

Genesis 21:8-21; Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17

Grace to you and peace from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

I've had a couple different people ask me this week, more or less out of the blue, how I became a pastor. Now fortunately it was NOT one of those "how did YOU ever get to become a pastor?" But it was more of along the line of, how did I know that God was calling me to be a pastor? The very simple answer was I didn't. I shared a story here a couple of weeks ago (I don't know if all of you heard it) that in seminary a friend of mine once dreamed she received a fax from God. Life would indeed be SO much simpler if God would just talk to us via a fax or a text message or email, wouldn't it? Life would just be so much better. But God doesn't (at least in my experience) work in that fashion. I explained to those folks how I came to understand of my call to ordained ministry rather slowly. It was a bit of a hit or miss approach.

In our reading from Genesis tonight I think we have a similar situation, where we have people who are striving to understand what it is that God wants them to do. Now in the story so far (if you have been coming on Saturday nights, we've been doing this semi-continuous reading out of Genesis) God called these people, God called Abram and Sarai, from their homeland, the country of Ur, and made a covenant with them. God said, 'because of your faithfulness, I will be your god and you will be my people. I will make of you a nation so great that your descendants will outnumber the stars in the sky.' (Remember this is the time that we didn't have light pollution that we could actually see the stars in the sky.) This is the Great covenant (it's actually the second covenant in the book of Genesis – 5,000 points to anyone who can name the First covenant. It happens back in Genesis 9 . . . that's right, the story of the flood: it's the rainbow. 5,000 points for Dave Miller!)

The drawback with the covenant that God made with Abram and Sarai (I will make of you a great nation, your decedents shall outnumber the stars in the sky) is that Abram and Sari have no children. As a matter of fact, Sari says, 'have you looked at this womb lately, it's all dried up.' So in order to help to get things moving along, Sarai says to Abram, 'I want a child. So if you're not going to give me a child, then take my handmaiden, Hagar, and have a child with her, so that I can at least experience motherhood vicariously.'

Now Abram, being the stalwart, upright, moral guy that he is, replies, 'You want me to go have sex with another woman and have a baby with her? . . . Okay, I'll go do that.' So, Abram and Hagar get together, Hagar gets pregnant. The thing is, that once Hagar gets pregnant, even though she is Sarai's handmaiden, she starts going around saying "*I'm pregnant and you're not.*" This kind of ticks Sarai off and she goes to her husband and says 'that woman that you got pregnant, she's making fun of me and I want you to get rid of her.' Abram, being the stalwart, upright and moral guy that he is, responds, 'you want me to kick out of our camp the woman who you handpicked for me to have sex with? . . . Okay, I'll go do that.' So off he sends Hagar out into the desert, this pregnant woman.

Now this is back in chapter 16, while Hagar's out in the desert, God speaks to her:

Genesis 16:10 ¹⁰The angel of the LORD says to Hagar, “I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted multitude.” ¹¹And the angel of the LORD said to her, “Now you have conceived and shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael, for the LORD has given heed to your affliction.”

God then speaks to Abram and says ‘you have to take her back’ and he does, she goes back and he takes her back and life is pretty okay. Kind of.

The Lord God reminds Abram and Sarai of that covenant, and to reinforce the enormity of that covenant, God changes their names. Abram becomes Abraham (which means “ancestor of a multitude”) and Sarai becomes Sarah. Now to me, at least, a little bit of an interesting side note that often times throughout the scripture, at points, people receive new names. Abram and Sarai, Abraham and Sarah; their grandson Jacob, brother of Esau, Jacob will become known as Israel. In the New Testament, Simon Peter is also known as Cephas; and there is another guy named Saul who gets greater respect among the believers of Jesus when he becomes known as Paul.

