

A God for All People
Genesis 21:8-21
June 25, 2017 – The Third Sunday After Pentecost

The story of Ishmael as presented in Genesis is hugely important, and perhaps it's more important today than in times past as our world is getting smaller and as peoples of differing faiths come into an ever closer relationship with each other. You see, tradition tells us that Abraham, through his descendent Ishmael, is the father of Islam; and indeed we find a nearly parallel story to that presented in Genesis 21 in the Koran.

Ishmael was the first son of Abraham, born of the Egyptian slave Hagar. When Sarah, Abraham's wife was unable to conceive, she gave Hagar to Abraham in what we might call the world's first surrogate mother. But then Sarah did conceive; and she became jealous of Hagar and Ishmael. She was concerned that Ishmael may inherit both rights and property that she felt should be going to her son, Isaac. So, she told Abraham, "Put this woman and her son out. This servant's son will not share the inheritance with my son, Isaac."

Abraham was rightly distressed by this, but God intervened. God told Abraham, "Don't be upset. Do what Sarah asks because your descendents will be traced through Isaac. But I will also make your servant's son a great nation, because he is also your descendent." That nation is Islam – one of what we refer to as the three Abrahamic faiths: Islam, Judaism, and Christianity. Indeed, as God is the God of the Jews, and later the Christians; God is also the God of the Muslims.

It was in the early 1990's that I was involved in a study; what might be called a roundtable discussion on the Book of Genesis, held at Fairmount Temple, a large Jewish Synagogue on the East Side. I will never forget coming to this passage, and an elderly Jewish man – traditionally dressed, in a black suit, black hat, and beard – stood up and pronounced: "It seems to me that it's time that Mr. Netanyahu and Mr. Arafat [the then Palestinian Leader], would recognize that they are, at the very least, cousins!" Would that the Israel, and Palestine, and the rest of the world would indeed recognize that Jews and Muslims and Christians are all cousins in the faith.

So, back to our Genesis Story. . . Abraham does send Hagar and her son, Ishmael, away to wander in the desert. Eventually their water runs out; and Hagar begins to grieve for her son and their situation. Key point here. . . God heard their cries, and God responded. Hagar opened her eyes and before her, in the midst of the desert was a well. She filled her flask with water, and gave it to her son who grew up to be the leader of a nation. The Koran tells us that the location of that miraculous well was Mecca, which is today a major Islamic pilgrimage site.

This was, of course, two thousand years before the birth of Jesus. Christianity was still a long way into the future. And Islam, as we know it today, with its roots in the teachings of the Prophet Mohammad is still younger. Mohammad lived in the late sixth and early seventh century A.D. But all three religions trace their roots back to Abraham.

I once made the statement, in a Sunday School Class I was teaching that Jews, Christians, and Muslims all worship the same God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Well, word of this statement got back to my pastor at the time, who confronted me. He stated, "Jews and Muslims do not worship the same God as Christians do; because Christians worship a triune God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; and Jews and Muslims do not." I replied, "Well let's think about this. If Jews and Christians do not worship the same God; that means we don't worship the same God that Jesus worshiped. I worship the same God that Jesus worshiped; don't you?" My pastor responded, "I need to think about that."

Friends, we all worship the same God, the only God, the God of Abraham and the God of Jesus of Nazareth, a God that is infinite in time and space and ultimate in nature. We may relate to that God differently. We may have a different view of that God; and, as I've stated before, I believe the Christian view is superior, because I believe the Christian view encourages a more intimate, up-close, personal, loving relationship with God through our doctrine of the risen Christ and the Holy Spirit.

Now, I ask you to allow me to stretch my point a bit. . . A number of years ago, I was asked to teach a unit on Hinduism as part of an Introduction to Religion Class I was teaching at John Carroll University. In preparation, I majorly dug into the Hindu faith which I knew very little about prior to this assignment. Now I suspect most of us know that Hinduism is a polytheistic faith with literally thousands of gods. But, as I studied, I found writings of the mystics that explained that all the Hindu gods emanated and were of the same substance as the one creator God Brahma. No, I will NOT go so far as to suggest that the Hindus worship the same god as Jews, Christians, and Muslims. The differences are just too great with all the temples and images, etc. But as I read of all the gods being of the same substance and emanating from Brahma, I was forced to ask myself if this is really that different from the Christian belief of one God in three persons – Father, Son, and Spirit.

Friends, there is only one God. Earlier in our service, we heard what Jews refer to as "the Shema" – "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, The Lord is one..." (The word "Shema" is simply the Hebrew word for "Hear.") But this statement is the central tenant of Judaism – "You should love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." The commandment further states that you should teach this to your children, bind the commandment to your

hands and foreheads, and write it on your doorposts. (Deut 6:4 ff.) And indeed, a good Jew does just that.

But let us not forget that this is also the central commandment of Christianity. When Christ was asked what is the greatest commandment, this is the one he cited. I also note that he went on to cite a second commandment – from the Holiness Codes of Leviticus: “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”(Lev. 19:18)

Indeed, there is only one God of all people; and as I have studied the great religions, I also find one central commandment – a commandment to love, to love God, to love all God’s people, to love all creation. Of course, every religion has its perversions. It deeply saddens me, that the media focuses on extremist Muslim terrorists to the point that a significant part of the population believes that they represent the Muslim faith. I’ve spoken before about teaching a unit on Islam (in a different course than the unit on Hinduism); but, after concluding the class in which I spoke about the pillars of Islam, a young Islamic woman walked up to me with tears in your eyes. She said, “Thank You.” I said, “Thank you for what?” I did not know she was a Muslim; she did not wear traditional dress; but she stated, “I’m a Muslim. Thank you for telling the class, my people also love peace.” I will never forget those words, from a young college student – “Thank you for telling the class, my people also love peace.”

Friends, every week, in the church we pray for peace; and we will continue to pray for peace as long as there is bloodshed in our world, because I believe with all my being that the one God whom we worship is a God of peace and a God of love; and, it’s time that we all recognize that Jew and Christians and Muslims, and yes maybe even Hindus and Buddhists and Agnostics and Atheists are all cousins. Cousins in the family of God.

Let us pray. . .

Lord,
Indeed, you are the God of all people.
And so we pray for your children everywhere.
May all people know your peace and your love.
May all people know your holy presence in their lives.
And may we, your people in this place work to make it so.
In your holy name.
Amen.

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