

Hearing the Voice

June 21, 2026

Genesis 21:8-21

⁸ The boy grew and stopped nursing. On the day he stopped nursing, Abraham prepared a huge banquet. ⁹ Sarah saw Hagar's son laughing, the one Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham. ¹⁰ So she said to Abraham, "Send this servant away with her son! This servant's son won't share the inheritance with my son Isaac." ¹¹ This upset Abraham terribly because the boy was his son. ¹² God said to Abraham, "Don't be upset about the boy and your servant. Do everything Sarah tells you to do because your descendants will be traced through Isaac. ¹³ But I will make of your servant's son a great nation too, because he is also your descendant."

¹⁴ Abraham got up early in the morning, took some bread and a flask of water, and gave it to Hagar. He put the boy in her shoulder sling and sent her away. She left and wandered through the desert near Beer-sheba. ¹⁵ Finally the water in the flask ran out, and she put the boy down under one of the desert shrubs. ¹⁶ She walked away from him about as far as a bow shot and sat down, telling herself, I can't bear to see the boy die. She sat at a distance, cried out in grief, and wept.

¹⁷ God heard the boy's cries, and God's messenger called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, "Hagar! What's wrong? Don't be afraid. God has heard the boy's cries over there. ¹⁸ Get up, pick up the boy, and take him by the hand because I will make of him a great nation."

¹⁹ Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well. She went over, filled the water flask, and gave the boy a drink. ²⁰ God remained with the boy; he grew up, lived in the desert, and became an expert archer. ²¹ He lived in the Paran desert, and his mother found him an Egyptian wife.

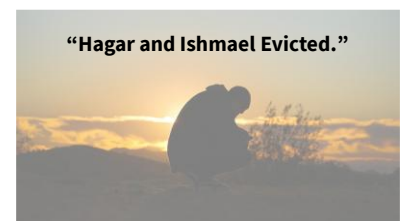


Today we continue with the story of Abraham. Isaac has been born and has grown up a bit – enough to be weaned from Sarah. This is cause for celebration. Abraham throws a party, a huge banquet. At this gathering, Sarah sees Ishmael laughing. We do not know what he was laughing about or who he might have been laughing at or with. Maybe he was just laughing about something funny, or maybe because he was enjoying the celebration. We simply do not know why Ishmael was laughing. It did provoke Sarah.

Maybe this is because there is some bad history between Hagar and Sarah. Yes, it was Sarah's idea to allow Abraham to sleep with her servant Hagar. At that point Abraham was 86 years old. Once Hagar became pregnant, there was now tension in the relationship. In fact, Sarah was so mean to Hagar that she ran away. But the Lord's messenger found Hagar and encouraged her, telling her to go back and to endure the harsh treatment. The messenger also added a promise from God, telling Hagar, *"I will give you many children, so many that they can't be counted!"* Then Hagar is told to name her son Ishmael, which translates to "God hears." Because God saw her in her suffering Hagar calls God "El Roi" – the God who sees. She feels seen, valued, of worth. Hagar returns to Sarah and Abraham and lives with them for another 14 years.

There is no more mention of Hagar and Ishmael until we turn to our reading for today. The subtitle of today's reading in my Bible is this: "Hagar and Ishmael Evicted." How does that title sit with you?

What emotions or feelings are stirred up when you think about someone being evicted? For me, those feelings are uncomfortable.



Thinking about someone being evicted brings up sorrow and despair. This Biblical story of eviction is not an easy story to read or to reflect upon. Yet here we are.

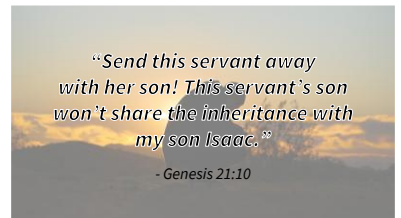
We're here because the Bible is not just a feel-good story. It is real and authentic. The Biblical witness does not tell just the good side of the story. It is not a sanitized version of human activity. The Bible has rawness and portrays selfishness and sinfulness and short-sightedness in their true light. In our text this week, it feels like no one does right. Even God seems to be allowing something to happen that does not feel right or sit well with us. It feels so wrong for God to allow Hagar and Ishmael to bear the weight of the wrong choices of Sarah and Abraham, being evicted and sent out into the desert to die.

