

“GOD HEARS *THEIR* VOICE”

Genesis 21:8-21; Matthew 10:24-39

**Market Square Presbyterian Church in the City of
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania**

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At Jim Chisholm’s funeral last Thursday, one of the pastors began to pray with the invocation, “*O God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob...*” On the one hand, there is nothing unusual about that. Many prayers begin by identifying the God they are addressing as the God of the patriarchs to distinguish from false gods and idols.

On the other hand, Isaac was not Abraham’s first son and, in those days, firstborn sons had substantial rights and benefits subsequent sons did not. (As a firstborn son myself, I am a little chagrined at the passing of that convention!) Curiously, though Ishmael was Abraham’s firstborn son I do not remember ever hearing even a single Christian prayer begin with the more ritually appropriate, “*O God of Abraham and Ishmael...*” Why is that? And why might the lack of such be significant?

We do well to know the story of Abraham, a small part of which we will peek at today. Bruce Feiler in his extraordinary book about Abraham called, creatively, Abraham, wonders why the arts and entertainment communities largely have turned their backs on Abraham. After all, Feiler writes, Michelangelo has his David and Joseph is showcased in an Andrew Lloyd Webber musical (not to mention a home video starring Donny Osmond). Moses is the subject of a Cecil B. DeMille epic and Steven Spielberg and Harrison Ford spend an entire movie chasing after the lost Ark of the Covenant! But the klieg lights have been turned off to Abraham even though without him there probably is no Moses, Joseph, or David.¹

The Hollywood inattention is particularly puzzling in consideration of the juiciness of Abraham’s story. Abraham was called by God to leave home and everything he knew to journey to an unknown destination. It was the ultimate “on the road” saga. Then, Abraham and his wife,

¹ Feiler, Bruce, Abraham.

Sarah, far past childbearing age, nevertheless become party to a covenant initiated by God who promises they will have a son through whom God will make a great nation by which all of the families of the earth will be blessed. But best of all for the filmmakers, along the way Abraham gets caught up in a love triangle and all of its attendant intrigue.

Let's start there. As it turns out, despite God's promise Sarah despairs of being able to provide an heir, a son, for Abraham. After a long season of failed attempts, and in keeping with common custom of the time, Sarah gives her maidservant Hagar to Abraham as a concubine. Sarah conceives a plan whereby she will produce a son for Abraham through Hagar's surrogacy.

But when Hagar does indeed get pregnant, Sarah, whether real or imagined, senses a power shift between herself and Hagar. Sarah feels Hagar is acting contemptuously toward her. She believes Hagar no longer displays proper deference. As a result, Sarah begins treating Hagar so badly - the word used in Hebrew is the same one that later describes the treatment of the Hebrew slaves by the Egyptians at the time of Moses - that Hagar runs away. But a messenger of the Lord speaks to Hagar and tells her to go back to Abraham and Sarah and that her son will be named Ishmael (meaning "God hears"). Sarah had dealt with Hagar harshly but God is tender with her and so Hagar obeys and returns.

Meanwhile, in the part of the Abraham story our text today tells, Sarah becomes pregnant just as God had told her and bears a son named Isaac (meaning "laughter" because Sarah had laughed when God first had promised she would give birth to a child in her old age). But now Sarah does everything but laugh. She frets, fusses, and fumes over which of Abraham's sons - her Isaac or Hagar's Ishmael - will be Abraham's heir because Ishmael had been born before Isaac. Sarah, of course, championed Isaac.

One day Sarah complains to Abraham with no small drama that Ishmael has been making fun of Isaac (though for all we know it may have been a contrivance concocted by Sarah to press her antipathy toward Hagar and Ishmael). *"Get rid of that slave woman and her son,"* Sarah insists to Abraham in the way only a wounded wife can do. *"No child of hers is going to share an inheritance with my son."* Abraham is anguished because Ishmael is his son as much as Isaac. But God says to Abraham, *"Do whatever Sarah tells you. Regarding Ishmael, I also will bring forth a nation through him because he, too, is your son."*

The next morning Abraham wakens early, packs some food for Hagar and Ishmael, fills a canteen with water, and bids them farewell. Hagar tries to make a go of it for several days but the desert is a daunting place. Finally, with no ongoing source of food or drink, Hagar places Ishmael under a bush and walks away because she cannot bear to watch her son perish in the heat.

Hagar is anguished, Ishmael is anxious, but God hears their cries. God tells Hagar to go and get the boy, that God will make of Ishmael a nation of people. Just then a well of water appears before Hagar. She fills her canteen and goes and embraces and kisses Ishmael and gives him a long, cool, drink. This part of the story ends with the narrator telling us that God remained with the boy as he grew up.

If you want to do yourself a favor, make some time this week to read the whole Abraham narrative, beginning in the latter part of Genesis 11 and then just keep reading. Abraham's story is a page turner and you will not want to stop once you start. In the book of Hebrews in the New Testament, Abraham is lifted up as a paragon of a person living by faith and we can learn a lot from him. And Abraham became the father of the three great monotheistic religions in the world - Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Abraham is someone from whom the church can profit greatly in these days.

