

Texts: Genesis 21:8-21, Matthew 10:34-39

We've all been there, or some place like it. It starts with the unexpected phone call; you immediately know, from the hesitating, subdued voice on the other end, that this is not good. It may be about your parent, your grandparent. Or the test came back, the teenager is pregnant. Or the test came back, and it's that dreaded word you never want to hear. And the world spins, out of control; life turns upside down.

Sarah and Abraham had been waiting, and waiting, and waiting for the promised gift, a son to be given. God promised his birth more than 20 years before it happened, when Abraham and Sarah were a lot younger, though already too old to be parents. The Bible tells about the birth in simple, matter-of-fact terms. "The Lord carried out just what he had promised." (Gen. 21:1) Sarah became pregnant and gave birth to a son. Abraham named him: Isaac: "he laughs". Father Abraham was 100 years old. The Bible doesn't record much hoopla at the birth itself.

What it does present, in greater detail, is the tremendous disruption this child of promise brings into the family. Things spin out of control, go topsy-turvy, as a result of God's gift. Of course, we can see elements for potential conflict already in place. During that twenty-year waiting period, taking matters into their own hands, working some creative problem-solving, Abraham did have another child, a son, with their servant, Hagar. Sarah supported the idea at first, but soon changed her mind. That first son's name, of Abraham but not Sarah, was Ishmael: "God hears". Ishmael and his mother were still a part of the household when Isaac arrived. Can we foresee drama ahead? The real housewives of Genesis.

We enter the drama when Isaac was weaned and so Abraham throws a feast. It doesn't take much of a spark to light the fuse. "Sarah saw Hagar's son laughing." Cleverly, the writer doesn't state Ishmael's name anywhere in this episode. He is "Hagar's son." The one she bore to Sarah's husband Abraham. He laughs, Ishmael does. "He laughs" is the name of Sarah's son. The son **she** bore with Abraham. That's all it takes. The fuse is ignited; the explosion rips the family apart. It erupts in Sarah: "Send this servant away with her son! There is no way **her** son will share any of the inheritance with my son Isaac." Sarah will have the last laugh!

Her outburst tears Abraham apart: "this upset Abraham terribly". God tells Abraham, "Don't get upset about this, just do whatever Sarah tells you to do. I'll make a great nation of your servant's son, because he is also a son of yours."

Abraham has learned by now, over those twenty years, to trust and do as God said. He did just as Sarah demanded. He was faithful to God and Sarah. He got up early the next day, and sent Hagar and "the boy" away. On the day after the great banquet, after a party which we assume never got off the ground, what did he give them for provisions as he pushed them out the door? Some bread and a flask of water. Into the desert. Lots of luck!

It's topsy-turvy. Messy, the thesaurus adds. Chaotic. Mixed-up. Tangled. Higgledy-piggledy.

The family is split. Hagar and her son are at great risk. The water in the flask soon runs out. She puts the boy under a desert shrub and then she walks away, telling herself, "I won't hear him die, this far away." "She sat at a distance, cried out, and wept."

We've been there, or some place like it. Coping devices fall short, resources prove empty, help is nowhere in sight. Unsure about what to do next, overwhelmed, life turned upside-down, things don't make sense. And it gets to us, it hurts. Like Hagar, we can't escape the pain, though we try. We break down. We lose it. We weep.

These are not idle words that Jesus speaks: "Don't think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I haven't come to bring peace but a sword. Son against father. Daughter against mother. Daughter-in-law against mother-in-law. Your love for me must be primary, your faith must mean everything. It will be disruptive and will test other relationships." Just to warn us. When we are kingdom people, our relationship with God is not just one segment of life, not confined to one day of the week, or one hour on Sunday. Jesus is not willing to be a compartment for us to open just when the time seems right, or when things go wrong. It's total; we're in all the way. The kingdom is it. Expect faith to be a topsy-turvy generator. And a family relationship tester.

However, faith guarantees rewards. Promises hold. God prevails. As Hagar sits and weeps, an arrow shot away from her nearly dead son, the next words we read are: "God heard." What did I say the boy's name meant, the unmentioned name? God hears. God knows the name. God heard. Subtle, the writer is. Subtle is God as we become aware: God hears. God knows. A messenger from God reveals a well to Hagar. She fills up her flask, and gives the boy a drink. The cup overflows.

God hears. After the storm, peace. After the rug is pulled out from underneath, a helping hand. As damage is assessed, remaining resources are discovered: it's a well and we keep going. God hears, promises hold, faith keeps us going, and going.

We are reminded, here in our hot and thirsty desert, that there are many whose lives are at much greater risk than ours, due to economics, or illness, or family circumstance, or no safety net. May we hear their cries for help, empathize with their pain, and serve as messengers: God hears. There is a well. The Lord carries out just what he promised.

May God send us as messengers, to point our sisters and brothers who thirst to the well. Where they too can get filled back up, with water, with cooling air, with shelter from the heat, with rest and the relief of being cared for. A cup of cool water, we know how life-saving it is. Our cups overflow, may we not waste a drop.