

Tell Me the Stories – Abram

Week 2, Genesis Chapter 16 & 21 Ishmael

This week we are looking at the story of Ishmael but the characters of Abraham, Hagar and Sarah are much more prominent. Ishmael is an idea, then a baby and later a child. It isn't until chapter 21 that Ishmael really does much. It is important as we read this story to remember that this is one very complicated family. And just like there were issues with Adam & Eve, Cain & Abel, Noah & his sons, we have issues again – ones that lead to dysfunction. No one is perfect in this story except God. It is important for us to withhold judgment and look at the big picture.

All Age Question: What is one thing that you love about family? What is one thing that drives you crazy about family?

Part 1 Chapter 16:1-6

This story begins in the middle of last week's lessons on covenant. That means when we are reading names we have Abram & Sarai. For the purpose of clarity since we've already covered the covenant and name changes we will keep the names of Abraham & Sarah. So the promise has been made that Abraham will become of the father of many nations and Sarah has not yet had a child. In a previous chapter we learned that the fulfillment of the promise would be a physical son. With nothing happening Sarah proposed her slave to be a surrogate. For Sarah this is a theological issue as well as a physical issue. Scripture does not tell us about the shame that Sarah would have faced in the community being a childless woman. Because it is not mentioned we do not know how this may or may not have affected her. We do know, however, that Sarah believes God's promise. She also knew that God works through humanity. This is not a case of Sarah deciding to take matters into her own hands because she had waited long enough. Sarah was acting because she believed that God worked through humans and perhaps the promise had not been fulfilled because she had not yet done what was needed to be done.

Question: How does God work through our actions? Can you share an example?

What happens when we interpret the actions of Sarah as taking matters into her own hands? It changes our understanding. Because we understand that Sarah is acting in faith this is not a case of Sarah ignoring God's promise or being impatient in waiting. God promised a child and it was not forthcoming. Sarah is acting in good faith. It is only after this chapter that Sarah expressly is added to the promise in the covenant that changes her name from Sarai to Sarah.

Mother Teresa wrote: "I used to pray that God would feed the hungry, or do this or that, but now I pray that he will guide me to do whatever I'm supposed to do, what I can do. I used to pray for answers, but now I'm praying for strength. I used to believe that prayer changes things, but now I know that prayer changes us and we change things."

Question: Do we prayer like Mother Teresa asking God to use us to answer prayer? Do we ask God to change us so that we can change things?

Kid Question: Do you like to make your own decisions or let others decide for you? Why?

The next part of the story is that Hagar conceives and then looks upon Sarah with contempt (verse 5). All too often we look at Sarah as the person who should receive understanding and Hagar is completely left out of the equation. We don't expressly know why Hagar is looking at Sarah with contempt but we can and need to imagine. Hagar was not asked if she wanted to be a surrogate, nor Abraham's second wife. She becomes both because that is what she was told to do. Hagar was a "slave-girl" and her entire life is in the hands of Sarah. Remembering this may help explain contempt. It is this contempt that prompts Sarah to turn to Abraham to fix it. He pushes it back on Sarah to decide what to do. Sarah deals harshly with Hagar who then runs away.

All age Question: How can we understand those in our family better?

Chapter 16:7-16

So deals harshly with a pregnant Hagar, who runs away into the wilderness. And God meets Hagar there. Imagine the desperation of Hagar, she is hopeless. God speaks into the hopelessness, not just hope but gives her promises for the future. God addresses her by name. God makes promises for Ishmael as well.

Throughout these early chapters of Genesis God makes a lot of promises. What does this tell us about God's heart? That God loves creation and wants to make it better. Hagar responds to the promises of God not just with gratitude but with awe. She cannot believe that she saw God and lived.

All age question: How do we see God today? How do we respond when we experience God?

Ishmael Part 2 –

Read Chapter 21:8-21

Hagar faithfully returned to Abraham & Sarah and gave birth to Ishmael who is now about 16 years old. Abraham has now also had a second son, Isaac who in this passage is being weaned. Tradition holds that this happened when he was about 2 years old. Now that Isaac is becoming more aware of his environment Sarah is aware that something has to be done. We know that 2 year olds ask everything that comes to his mind.

All Age Question: What sorts of questions would Isaac ask? What questions would Isaac ask that would make his parents uncomfortable?

Because Isaac is growing up Sarah & Abraham know that they will have to do something about the relationship with Ishmael. Abraham has 2 sons and God makes promises to both sons. Sarah again is the one with the plan. She tells Abraham that he must send Hagar & Ishmael away. Can you imagine how distressed Abraham is in this moment? He has two sons. Abraham does not know the promises that were made to Hagar before Ishmael's birth. God tells Abraham to do as Sarah asks and tells him that the promise will be fulfilled through Isaac not Ishmael. Before Abraham has a chance to process God tells Abraham that Ishmael will have a nation because he is a son of Abraham.

As children we may have sung the song, "Father Abraham had many sons and many sons had Father Abraham..." We, as Christians think of the many sons as descendants through Isaac's youngest son Jacob and the 12 tribes of Israel (Jacob's new name). These are God's chosen people, whose story fills the Old Testament, are who modern Jewish people claim their heritage. Through the New Testament we hear the story of the 12 Jewish disciples who become the 1st Christian Apostles. This is our story. Abraham, as we know has 2 sons and Ishmael is promised to become a nation. Ishmael was known as a prophet and one of his descendants was the prophet Muhammad and their story in the Qu'ran is the holy book of our Muslim brothers and sisters. Our text does not contain this story but in Islamic tradition when God tells Abraham to do what Sarah says concerning Hagar & Ishmael, that Abraham himself takes them to their destination. Our text tells us that Abraham gives them water & bread and sends them off.

So Hagar & Ishmael are on their own. Before too long they run out of water and Hagar is again in anguish. She knows that without water they will both die and she cannot bear having to hold her son as he dies. As she cries out & weeps God hears her, gives her comfort, a promise and water. Our text concludes that God was with Ishmael as he grew and that his mother found him a wife, the only time in the bible where the mother does this.

Question: How might we understand our Jewish & Muslim siblings better?

Kid Question: How do we begin to get to know new people? How do we understand each other?

What do these stories tell us about God?

God is not a puppet master pulling the strings of our lives. It might be easier for God if that was it but we God has given us free choice. Does that mean that God is absent? No. In these stories we clearly see that when Hagar calls out, God responds. It also reminds us that God is not only there for the chosen ones. God answers prayers and makes promises to a slave-girl from Egypt. It is important to remember that our God is the God of ALL creation and we cannot hold claim to be the only ones with whom God cares for. How might we reach out using the blessings we have to others? What we believe about God matters deeply for us and our witness in the world.

Question: What have you learned about God in these chapters?

Prayer: God Almighty, don't stop working in us and through us when we are struggling. Give us guidance and strength to act when we must to bless, not only our but the lives of our neighbors. Amen.