

Sermon – Fourth Sunday After Pentecost (Proper 7A)

Scripture Texts: Genesis 21:8-21; Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17; Romans 6:1b-11; Matthew 10:24-39
Sermon preached at Gloria Dei (Old Swedes') Episcopal Church

Focus Statement: *We worship the God who not only sees, but also liberates: both slave and enslaver are offered freedom in God's kingdom. Though taking up that freedom can be divisive and costly, it ultimately leads to flourishing for all.*

Loving God: May my spoken words be faithful to your written Word, and lead us all to better know the living WORD, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Outline:

1. Challenging Texts

- a. There is irony in this passage from Matthew coming to us on Father's Day...
 - i. "I have come to set a man against his father..." – How does this square with the 5th commandment???
 - ii. "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword." – Isn't healthy Christianity supposed to be about unifying people? Especially in the Episcopal Church, we emphasize that all are welcome, and we work to build bridges, being "the middle way."
 - iii. Thankfully, especially in a season when we are focusing on OT stories, our OT passage today provides some crucial insight and guidance for interpreting Jesus. Still, it is not without major challenges of its own.
- b. Hagar's story isn't 'supposed' to be here!
 - i. Genesis, and the OT as a whole, focuses on God's relationship with the people of Israel, on the covenants that God makes with this particular people.
 - ii. God has made covenant with Abraham and Sarah, promising them descendants – and Hagar is not part of that promise! Rather, in the grand narrative, Hagar is a mistake made by the main characters when they grew impatient and tried to fulfill God's promise by themselves.
 - iii. Her son, Ishmael, is a child of Abraham, but the text makes clear that his is not the promised child, through whom God's promises will be fulfilled.
- c. So, if this story went the way it was 'supposed' to, Hagar and Ishmael would be made villains and written out.
 - i. Some translators try to do just that! NRSV says Ishmael was playing with Isaac, but many translations say that he was mocking Isaac.
 - ii. In reality, the Hebrew is very ambiguous, and doesn't actually mention Isaac at all. However, it is clear that Sarah feels threatened by Ishmael's existence. And, when someone in power feels threatened by a subordinate or minority, we know all too well what happens next. Abraham and Sarah drive them out into the wilderness, seemingly to die.
 - iii. What is especially interesting, however, is that Hagar and Ishmael's story doesn't end with them being driven out, and the text refuses to make them the villains.

2. The God who Sees – and Liberates!

- a. Hagar and Ishmael are driven out into the wilderness, but it is here that they encounter God. God hears their distress and provides for this mother and child. More, God makes a promise – a covenant – with Hagar. This slave woman who has been used and abused receives a promise from God that her son will live and will father a nation... and we see the beginning of this promise being fulfilled by the end of our reading.
 - b. But, Hagar’s story is even more interesting than that, because this isn’t her first brush with death in the wilderness. While she was pregnant with Ishmael, back in Genesis chapter 16, she had previously attempted to flee from her abusive masters into the wilderness, and God had met and provided for her there; on that occasion, God promised that she would survive her time with Abraham and Sarah, and that her son would not be forever enslaved. In response, Hagar did something that no one else, in all of the Bible, does: she named God! Using the same language as a mother would use to name her child, Hagar named God *El-Roi*, the God-Who-Sees.
 - c. In the story of Hagar and Ishmael, God is revealed to us as the God who sees. God sees the plight of the oppressed and enslaved and marginalized. God sees and cares for them. And, as we see in today’s text, God not only sees, but also liberates! Hagar is finally set free from her enslavers, and rescued from the wilderness. She and Ishmael are able to build a new life and to flourish. God sees, and God also liberates! (This is especially significant this weekend, when Juneteenth calls us to remember the end of American slavery!)
3. The cost of freedom
- a. So, the story of Hagar holds good news for us – but it also holds a challenge!
 - i. There are times when we all face forms of oppression and marginalization; Hagar’s story assures us that God sees us in our moments of greatest need, and is working for our freedom and flourishing.
 - ii. But, I think it’s also very important to be honest about the reality that many of us often have more in common with Abraham and Sarah than we do with Hagar.
 - b. We live in a world shaped by demonic forces like sexism, racism, materialism, militarism, and homophobia – forces that seek to corrupt and destroy the people of God (forces that the Bible refers to, collectively, as sin).
 - i. But, many of us (if we’re honest) benefit from those forces, by virtue of our gender, or our orientation, or the color of our skin, or our access to wealth and education, or even our nationality.
 - ii. And this is where we come to understand the stark words of Jesus in today’s Gospel passage. Challenging these demonic forces is difficult work that all too often drives wedges between family members – as we are seeing in our country today.
 - iii. In his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, Dr. King observed that those of us in positions of power and privilege are often inclined to preach peace and unity at the expense of the victims of these demonic forces. And it here that Jesus has “not come to bring peace, but a sword.”
 - c. Thankfully, the liberation that God offers is not only for the oppressed, but for the oppressors as well!
 - i. The reality is that these demonic forces corrupt and destroy even the people who benefit from them. Abraham and Sarah enslaved and exploited and abused Hagar, but they also deeply harmed themselves in the process (as hinted at in the reluctance Abraham shows to send away Ishmael, the son that he has loved up to this point).

- ii. God sees us, in our places of pain and need – and also in our places of privilege and power. Wherever we are, we are called to embrace freedom and to join God in the work of liberation.
- iii. Sometimes, we must be willing to examine the systems that benefit us at the expense of others. Sometimes we must be willing to step out of those systems, to name them for what they are, and to work to change them – or even to tear them down.
- d. This can be difficult and divisive work, but Jesus makes it clear that this is also holy work – and that it ultimately leads not to death, but to life!
 - i. “Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”
 - ii. May we know God as the one who sees and who liberates, and may we have the courage to follow Jesus, on the way of the cross, into freedom and new life.

Amen.

Notes

- We worship the God who not only sees, but liberates.
- Sin, and slavery to sin, is about more than personal morality. It is about the systems of injustice that corrupt and destroy the people of God (ALL creation!)
- In Hagar’s story, God is revealed as the one who sees and the one who liberates. We see God’s particular care for the oppressed.
- This is good news, but we need to be honest that many of us sometimes have more in common with Abraham and Sarah than we do with Hagar.
- Here, God liberates, but it is by calling us to leave the systems of injustice - to examine and challenge the systems that benefit people who look like us, or who have similar incomes, or who love like us, or who have similar education and articulation. It requires us to be honest about the systems that benefit us over others, and to be willing to step out of those systems and work to change them - or sometimes to even tear them down!
- This is what Jesus means when he says he has not come to bring peace but the sword. This is divisive work at times, but it is also the only hope for those enslaved to sin.
- Recognize that BOTH the slaves and the masters are enslaved to sin! There is a cost to Abraham in continuing in his position of power - he loses his relationship with Ishmael!