

Jim Stochl
Community Presbyterian Church, West Covina
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The Journey of Faith: Family Drama

1 Now the LORD was gracious to Sarah as he had said, and the LORD did for Sarah what he had promised. 2 Sarah became pregnant and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the very time God had promised him. 3 Abraham gave the name Isaac to the son Sarah bore him. 4 When his son Isaac was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him, as God commanded him. 5 Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him.

6 Sarah said, "God has brought me laughter, and everyone who hears about this will laugh with me." 7 And she added, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age."

8 The child grew and was weaned, and on the day Isaac was weaned Abraham held a great feast. 9 But Sarah saw that the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham was mocking, 10 and she said to Abraham, "Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that woman's son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac."

11 The matter distressed Abraham greatly because it concerned his son. 12 But God said to him, "Do not be so distressed about the boy and your slave woman. Listen to whatever Sarah tells you, because it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned. 13 I will make the son of the slave into a nation also, because he is your offspring."

14 Early the next morning Abraham took some food and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar. He set them on her shoulders and then sent her off with the boy. She went on her way and wandered in the Desert of Beersheba.

15 When the water in the skin was gone, she put the boy under one of the bushes. 16 Then she went off and sat down about a bowshot away, for she thought, "I cannot watch the boy die." And as she sat there, she began to sob.

17 God heard the boy crying, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "What is the matter, Hagar? Do not be afraid; God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. 18 Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation."

19 Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. So she went and filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink.

20 God was with the boy as he grew up. He lived in the desert and became an archer. 21 While he was living in the Desert of Paran, his mother got a wife for him from Egypt. (Genesis 21:1-21)

28 Now you, brothers and sisters, like Isaac, are children of promise. 29 At that time the son born according to the flesh persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now. 30 But what does Scripture say? "Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman's son." 31 Therefore, brothers and sisters, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman. 5:1 It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. (Galatians 4:28-5:1)

Intro

In our reading this morning, we have one of the most joyous events in the Bible, and also one of the most painful. And the life of faith sees God's hand in both.

There are four main actors in this story: Sarah, Abraham, Hagar, and God. The boys, Isaac and Ishmael, are there, and are important to the story, but they don't really do much.

For the previous 15 years or so, since the birth of Ishmael by Hagar, this little family unit has experienced its shares of joys and sorrows, its ups and downs, but the family seems to be intact. Every person knows who they are, and what their role is. But this fine and delicate balance is clearly upset by the birth of Isaac.

How many of you were oldest children? Do you remember the birth of your younger siblings? For many older children, it can be a traumatic experience. From having the total attention of two parents, to having virtually none of their attention as they focus on the newborn can be quite a change.

There is a story told of a young boy in kindergarten whose mommy was pregnant and due to deliver a baby sister. One of his friends in class had a younger sister, and so he was sought out for advice in how to prepare for the situation. The "wise" friend was a bit of a scamp, and wound up telling the boy that he had better enjoy his blessing while he could, because when his sister was born, the boy was going to have to sleep outside with the dog, and eat dog food. You might well imagine how this upset the boy, but his friend had the experience and had to be believed!

The day came when the parents went to the hospital, and the young boy stayed with his grandparents. All was well, until the dreaded phone call from the hospital. Grandma proudly announced, "You have a baby sister!" At this, the boy broke into tears. When asked why he was upset, he howled, "I don't want to sleep outside with the dog!" Being wise, the grandparents reassured him this would not be the case, and took him for an ice cream cone.

The birth of a child can upset the delicate balance of a family system. Just like anything new can upset the delicate balance of a church, or workplace, or community, or nation. Let's see how the birth of Isaac affects the main characters in the story.

Sarah

For Sarah, the birth of Isaac is the long awaited, and long promised event. There is nothing quite like it! They have been waiting for 25 years for the birth of this promised son. That's a long time to wait for anything! Isaac is God's gift, as our text says "the Lord was gracious to Sarah."

Isaac is the initial fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham and Sarah to bless the world through Abraham's offspring, which is ultimately fulfilled in Christ.

To Sarah, the birth of Isaac must have felt like vindication. As much as Abraham might have tried to assure her of his love for her, in her barrenness, she must have felt a little twinge of doubt, knowing that she was unable to give Abraham children, while Hagar had Abraham's son, Ishmael. So although the balance of power in the family was officially Sarah's, having no children of her own would have tilted the power in the family towards Hagar.