So Abraham and Sarah are reminded of the covenant; they go and have a “spousal relationship,” and long and behold, Sarah conceives, she gives birth to Isaac - “he who laughs.” Isaac, who has this half-brother Ishmael (“God hears.”) But unfortunately once again the scenario repeats itself, because we’re human beings, we fail, we don’t always do as God wants us to do, and as we learn the lesson tonight, the older, first born Ishmael is perceived by his half-brother’s mother to be a threat to the inheritance of the Covenant, and so off into the desert once again Hagar is sent, this time accompanied by her son. But before they go, God informs Abraham that through Ishmael as well, the Covenant will be carried out.

Now Abraham and Sarah wanted to fulfill God’s covenant, but it didn’t look like it was happening. That’s how they got embroiled in this whole Hagar/Ishmael thing.

How do we know what God wants us to do? I keep looking for those faxes and I haven’t found them yet. “I will make of you a great nation.” “Your descendants will outnumber the stars in the sky.”, Yet, HOW MANY years did Sarai STAY BARREN. I am sure they were thinking something along the lines, ‘did we not write it down correctly? Did we misunderstand something in the translation here? How is this “great nation” supposed to come from the two of us when there is no off spring coming here? How many slaves is Abraham suppose to impregnate to make this great nation?’

In my life I had people from a fairly early age, like high school, tell me that I should be a pastor and I said very politely, “no thank you.” Now admittedly that was a time, thirty some years ago, when pastors were still held to be different from the congregation. Different as in a stronger faith; different as in being less sinful; different as being a “better” human being. None of those are true for me. During my college years, I had similar conversations. At that point, though, I was more about not learning ancient Greek (I had taken German in high school and thought I had done fairly well in high school, and then when I got to college I failed my first semester of German and then I failed my computer language class. I was not about taking some more languages, and failing.)

How do we know what God wants us to do? Sarah and Abraham got it wrong. They tried to force God’s hand, which I gotta tell ya, that never, never works. God is going to work on God’s own time; no slower, no quicker. How do we know what God wants us to do?

Now my own example, there were two major events that happened. The first was the birth and death of our son Noah. I was a youth director and Marianne my wife was a preschool teacher in the same congregation. After Noah's death many people came to my office seeking to console me, but who, in actuality, needed to be comforted themselves, because Noah's very short life had reminded them of their own childhood, their wounds of marriage, or perhaps their own child's untimely death. They needed to be loved, supported and healed.

Abram sent Hagar into the wilderness – God sent her back. I was in the wilderness of grief over the loss of my son. Those who came to me, needed to be healed. God sent me back by helping me realize that I could be used as a healer for those who are suffering while in the midst of my own grief. Then perhaps God can use me in other settings. God did not abandon Hagar and Ishmael when they were out in the wilderness. Maybe they weren't going the way that they thought they were supposed to be going for someone who had been blessed by the Almighty.

The other thing that happened to me was a fellow in my congregation for whom I had great deal of respect, almost out of the blue said to me one day, "You know, John, the retired bishop and I were talking, and you are exactly the kind of person we feel should be in seminary." When I went home and told Marianne that, she said that was God speaking to you.

God got Abraham's attention thru Ishmael, regardless of the fact that Abraham kept sending him away. God continues to call, and to push, prod, and poke especially when we try all the more to ignore what God wants us to do. Seminary was NOT an easy thing for me. I am not an overwhelming scholar; I struggled with my classes. I had a VERY difficult time with my synod candidacy committee. They didn't think I was cut out to be a pastor. But I figured, I am going to go to seminary and do my best and if I failed, if I can't pass those classes, then okay I misunderstood what God wants me to do. But, for good or bad, I survived seminary and I graduated, and eventually ended up here.

Ishmael and Isaac remain half-brothers, despite how their mothers did, or did NOT, get along, they're still brothers. When their father Abraham finally dies, they are both there to bury Abraham (this is Genesis 25.) But to know God, we have to spend time with God. We have to spend time in prayer, time in worship, time in fellowship. Fellowship with God, fellowship with one another. We know the will of God; we know the heart of God as we read scripture, as we pray, as we talk with other believers. God spoke in the Old Testament; God continues to speak to us today. Regardless of when God speaks, we need to be ready to listen.

Amen.

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