of a situation, and forgotten to invite God into the equation. I wanted a more functional childhood, with two parents. I wanted my first husband to get sober.....and I wanted Heather to be our pastor forever. None of that was in my power, but it didn't stop me

from *trying* to control things and alter some outcomes. And like Sarah, most of my attempts at control just served to complicate issues or to prolong the suffering! Like Neni, I've had my share of sleepless nights, and many headaches!

So, I got some therapy, I got a divorce....then I got some more therapy, and slowly, I have learned how to ask for help, to change my behavior, and to let God into my life more, through prayer and meditation.

Our church is getting a new pastor...***What could go wrong?***

And the truth is things will go wrong, but we will have lot of opportunities to help things go ***right***. As a church community, our jobs are to be accepting of our new pastor, be patient as he gets settled here, and then receive the gifts that he brings to our family. As a community of faith we need to trust God, pray for grace and guidance, and welcome Pastor Henry with open arms and hearts. The Evangelical Christian minister and author Charles Swindoll is famously quoted as saying..."I am convinced that life is 10% what happens to me and 90% how I react to it."

And may it be so for us...**WE** are in charge of our attitudes! May we invite God into that equation, so that our attitudes and our welcome reflect the love of this Lynnewood family at **our** best! Can I get an Amen??