

**Proper 7A - 6/22/08
St. David's**

A few weeks ago, The Rev. Canon Dave Bailey called me and asked if I would consider making a road trip. He told me that he had just left St. Barnabas in Tooele and had a long conversation with their Vestry about the future. St. Barnabas is in the midst of a search for a new Rector. The first step in choosing a priest is to understand who you are, and Dave told me that they were really struggling with their identity. "They seem to believe," Dave said, "that the only way a church can grow in their part of the world, is to take a literal and/or fundamentalist approach to the Bible. That's not the way they understand themselves," he told me, "but they also really want to grow. Would you consider telling them the story of St. David's, so they can hear a real example of a mainline church thriving?"

I took that trip to Tooele on Tuesday and that evening told the congregation your story. But before I arrived, I got to know a little bit about the theology of the people there when their interim Rector, Len Evans, picked me up at the airport and talked to me about them on the way to the church. Though Len was thorough in his explanation, I

actually learned more about the parish when Len received a call from the parish administrator on our way there. Len was inspired to buy a Prius after visiting Jean and I a year or so ago, but he got the one with all the bells and whistles, including a bluetooth phone deal. So I was able to sit there and listen to the entire conversation he had with the administrator. She began, “I’ve been thinking about this all day and I really need your help. What is the deal with this Abraham guy? And why do people keep telling me I’m related to him? I don’t appreciate other people telling me who they think might be my relative. I’m not related to him, am I? He’s kind of weird.”

So Len carefully told her about Abraham’s blood lines through Jesus and then said, “so in a way, we are all related to him. He is the father of Judaism and eventually, Christianity. By faith, we are all related.

“So,” she said, “he’s not really an actual person right? These stories about him in the bible, they didn’t actually happen right? They are more like those myth things you’ve been telling us about, right? Because I really don’t want to be related to a guy who would do those

things.”

None of us, of course, wants to be related to a guy who would do those things. We all know the story of Isaac, Abraham’s son bore to him through Sara, and the gory tale of how he took that son out to kill him because he believed that was what God told him to do. That will be our reading next week. But today, we get an Abraham story fewer of us know, the story of Abraham’s relationship with his first born son, Ishmael, bore to him through Hagar. We haven’t heard this story as often because it was not in the old lectionary at all. That’s another reason why we started using the Revised Common Lectionary here at St. David’s years and years ago. It, for the most part, does not skip the embarrassing stories of Biblical characters behaving badly. It forces us to deal directly with the fact that the people we hold up as our heroes and saints are often not exactly saint like. They are instead, more like you and me, often confronted with very difficult decisions and sometimes making poor choices that they will have to live with forever. In fact, if you want to see a contemporary version of how we continue to live into Abraham’s legacy today, check out the movie or

the book, *The Kite Runner*. It is a fascinating tale of a modern day Abraham, Ishmael and Isaac, and how they deal with their own history, mistakes and guilt and attempt to find redemption.

But today's story is not just a tale of our predecessors and how we are to deal with the fact that the mother of our religious tradition was so jealous, she ran off her husband's own family into an almost sure death in the desert. It is not just the story of the father of our tradition not having the courage to stand up for his own wife and first born son. It is not just a tragic and embarrassing tale for all of us with Jewish and Christian roots. It is also the story of another entire faith tradition. Though we hear little about Hagar and Ishmael anywhere else in the Bible, they will become central characters in another sacred text, the Quran. Because just as Judaism and Christianity trace their beginnings back to Abraham, so do Muslims. The roots of our tradition occur through Sara and Isaac and the roots of the Muslim tradition happen through Hagar and Ishmael. Just as Jesus is seen as a descendent of Abraham through Isaac, Muhammed is seen as a descendent of Abraham through Ishmael.

Here, right in our sacred text, we have evidence that God's plan was never to a single culture or a single religious tradition. From the very beginning, according to the Bible, God chose religious diversity.

Some have tried to disparage the Muslim tradition, by suggesting that Ishmael was a bastard, and that Isaac was the real son. But as we all know, it was common in that day for men to have sex with family slaves, especially when they had no male heir. Sara, in fact, insisted that Abraham do so. We also know that the first born son held all the family rights and inheritance cards in that culture. But even more importantly than that, God is the one who endorses Hagar and Ishmael. Yahweh makes this clear twice in today's first reading. First he tells Abraham. "As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring. Then, when Hagar is staring death in the eye, the angel of God, very reminiscent of the one Mary will hear many years later, tells her, "Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy...I will make a great nation of him."

There is virtually no difference between the promise God makes to Sara and Abraham about Isaac and what will become Judaism and

the promise God makes to Hagar and Abraham about Ishmael and what will become Islam.

But if you didn't know that tradition, if you didn't know about the three faith traditions that would grow out of this one patriarch, Abraham, I ask you the question asked by the administrator at St. Barnabas. If you had a choice, would you prefer to be related to Abraham? And perhaps more to the point, if you got to choose between Abraham's two families, who would you pick as your ancestors? Sara and Isaac or Hagar and Ishmael? Would you rather be connected to the family that kicked out the other into the desert to fend for themselves, or the people who got kicked out?

