

Wednesday, June 17 2020

Learning to Trust In God's Promises

In our Old Testament / Hebrew scripture reading this coming Sunday, the story of Abraham and Sarah continues. God had previously promised that even though they were both elderly they would have a son and that son would go on to found a great nation. When this promise from God wasn't fulfilled right away, Abraham and Sarah began to doubt that God would do as He had promised. As time went on and they still did not have a son, they became desperate and decided that Abraham would have a son with Sarah's servant Hagar instead. This total lack of faith on their part and this attempt to make God's promise take place by their own means had dire consequences, which we begin to learn about in this week's reading.

Hagar's son Ishmael and Sarah's son Isaac are playing together. By this time in the story Ishmael is a teenager and Isaac is about three years old. In the NRSV translation we are told that Ishmael is "playing" with his younger brother. The Hebrew word used in this verse could be translated as "playing", but it could also be translated as "mocking", "making fun of", or "laughing at". It is possible that the writer of this section of Genesis is using a play on words since Isaac's name literally means "laughing", since Sarah laughed when she heard God promising Abraham a son in his old age. We don't know for sure what is happening between Ishmael and Isaac. It could be that Ishmael is jealous of his younger brother. It could be that he is bullying him. It could be that he is an immature teenager and is making fun of his younger brother's name. Or it could be that they are just two brothers having fun playing together!

Whatever Ishmael's true intentions are, Sarah does not like what she sees going on between the two boys. It could be that her own insecurities and jealousy are affecting the way she perceives a harmless interaction. She has likely been jealous of the fact that her husband has had a child with her slave Hagar, even though this was originally Sarah's idea. Hagar and Ishmael's presence is a constant reminder to Sarah of her inability to have borne a son for Abraham, and a reminder of her lack of faith in God's promise to provide a son to Abraham with her. Moreover, it is possible that Sarah wants Abraham's full attention and affection devoted to her and Isaac rather than be shared with Hagar and Ishmael.

Whatever Sarah's true intentions are, she convinces Abraham to banish Hagar and Ishmael to the wilderness. Family in-fighting, jealousy, insecurity, and a lack of faith culminate in this cruel act, which could have led to the death for Hagar and Ishmael.

Fortunately God was fully aware of the situation and had other plans for Hagar and Ishmael. God tells Abraham not to be afraid and that He will make a nation out of the descendants of Ishmael as well. God watches over Hagar and Ishmael while they are in the wilderness and provides for their needs.

There are several lessons that we can learn from this story:

- First, we should always trust in God and His promises. When God says He is going to do

something, He does it. God always keeps His promises!

- Second, when we doubt God's promises and take matters into our own hands we are setting the stage for bad things to happen. Abraham and Sarah's decision to have a child with Hagar set in motion a course of events which led to a great rivalry.
- Third, while humans often become involved in jealousy, rivalry, and in-fighting, God loves all of us.
- Fourth, despite human weakness and brokenness God can still make things work out for good.
- And fifth, God watches over and cares for all of us, especially those who are cast out by society. He provides for the needs of the weak and the vulnerable, and hears us when we call out to Him.

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