It appears that Sarah was happy until Isaac was weaned. Then she became unhappy. "If mama ain't happy, then nobody's happy." Why? Because her son, her precious baby boy, her light and joy, her laughter, was now in the second place in the family legacy. In Semitic culture, the eldest child has the right of inheritance, and inherits double what anyone else gets. Ishmael is the eldest son, no doubt loved by Abraham. But Ishmael is a threat to Isaac. And Sarah has probably not forgotten those long ago taunts by Hagar, her hand maiden, after the birth of Ishmael. And on the day when Isaac was weaned, Sarah saw Ishmael mocking. Presumably, Ishmael thought himself to be the rightful heir, and this scrawny brat, Isaac, even though birthed to Sarah, would not have a chance.

It is difficult to know what the word translated "mocking" really means.

The Rabbis try and explain Sarah's rage. *Mitzachek*, they explain, cannot mean simply playing as young boys often do, maybe even a little roughhousing. It must mean something sinister, something awful, for Sarah to have become so angry. Indeed, they link the word *mitzachek* with sexual immortality- in this case incest- using another text in Genesis with the word *mitzachek*, when Isaac and Rebekah are sexually flirting . Or they suggest that Ishmael was trying to get Isaac to play with idols. Or even that Ishmael was trying to murder Isaac. *Mitzachek*- to laugh, to play, the very same Hebrew root of the word *Yitzchak*, or Isaac. Ishmael was *mitzachek* with *Yitzchak*-perhaps, playing as his equal. Ishmael was a threat because he

enters into the closed circle of Abraham and Sarah when he plays with Isaac. He is a threat because if he gets close enough to that centre, he may get to share in the inheritance. “Cast out that slave woman and her son” Sarah says, “for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.” What an early lesson Sarah taught those kids. My son won’t share the inheritance with that son of a slave. My son is an insider. Your son is an outsider. (http://www.kolel.org/pages/holidays/5761_YKS1.html)

The Apostle Paul takes up the cause in Galatians 4:29, where he writes, “At that time the son born according to the flesh persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit.” So Paul translates *mitzachek* as “persecuted”.

Whatever it was, and we have to remain somewhat tenuous about the exact nature of the offense, it caused Sarah to become really angry. Whatever it was, it seems tied to the idea of inheritance, as she says in verse 10, “Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that woman’s son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.”

A new addition to the family can bring great changes.

Abraham

Well, good old Abraham is torn. He loves his wife, Sarah, and his new son, Isaac. And yet, he also loves his son, Ishmael, and may have some love for Hagar. The text tells us that Abraham was distressed, because it concerned his son, Ishmael.

One cannot, perhaps, underestimate the affection Abraham may have had for Ishmael. Up until the birth of Isaac, Ishmael was Abraham’s only son. They played together, worked together, sang together, learned together. Abraham taught Ishmael about business, about shepherding flocks, about trading, about God. They went hunting together, and if there had been streams, perhaps even fishing together. And now, he was being asked to send them away.

In our family, I can say without hesitation that Mark is my favorite son, and that Rachel is my favorite daughter. When I say that, they often roll their eyes and say, “Dad, I’m your ONLY son”, or “Dad, I’m your ONLY daughter.” Still, they know that I mean it with my whole heart, even if there is some fun in it.

But if Beth came to me one day and said, “You have to choose one or the other”, I am not sure what I would do. Like Abraham, I would be

distressed! And I am grateful Beth has never made that demand, nor would she.

A new addition to the family can bring great changes, and great choices.

Hagar and Ishmael

Early the next morning, Hagar and Ishmael are given some bread and a skin of water, and sent into the desert. This must surely mean death! The desert is no place for a woman and a teenage boy to be wandering with inadequate water. After a while, the water runs out, and Hagar and Ishmael sit down to die. Both are crying, as you might imagine.

It is hopeless. They have been kicked out of their home and family, and cast into an unforgiving desert. There is no hope for survival on their own.

A new addition to the family can bring great changes, and great choices, and great suffering.

God

The main character in this drama, of course, is God. In their book, "How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth", Gordon Fee and Doug Stuart remind us that the hero in all Old Testament stories is God. While many characters in the Old Testament do heroic things, the main focus in the Old Testament is the character of God.

And so it is in this story. It is God who promised a child to Abraham and Sarah, and God who delivered on the promise.

It is God who reassures a distressed Abraham that letting Hagar and Ishmael go is OK. It is God who reconfirms the promise that Ishmael, like Isaac, will become a great nation.

It is God who hears the crying of Hagar and Ishmael in the desert, and so guides them to water, so that they will live to fulfill the promises to them.

It is God who is with the boy as he grows into a young man, a great archer.

A new addition to the family can bring great changes, and great choices, and great suffering, and the greater good.

So what can we possibly learn from this story this morning, that will assist us to grow in faith?

Lesson 1: Life is a Gift

I think the first lesson is that life is a gift. Sarah and Abraham certainly had their part to play in the birth of Isaac. And yet, try as they might, Isaac was not going to be born just because of their efforts. Ultimately, Isaac was a gift to Abraham and Sarah.

