

**Duke Chapel**  
**Fifth Sunday after Pentecost ~ June 19, 2005**  
**Scripture ~ Genesis 21:8-21**  
**Sermon ~ *The Wonders of God's Grace***  
**Preacher ~ George Thompson**

There is a certain irony about our lectionary text from the Hebrew Bible today. This is Father's Day in the secular calendar; but our attention today in sacred worship is focused upon the frightful story of Abraham sending his son Ishmael into the lethal desert of summer. Perhaps we should hide from the ears of our children this portion of holy writ. It comes as a bit of embarrassment on a day in which so many of you loving fathers have nobly chosen to attend Duke Chapel rather than escape to the green grandeur of a Durham golf course. Here in worship we are confronted, without warning, by the story of a father driving his sixteen year old son into a deadly wilderness amidst the screaming protests of the lad's desperate mother. Abraham here is not exactly a role model for fatherhood. Nonetheless, if we were to substitute next Sunday's Old Testament lectionary reading, matters would only be worse. Horror of horrors: in the ensuing narrative, this same father stalks up a desolate mountain and builds a devouring fire in willingness to sacrifice Isaac, his second son, as a burnt offering unto the Lord. Such a passage from scripture deserves being reported to the Department of Social Services, not read within these pristine Gothic chambers.

What is going on here in holy writ? Moreover, how can such an intimidating narrative be remotely relevant for these our times? Have we not had more than our share of David Karesh lunatics intent upon sacrificing their children on behalf of some capricious god?

One of the big blockbuster movies that opened last month was a new Crusader epic entitled, *Kingdom of Heaven*. The fictitious setting is the year 1187. Even though this cinema makes little effort at being historically accurate, it convincingly interprets the violent conflagration between European Christians and Arab Muslims just before the Third Crusade. It depicts a chaotic Jerusalem toward the conclusion of a century's rule by Christian zealots. In this fateful year, the balance of power changes. Arab armies strengthen their resistance to European dominance. In response to savage violence initiated by the Templar Knights, Arab armies conduct a successful siege upon the sacred city. They are led by their heroic warrior-statesman, Saladin.

This movie had its inception in the mind of producer Ridley Scott immediately after the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. In a worship service five days after that infamous assault, President Bush (speaking at the National Cathedral in Washington) called for "a **crusade** against terrorism." This was his choice of words.

Despite all the political denials, we are currently in the midst of a global holy war. Citizens of the Arab world, including radical adherents of Osama bin Laden as well as peace-loving Muslims, consider themselves to be descendants of Ishmael. **Thus, much is riding upon how the church interprets this story from Hebrew scripture.**

On the surface, this narrative appears to be all about God's favoritism toward Isaac—Abraham's second son. An aging and barren Abram and Sarai are told by God to leave all their securities and go to a foreign land. *Yahweh* promises, "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great...."<sup>1</sup>

The biblical plot thickens when Sarai herself began to lose faith in God's promised blessing. In her aged barrenness, she proposed that Abraham take Hagar, a lovely Egyptian slave, as his mistress. But, when Hagar conceived and produced a handsome, healthy son named Ishmael, Sarai's generosity turned to jealousy.

Thus, neither Abram nor Sarai had fully trusted in God's promise. Nonetheless, in her old age, Sarah finally conceived and (against incredible odds) gave birth to a son, Isaac. His name literally meant, *child of laughter*—a reference to his mother's response to the news that she would become pregnant.

But his birth was no joke. Things got very serious upon Isaac's first birthday. Abraham proudly called for a public celebration. On this day of the baby's weaning, according to near eastern customs, the child took his first step toward manhood. Other children were present for this festive occasion. But Sarah's eyes were not lovingly focused upon her beloved Isaac. Instead, she watched Ishmael (Hagar's child) with resentment and censorious judgment. When she observed the older child laughing, she assumed that he was mocking her dear Isaac. She exploded with rage. Ishmael's very presence at the party reminded Sarah that Abraham's oldest child was a rival to his fatherly affections she desired exclusively for her darling son Isaac. So, in her jealous fury, Sarah demanded that Abraham cast Hagar and her son Ishmael from the family circle, insisting, "the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac."<sup>2</sup>

The Genesis story discloses the frailty and disobedience of Sarah and Abraham. Left with the agonizing choice between an aged wife and a young mistress, and between two sons whom he loved, Abraham reluctantly exiled Hagar and his eldest son Ishmael.

But the focal point of this story is not upon the faith (or unbelief) of Abraham and Sarah. This is the story of God's prevenient grace. Abraham gave Hagar bread and a skin of water—nothing more. Then, he sent her away into the scorching heat of the desert, assuming that neither of them would survive. Yet, God did not desert Hagar and Ishmael. God compassionately heard the lament of Hagar. God sent a messenger to rescue her, uttering these words of comfort and hope: "Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him."<sup>3</sup>

Yes, God chose Abraham and Sarah for a distinct role. Their descendants through Isaac were chosen, not for privilege, but for great responsibility. Through the descendants of Isaac, the whole world was introduced to this God of inclusive grace and extravagant mercy. The descendants of Isaac bore the indignity of slavery in Egypt, captivity in Babylon, and persecution under the Seleucids. The lineage of Isaac was called forth by the prophet Isaiah to become "a light unto the nations." They were chosen for great

responsibility in each crucial era of human history. Collectively they became the suffering servants whose wounds were the source of healing for the human race. In their finest hour, the descendants of Isaac became a light of righteousness for other nations and a beacon of peace in a violent world. God chose Israel because God *loved* Israel. God's love always comes like that: undeserved, unexpected, and mystifying. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Frodo asked Gandalf, "Why was I chosen?" Gandalf's reply: "Such questions cannot be answered. You may be sure that it was not for any merit that others do not possess... but you have been chosen, and you must therefore use such strength and heart and wits as you have."<sup>4</sup>

But Isaac's chosenness, according to the narrative of Genesis, was not contingent upon the curse of Ishmael. To the contrary, this one whose name literally means *God hears*, likewise, received a great blessing. His descendants—the Arab nations—will also be great.