I, for one, would have to side with the parish administrator at St. Barnabas and choose the family that became disconnected from Abraham. I would much rather have in my genes the pain and suffering of Hagar and Ishmael, then carry the legacy of a family who rejected their own family.

Based solely on the origination narratives of the two religions, I have to tell you that I relate much more to the Islamic tradition than I

do our own. Does that mean that I am suggesting to all of you this morning that we should convert to Islam? Of course not. There is a lot more to the story than this single tale. But I think this one story does have much to say to us about how we relate to Muslims. For one thing, how could any practicing Jew or Christian accept our own Biblical tradition and simultaneously reject the validity of the Muslim tradition? If nothing else, today's reading makes it clear that God blessed and cared for the origins of Islam, just as God did our own tradition. From a Jewish or Christian perspective, we cannot do anything but honor and respect anyone who makes the theological choice to be Muslim.

This understanding alone would go a long way toward easing the tensions among Muslims, Jews and Christians today. But if we can sit with the uncomfortableness of this story a little longer, I believe it offers us even more. Let us, for a second, put ourselves in the place of a devout Muslim in the Middle East today. Your tradition is rooted in the story of this mother who suffers to the point of not being able to sustain her own child. While this is happening, the family who threw this women out into the desert becomes famous and financially well

endowed. They seem to benefit from the pain and suffering of Hagar and Ishmael. Now, how would you interpret the world situation today when one country consumes the vast majority of the world's resources, while people all around you look just like Hagar, not even able to provide for their own children?

If we, as a nation, would have taken the time to understand why a Muslim from the Middle East might see American capitalism as a direct attack on their religion and their livelihood, if we had attempted to understand the roots of their concern, imagine how differently we might have approached Iraq and Afghanistan. Imagine how many lives would have been saved and how we could have worked together to lift the Hagers and the Ishmaels up to a life of dignity and respect, as God intended. Imagine how Israel and Iran might understand each other today, instead of building nuclear weapons to destroy one another.

The story of Sara and Abraham like the story of Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah and Ham, the people at the tower of Babel and countless other stories in our text are not always easy to hear. They remind us that all of us come from dysfunctional families of one sort or

another. They remind us that we too have often prospered at the expense of others.

We learn from these stories when we are willing to accept that, yes, these are our ancestors and we screw up just like them. We learn from them when we realize that God is with us despite our failings, but also that God is with the other, blessing other people and other faith traditions, just like God blesses ours.

Finally, we realize today that our Biblical lessons rarely come from the example of our ancestors, whether those ancestors be Hagar, Sara or Abraham. Our example comes from God. God is not the co-conspirator with Sara and Abraham in their repulsive behavior. Instead, God is the one who reaches out compassionately to protect Hagar and Ishmael when they are abandoned by their own family. The human model of family suggests that the way to deal with this jealousy problem is to ostracize family members. They become outcasts. Families do the same today when a member of the family does not meet their social or ethical expectations. They are disowned, they are outcasts. I think particularly of families who will no longer associate

with gay members of their family or alcoholics or drug addicts.

But God's model does not sanction such a view of family life.

God despises it. And who do God's sympathies rest with when families hurt each other? The outcast. The one who has been left out in the cold. God protects Ishmael and Hagar, just like God cares for all of us when we are left out by our families or others. The lesson in the story of the Abraham family is not what THEY do, but what God does.

We get a similar message from Jesus in the Gospel. Just like the bulk of Jesus's parables, his message here is meant for the outsider, the outcast. He notes that even the most forgotten in all of creation, in this example, the sparrows, are cared for by God. God cares for all of us, so we need not worry. I think it is important to note here that Jesus does not say that sparrows will no longer fall. We will continue to face suffering and pain. In fact, these times are often when we feel God's presence most intimately. But when we feel rejected by all the world, even our own family, this is when God is most aware of our plight, and why we often become aware of God more in a crisis than any other time. That, of course, is exactly when Hagar and Ishmael

discover that God is with them. In fact, that is what the name Ishmael means, God hears us.

The key is to remember that no matter who else abandons us, we remain in relationship with God. And in fact, the more segregated we are from our families or from the rest of society, the more God seems to reach out to us. None of us, no matter how ostracized we become are islands. None of us are made to be rugged individualists. All of us are in a divine-human relationship. All of us have family, regardless of our blood relationships.

This morning then, let us not reject our connection to Abraham and all of our biblical ancestors. Let us learn from them, and from God's response to their bad behavior, so that we may never again create outcasts of our own family. Let us also realize that our own family extends not just to our blood relatives and our faith relatives, but to Muslims and people of all faith traditions the world over, with whom we are intimately connected. Let us never again make outcasts of anyone and may we lift up every Hagar and Ishmael we find along the way. Amen.