This is difficult for Americans to hear, really. We have a bedrock belief that hard work always pays off, and that we have no one to thank but ourselves when things happen. We are the masters of our own fate, the captains of our own ships.

And yet, it is undeniable that life is a gift. None of us chose the moment or our birth. None of us chose the parents or family we had. None of us have much control over the schools we get into or the jobs we wind up getting. None of us is in control of the health of our loved ones. None of us knows the time of our own death.

It is wearisome to think that we are the ones in control of our lives. We have to think through every angle, every possibility, every permutation. Our incessant scheming can rob us of the one thing God wants us to have in this life: joy!

The old Westminster Catechism asks, "What is the chief end of man?" That is, what were human beings created for?

The answer is not, "To work hard all your life, accumulate a bunch of stuff, retire, and die." The answer is: "To love God and enjoy Him forever."

In Sarah's concern for the inheritance of her son, notice she calls Isaac "my son", she loses the joy of having Isaac. And she causes the great suffering of Hagar and Ishmael. If she was selfishly concerned only with herself, we would see the error of her ways. But she is selfishly concerned with Isaac. And by her control, and manipulation, she loses out on the joy that she might find. In fact, in the Genesis story, this is the last role Sarah will play until she dies in chapter 23. Until her death, we do not see her again in this story.

So what about you, this morning? Are you in control? Are you insistent on having your way? Perhaps you have even spiritualized it by being concerned for the welfare of someone else, a parent, a child, a

friend. Your level of control, of feeling that it all depends on you, will rob you of joy, as it did Sarah.

Lesson 2: The Good or the Best?

The second lesson is to be learned from Abraham. And that is, in order to embrace the best, we must sometimes surrender the good. One of my seminary professors used to say, “The good is always the enemy of the best.” That is, sometimes, we settle for what is good, but God wants us to let go of the good, and embrace the best.

This does not mean giving up something bad or detrimental in exchange for something good. It is about settling for less than God intends for us. It is Abraham trying to have two sons that will be great nations, and loving them both, and yet he can only nurture the one, Isaac. While both sons will be great nations, only one will bless the world through his offspring.

Many people reading this story have wondered about the fairness of God. On one level, it’s easy to understand why Sarah and Hagar didn’t get along and it’s also easy to see why Ishmael and Isaac probably wouldn’t grow up to be best friends.

But why would God literally order Abraham to cast off Ishmael and Hagar in such a seemingly cold way? There are two answers to that question. One is that God knew something Abraham didn’t know. He knew he (God) was going to take special care of Ishmael out in the desert. God never intended to see Hagar and Ishmael die in the hot sun. The other answer is that God wanted to protect Isaac because he was the promised seed of Abraham. That’s the reason God gives in verse 12. As long as Ishmael remained in the house, he would be a threat to God’s plan. He had to go, even though it meant hardship and deep sorrow and even though he and Hagar probably never understood why it happened. They felt rejected by Sarah and Abraham—as indeed they were.

To accomplish anything in life you’ve got to give up the good in order to achieve the best. That means that some good things have to go in order that better things may come. This touches so many areas of life—how we spend our time, especially our leisure hours. It ought to cause us to examine our habits and the friends we hang around with. Some things may not be wrong, but they just aren’t good for us. And some friendships

may not be bad, but they keep pulling us in the wrong direction or they us from going where we want to go.

This principle certainly applies to the “hidden” area of life, the part of your life that no one else ever sees. If you want to grow as a Christian, the good must go in order that the best may come. Sometimes God says, “I want that thing to go, because I have something better in mind for you.” Often times when God says that we won’t understand the reason and God won’t always explain it to us in advance. We simply have to obey without having full understanding. That’s what trusting God is all about. (<http://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/1996-06-16-Gods-Good-vs-Gods-Best/>)

So what good thing are you holding onto today, that God may be nudging you to let go, so that you might experience God’s best? Is it a possession? Is it an attitude? Is it a habit? Is it some relationship? Let it go, and embrace God’s best for you.

Our Story or God’s Story

Finally, and briefly, whose story is it? For many people, we try to fit God into the story of our lives. We read the Bible. We pray. We come to church. We even give some money. But we are still in charge. It is still our life. And as long as God does what we want, then we are OK with that.

But in reality, God is too big to fit into our lives. The story of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation is that we are a part of God’s story. And God’s story is a love story, a story about coming to rescue human beings who have made terrible choices, to forgive them, adopt them as sons and daughters, and empower them to live differently from the culture they are in. Ultimately, God’s story is a story of blessing the nations. And we, children of Sarah and Abraham by faith, get to be part of that story.

So which is it for you this morning? Is God a part of your story, or are you a part of God’s story? The life of faith is a journey to discover your part in God’s great story. What is your part in God’s story to bless all the nations of the earth?