For one thing, remembering that Ishmael is Abraham's son, too, as well as Isaac, the church perhaps can better be persuaded that our Muslim brothers and sisters really are our brothers and sisters. We do pretty well with that at Market Square but we must continue to make our witness. While Jews and Christians trace their lineage through Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac, Muslims trace theirs through Abraham, Hagar, and Ishmael. Christians, Jews, and Muslims all have Abraham as our parent. We all are Abrahamic progeny. We all sing of "Father Abraham."

Important in the world today, scripture makes sure to tell us that God hears *their* voice, too: Hagar's and Ishmael's. Hagar's voice and Ishmael's voice are important to God. God hears them. God honors them. They and their descendants hold a place in God's heart as much as Isaac's offspring. Any complicity by Jews and Christians to minimize or marginalize Muslims in the world derives no authority or applause from God to do so. The reverse, of course, is true as well.

(I can say in that regard that the Muslim community in Harrisburg is as loving and hospitable toward Christians and Jews as any I ever have known. On Christmas morning at Market Square this past December, only days after ISIS announced its targeting of Christian churches in the West, we welcomed in our worship a sizable contingent from the local Muslim community who came to be in solidarity with us and to offer us their support.)

I also am told that African-American womanists find legitimacy and support in Hagar and Ishmael. Delores Williams, author of the book Sisters in the Wilderness, writes that Hagar is "an analogue for African-American women's experiences from slavery to the problems of single mothers today." Hagar and Ishmael are not seen as victims but survivors. Referring to Hagar's

and Ishmael's rescue in the desert when God hears their voices, Williams interprets it is an example of "God making a way when there is no way." Williams says Hagar and Ishmael have given hope and solace to African-American women ever since.²

It is important for the church to find, develop, and use its voice. We cannot simply mimic nationalist rhetoric when our Abrahamic kin are at issue. As the Spirit gives us utterance, our voices are to reflect what God says to us.

But, to do that, we also must listen. We must listen to God in scripture and in the Spirit and in voices not our own. We must listen because God hears *their* voices, too, the same voices those of us with privilege sometimes deem to be less than our own, the voices we too often consider as "other" because "their" race, religion, nationality, political affiliation, economic status, manner of expression, or worldly condition are different than ours.³ God erects no gate or wall to create insiders and outsiders to God's love and care and thus we may not do so, either. God listens to *their* - to those we call "other" - God listens to *their* voices and loves them, too.

Have you ever been the "other"? Have you ever been Hagar or Ishmael? Have you ever felt silenced, sequestered, or sent away? Then you can imagine how it feels to people similarly treated who yearn for their voice to be heard and their personhood to be accounted for and valued. You can appreciate those who summon the courage to make their voices heard trusting the promise of Jesus who told his disciples that "*nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, tell from the housetops.*"⁴

As in Hagar's and Ishmael's day, we live in a time when many voices are calling out in their quest to be heard. When voices are not heard, when voices are excluded or systematically quieted or suppressed, they find subsequent expression in rage and outrage, in torrent and terror. From the beginning of Genesis, we meet God as the God of all peoples.

To Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac, God says "Yes!" To Abraham, Hagar, and Ishmael, God says "Yes!" To Black Lives Matter adherents, God says "Yes!" To LGBTQ and agender and non-binary persons, God says "Yes!" To Palestinian families who who want peace, justice, and unfettered opportunity, God says "Yes!" To people in the heartland of our nation who feel left out, God says "Yes!" To those who cry out for a just and equitable criminal justice system and to

² Williams, Delores, *Sisters in the Wilderness*. 1993, Orbis Books.

³ Inclusion of all peoples in our diverse and inclusive family of faith including those named in this sentence forms the heart of the Market Square Presbyterian Church mission statement and is our intended, resolute, usual, albeit not yet perfect, practice.

⁴ Matthew 10:26-27

those who cry in fear of the loss of their health insurance and thus their access to health care, God says “Yes!” Even to those who want an 8:30 summer service at Market Square, God says “Yes!” God hears *their* voices, too, the voices of them all, and God is not mocked! God will act and a faithful church is a part of God’s plan.

We cannot domesticate God or tame God or make God in our image. God is not in our pocket. Whenever we are tempted to think our voice is the only one God hears or that our cause is God’s cause or our politics are God’s politics, the words of an anthem by Bob Chilcott our Sanctuary Choir sang recently come to mind:

When we assemble here to worship God, to sing God’s praises and to hear God’s word, we will walk softly. We will walk softly.⁵

Walking softly, humbly, so that we may hear the other voices God hears is our way forward in the world. Not heavy-handedness nor hard-heartedness but even-handedness and wholeheartedness after the manner of the God of Abraham, Sarah, and Isaac and the God of Abraham, Hagar, and Ishmael will win our day.

If we want to see clearly how that works, we can look at Jesus Christ our Lord .

Amen.

⁵ An anthem by Bob Chilcott entitled simply, “Walk Softly.”