

“All lives matter”

Genesis 21:1-21 (June 25, 2023)

If you remember last Sunday’s service at Bethany Manor, you’ll know that we spoke about laughter. Sarah laughed when she heard God’s promise that she would have a child, though she was well beyond her child-bearing years.



When I say beyond, I mean – humanly speaking. Then again, “Is anything too difficult for the Lord?” People of all ages can be part of God’s great plan for creation.

As our passage begins today, we see the fulfilment of God’s promise. Sarah *did* have a child, much to her amazement. 90 year old Sarah became a mother, and 100 year old Abraham a father. Who’d have thought? “God has brought laughter for me;” says giddy Sarah. And “everyone who hears will laugh with me.”

Do you know what they named that child? Isaac. Do you know Isaac means? Isaac means: “He laughs!” So, everyone is laughing.

But today our story takes a dramatic turn in the *opposite* direction. Today it’s not so much about the laughter.



It may start that way, with Abraham throwing a party for his now-weaned son, who is healthy and growing. It was a great feast, a day of celebration.

But then Sarah catches a glimpse of two children playing: Little Isaac and his older brother Ishmael. And the joy drains from Sarah’s face, leaving a darkness there like the clouds of a menacing thunderstorm on a hot summer day.

“Take him away,” she shouts at Abraham. “Get that son-of-a-slave-woman out of this house. I won’t have them anywhere near my beloved Isaac.”



There is a history to this stormy outburst. Back in chapter 16 you can read about it. Childless Sarah was impatient with God. After years of trying, and still no pregnancy, she gave her young Egyptian slave-girl, Hagar, to her husband.

Abraham conceived a child with Hagar. That brought tension between Sarah and her slave. Sarah was jealous of Hagar, and Hagar looked with contempt on her mistress. There is bad blood between these two, not surprisingly. Families can be difficult things. Especially ones like this.

Now Sarah decides it’s time for Hagar and Ishmael to go. “I don’t care what happens, just get rid of them,” she tells her husband.

Scripture says, “The matter was very distressing to Abraham.” But after an angel reassured him, he complied with Sarah’s wishes. Early in the morning, Abraham rose. He took some bread and a skin of water. And with those meagre provisions, sent them on their way.

Where would they go? How could they possibly survive? In that harsh wilderness setting, we can’t expect them to last for long. They wander in the desert. When they run out of water, Hagar knows their journey is drawing to a close.



What follows is one of the most pathetic scenes we have in all of scripture. A mother takes her beloved son, and sets him down under the shade of a bush.

“Then she went and sat down ... a good way off ... for she said, ‘Do not let me look on the death of the child.’ “And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept.”



Oh my! Wouldn't that just about break your heart? We wonder what will happen to these two most vulnerable people in such a desperate circumstance. Two cast-aways with nowhere to go. No food, no water, no home to return to.

Back in Abraham's tent, they're cleaning up the remnants of the party. For Sarah, the problem has disappeared. Hagar is out of sight. She brushes off awkward questions that may be asked. It's no longer her concern. But for Hagar and Ishmael, it's a very dark day. The laughter, for them, is finished.



The Bible is not a book of fairy tales, it's a story of life, real life – in all its glory and its struggle. And it's not just a book about long ago, it speaks of a God who is present in the here and now. So with that in mind, let me ask you: What dark days have *you* experienced? Have you found the presence of the Lord to be there too?

I was speaking with someone earlier this week who told me this is one of her favourite passages, because it shows us what God can do. And it's true. This is a powerful story of God's provision in the wilderness.



I told you that Isaac had a special name – “he laughs”. Did you know that Ishmael's name was significant too? Ishmael means “God hears.” God listens to Ishmael's distress. An angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, “What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is.” God has *heard ... Ishmael!*

This is not a story of escape, but of survival. God does not remove them from the wilderness. But rather, God provides for them in the wilderness. In that dry, hot, and dangerous, place. So many times we pray, “God get me out of here!” But that doesn't always happen, does it? The danger remains. The conditions are still dire. The discouragement is real.

So now God opens Hagar's eyes. And now she sees a well of water. How could she have missed it? God's provision for them had been there all along.

Water in the wilderness. Life in the desert. God's abundance beyond our imagination. Precious, life-giving *water*. What might there be for you?





Charles Paul Landon: Hagar Giving Ishmael Water From the Miraculous Well in the Desert

See what God can do? Even more importantly, see who God does it *for*!

My point here is that it's not *just* the child of promise, the child of laughter, Sarah's darling one, who is blessed by God. Yes, Isaac will be the child through whom God's covenant with Abraham is fulfilled. God will make of him a great nation. Those who bless him will be blessed. Those who curse him will be cursed. And through him all the families of the earth will be blessed. And that's a wonderful thing – for all of us.

But look closely now at what the angel says to Hagar. And note, this promise has been stated already twice before, so it's no mistake. The angel said to Hagar, "Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand ... for I will make a great nation of him."

I will make a great nation of *Ishmael*! The promise is strikingly similar to the one that is given to his half-brother Isaac. Both will have a role to play in the unfolding of God's divine purpose for creation.

We may think that being God's chosen people confers some sort of privileged status that others go without. But be *careful* with that! God's love is unreservedly for the whole creation and all of humanity. To be chosen by God for a special purpose in the world is both a privilege and a great responsibility.

In this story, God's love is given not only to the child of promise, but *also* to the outsider, the one with no privilege, no status, no place in the family, the abandoned one, the victim of Sarah's wrath.



Here's what I'm trying to say. We are all precious children of God. Every child matters.

Your life matters. No matter who you are. No matter what dark and dangerous circumstance you may find yourself in. Do you ever feel troubled, abandoned, alone? An outsider? Not one of the privileged few? Outside the circle of God's love?



We draw circles all the time – within our families of origin, and within the larger human family we are part of. Who's on the outside? Refugees, lonely seniors, children living in poverty. A patient in hospital. A person grieving the loss of a loved one, while the world (with such insensitivity) goes on its merry way.

In Abraham's tent there is laughter. But there, in the wilderness where Hagar and Ishmael find themselves, there is weeping and distress.



When's the last time you had a dark day? I ask, because faith isn't always about days of sunshine and laughter.

Of course we're grateful when it is! When life is good and full of joy, and you hear God's gracious word of promise given just for you. It's

truly wonderful. But there is a flip side to that. A grace that is given to us when there is *no* laughter. And we are in distress.

Faith in God, if it means anything at all, means that's God's loving presence is available to us in those dark days too. There is an angel to hear our voice. And not only ours, but the voice of every Ishmael.



And that raises one further question: Can we have compassion for others who go through dark days? Or are we too much like Sarah, out to protect our own precious children, and guard the future God has in store for *them* ... but oblivious to the plight of our neighbour?

I've borrowed the title for my sermon today from a phrase you may recognize. It rises from the survivors of Indian Residential Schools. It comes from the pain of children, now grown old, who like Ishmael, have felt isolated and abandoned.

There are deniers of this, apparently. As there are deniers of the holocaust too. Why is it so difficult for us to simply hear their voice? Can we listen, as God listens? Can we have compassion, as God has compassion?

There are so many in our world today who are forgotten. Sometimes we ourselves are among them.



The Good News – are you ready for it? – is simple. The God of *Jesus* – whose eye is on the sparrow, who clothes the lilies of the field, who counts every hair on our head and knows the number of our days – this God is present with us at all times and in all places.



This God loves us with a love that will not let us go! And faith in this God is *not* only for those who are laughing, but for *everyone, all* the time. Thanks be to God!

