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Proper 7A – Genesis (21:8-21); Romans (6:1b-11); Matthew (10:24-39)
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St. John's Episcopal Church, Wichita, KS

In today's Gospel story, Jesus tells us that our faith will set relatives against one another. And our Old Testament lesson shows us how.

Here in the very first book of the Bible, in the very first family of three different faiths, is a story of drama and intrigue that is so complex and harrowing that it would be hard to make it up.

It is a story that includes slavery and polygamy, racism and surrogate motherhood, a story as old as humanity and as modern as our front pages. And it is all framed around the love of God.

Because God has promised Abraham that he will be the father of a great nation. And Sarah has been promised a son. And after waiting several decades for these promises to be fulfilled, and starting to get nervous and impatient, they take matters into their own hands.

Hagar is Sarah's slave, there is no way around this. She is Abraham's property. And by law, any child that is born to a slave is the property of the master. So Sarah arranges for Abraham to have a child by Hagar, but as soon as the deed is done, and Hagar gives birth to a boy, Sarah is overcome with regret and jealousy, and she abuses Hagar and resents her son. Also, Hagar's status changes and she starts to act a little bit more like a wife than is good for her in her current situation.

Even after Sarah has a boy of her own, Isaac, Ishmael is still the older, and by rights, the bearer of God's promise and inheritance, and Sarah simply can't stand it. She demands that the slave woman, the Egyptian, the second wife with the first child, be cast away.

And there is an interesting bit of Bible scholarship in this verse, because some versions of the Bible say that Ishmael 'mocked' Isaac, which casts Sarah in a somewhat better light. But the New Revised Standard version, which we use in church and is generally regarded to be the most exact translation from the original Hebrew, says that the boys were simply playing. There is nothing for Sarah to fall back on. She made this mess and now she is going to clean it up, with brute force if necessary.

Because sending someone out into the desert, especially a mother and a child, is an absolute death sentence.

This is the origin of our faith.

And not just ours, but of course the Jewish faith, from whose stories Christianity was born. And not just these, because the Islamic faith takes particular interest in Ishmael, the child cast out, the firstborn of Abraham, and the Prophet Mohammed is believed to be a descendent of this son and Hagar.

Right at the beginning of peoples and nations believing in one God, believing that we have been chosen by God to be receivers of blessings and promises and bound together by the love of God, from the very first it has been complicated.

Not peace, but a sword.

Is it any wonder that we are still fighting?

Sometimes, when I am part of a conversation about the Holy Land, and all the tragedy and warfare that has occurred on that small plot of earth, somebody says something like, 'what would God think about all of God's children fighting over religion?' And I think to myself, 'God has had plenty of evidence of that it would come to this.' Jesus warned us in advance.

And, of course, it is not just happening somewhere else. Right here on our streets, a presidential candidate has to take steps to assure the public that he is not a Muslim, and it goes without saying that it would not be ok if he were, in our land of religious freedom. Two eighty-year old women are married after 50 years together, and they are verbally assaulted because their life-long love is called an abomination to God.

The names have been changed but the situations are no easier for those who believe in God's promises.

Sarah, after all, was reckoned as righteous, and it was, indeed, her child Isaac who became part of the lineage that came to include Jesus and the promise of eternal life, despite what she did. But Ishmael, too, received a blessing, and a name that means, 'God hears,' because God heard Hagar and the boy crying and would not leave them alone to die.

And so we are left with a legacy of believing that God's favor rests on us, but also the lingering feeling that God, in the end, leaves no one else out.

That WE may cast out others who threaten us, frighten us, whose beliefs are diametrically opposed to ours or who otherwise don't measure up, but somehow, beyond our understanding, the love of God reaches farther than we ever could.

But what do we DO? It is inevitable that we end up thinking this. How do we fix this situation? How do we repair the divisions in our families, in our country, in our world?

How can we believe that we will ever get to a place where we all get along, where we all see and understand each others' views?

Well, maybe WE don't.

It seems to me that the peace that Sarah and Hagar both ended up finding was not a peace brokered by them, it was not a place where they both got something they wanted from each other or even a place of forgiveness.

Both of them found peace when they were brought to the end of their respective ropes and they both gave up hoping that their lives could be different. It was only when they were brought to faith in God, and only when they got there by seeing that they themselves could do no more, it was only in this place that their lives began to turn around, that they began to understand the miraculous power of God's love of them.

The division that Jesus talks about in the Gospel is a division caused by the belief that God is real. And that does NOT mean the way we usually understand it, that my belief in God allows me to tell you that your beliefs are wrong.

Instead I think it means that the real power of God often brings us to places where there is no clear easy answer. Where we can both be right and have those right answers be in opposition. Or where we can ALL be wrong.

But what saves it is not our belief that WE can referee our own deepest disputes. It is the belief that this very power – this power in a God who loves us, who never leaves us, who is leading us all to the place we need to be, that this will be the peace that we eventually find, the salvation of us all.

What do we DO? We believe. We don't stop affirming our belief. We keep letting our beliefs lead us to do what we think is right. We listen for God's voice every day, as Abraham let God convince him to make a difficult decision that was ok in the end.

The world HAS been divided by our belief in Jesus. And in Yahweh. And in Allah. It has been divided by Sarah sending Hagar out to die.

But all along the way, it has been reconciled by the miracles of God, by the faith of those who follow. By the cross of the one who warned us that this would not be easy.

But it will be good. It will be the kingdom of God.