So, three major world religions have their roots in the saga of Abrahamic faith: Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. How we of the church interpret this story is crucial. For the Jews, Jerusalem's Temple Mount is the ascribed place for the sacrifice of Isaac. For Islam, this place is the traditional spot where Mohammed ascended in a nocturnal journey. Jesus came to the Temple in order to learn and revere the sacred scriptures of his heritage. The scrolls that Jesus read contained the narrative of grace. The Torah which Jesus learned told of two prevented sacrifices: Ishmael in the wilderness and Isaac upon this mountain in Jerusalem. God intervened to save both children.

We come back to these ancient stories today for an important reason. **Only as these three world religions acknowledge that their faith stories are narratives of grace will each discover a common identity.** As the Arab Christian Elias Chacour insists, these stories illustrate the fact that we are all "blood brothers and sisters." Thus, in the true spirit of Torah, Jesus offered the grace of God to a Jewish fisherman, a Cyro-Phoenician woman, and a Roman centurion. He admonished his followers to leave the issue of eternal judgment unto God alone. The apostle Paul was convinced that "all Israel will be saved."<sup>5</sup> The early church taught that it is truly God's desire that none should perish.

The hero of this story is certainly not Abraham. His faltering trust and Sarah's insecurities precipitated the crisis. The one heroic figure is Hagar. Phyllis Trible, the renowned professor of Hebrew Bible at Union in New York, argues that the faith of Hagar is the source of hope and promise for all marginalized women in our midst. She writes:

"Most especially, all sorts of rejected women find their stories in her. She is the faithful maid exploited, the black woman used by the male and abused by the female of the ruling class, the surrogate mother, the resident alien without legal recourse, the other woman, the runaway youth, the religious fleeing from affliction, the pregnant young woman alone, the expelled wife, the divorced mother with child, the shopping bag lady carrying bread and water, the homeless woman, the indigent relying upon handouts from the power structures, the welfare mother, and the self-effacing female whose own identity shrinks in service to others."<sup>6</sup>

The Hagar of history have been vessels of God's grace, saving the world from destruction. Every congregation is blessed by Hagar in their midst. Hagar is doubtless present anonymously today in Duke Chapel.

Jim Wooten, senior correspondent for ABC News, introduced the world to a contemporary Hagar and Ishmael. In his coverage of the political revolution in South Africa, Wooten stumbled upon a young victim of AIDS, Nkosi Johnson. He was born during the year of Nelson Mandela's liberation from prison. His mother, Daphne, was like an exiled Hagar. When her child was an infant and a victim of the HIV that infested his mother's body, Daphne refused to accept the pathos of her son's fragile existence. She took him to a clinic that only treated wealthy whites. Upon depositing Nkosi there, she died of infections. This tiny form of a child was, consequently, adopted by a compassionate white woman named Gail Johnson. Nkosi was so filled with the sacrificial love he received from these two remarkable, Hagar-like women that he developed into a completely self-giving child-man. Jim Wooten discovered him and told his story on ABC's *Nightline*. The boy became instantly one of the most recognizable persons in the entire African continent. He delivered an unforgettable address before a world assembly on AIDS. Before Jim Wooten met this gaunt little child, he caught a glimpse of his fragile form just a few feet from his car. Without interrupting the lad, Wooten drew near enough to overhear him practice a speech he would make that day before thousands. This eleven year old saint, one year away from his own death, repeated these lines from his speech: "We are all the same. We are not different from one another. We all belong to one family."<sup>7</sup>

In the wilderness of an antique land, Hagar taught Ishmael a similar message. She imparted to him self-esteem and love. Her teachings became a major theme in the book of Genesis, and thus the faith of Jesus of Nazareth.

The last time I preached from this pulpit I was a senior in the Divinity School, weeks before my class' graduation. York Chapel, our usual place for morning divinity school worship, was being renovated. This chamber provided a more-than-ample substitute space. A different senior was chosen to preach each Thursday. It was my time. But the campus was still in a state of chaos on that spring day, 1968. Martin Luther King had been assassinated two weeks earlier. Most seniors were only a few days away from entering their first parish assignment. It was a fearful time. King, the martyred prophet, had confronted the sin of our racism—the demonic assumption that God prefers one race above another, that God exiles some to a state of inferiority. Thus, on that day, and for the past thirty-five years, I have preached the message of Christ's grace and redemption offered to **all**. "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."<sup>8</sup>

When the church once again places this message at center, perhaps we shall be saved from a violence that God does not intend and by a grace that only God can supply.

### Footnotes:

1. Genesis 12:1-2a NRSV
2. Genesis 21:10 NRSV
3. Genesis 21:17b-18 NRSV
4. *Lord of the Rings*: a movie produced by George Lucas
5. Romans 11: 26a NRSV
6. Phyllis Trible, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), p. 28.
7. Jim Wooten, *We Are All the Same: A Story of a Boy's Courage and a Mother's Love* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2004), p. 2.
8. John 3:17 NRSV