This is a hard story to wrestle with. Hagar's story leads us to consider other hard stories, to think of others who are like Hagar. And God's response invites us to consider our response to the Hagar's of our world. As we prepare to enter into this time together, let us pray...

Lord God, like Hagar under a tree in the wilderness, in solitude and need, we sit with our hopes. Hear the voice of our hearts and speak to us today. Lead us to the well of your love. Guide us to drink deeply so that we can, in turn, help others to drink deeply of the well of your love. And now, O God, I ask that you would bless the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts. You are our rock and our redeemer, our Christ and our king. Amen.

Please turn with me to Genesis 21, starting in verse 8. There is a party thrown by Abraham because Isaac is old enough to be weaned. His total dependence upon Sarah is coming to an end. Yes, this is reason to celebrate. Isaac can now begin to join Abraham and Ishmael in their father-son outings and adventures – and soon enough in chores and other necessary tasks required of nomadic shepherds living in the desert wilderness.

As we said earlier, at the party, Sarah sees Ishmael enjoying himself, “*laughing*” is how the text describes it. Last week in our passage, Sarah and others laughed together, celebrating the gift of the miracle that was Isaac’s birth. But here and now, though, Ishmael’s laughter provokes Sarah. In verse 10 she delivers the eviction notice to Abraham: “*Send this servant away with her son! This servant’s son won’t share the inheritance with my son Isaac.*” Her words and her intent put Abraham into a state of great distress. Ishmael is his son, his flesh and blood. How could Sarah ask him to send his first-born son away, likely to die in the wilderness? Ishmael was Sarah’s idea, after all!



The God who saw Hagar when she ran away because of the harsh treatment she was enduring long ago now sees Abraham in his distress. God assures Abraham that Ishmael will be okay. Because Ishmael is also Abraham’s descendent, God will make of him a “*great nation too.*” So Abraham gets up early the next morning and carries out his wife’s demand. Giving Hagar some bread and a flask of water, Abraham places Ishmael in Hagar’s shoulder sling and sends them out into the desert. There is a matter-of-factness to how this all happens. But let us pause for a moment to consider Hagar and Ishmael’s feelings at this moment.

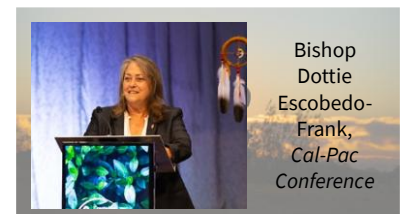


To begin this time of stepping inside the story, let us ask ourselves: How would you feel if you were in Hagar's or Ishmael's place? What would it feel like for Hagar to be used to produce a son for Abraham and then to be discarded once another son arrives on the scene? What would it feel like for Ishmael to be sent into the wilderness, to be abandoned by the only father he had ever known, to be cast out now that another son had been born? While these are hard questions to ponder, this was Hagar and Ishmael's reality.

Before continuing with the story, let us acknowledge that this is not just something that happened long ago. People are still treated like property, used and cast aside when they have no more apparent value to the ones with power over them. People are still harmed and wounded by human decisions made out of fear and doubt. And people are still exploited and taken advantage of by those in places of privilege and status. These are the realities for some of the people living in this broken world. These are the present realities for some people living in our communities.

Sent away, Hagar and Ishmael wander the desert. Soon enough their water and food ran out. So too did Hagar's hope. Hagar placed Ishmael under one shade tree and walked a little way away and sat down herself. She could not bear to hear his cry and to watch her son die. Sitting at a distance, we read that Hagar "*cried out in grief, and wept.*" She understood their situation. She knew what it meant to be out in the desert with no food or water.

At this year's Annual Conference, our guest Bishop was Bishop Dottie Escobedo-Frank. She serves the Cal-Pac Conference of the United Methodist Church.



Each year there is a second Bishop present to help with rulings and other “legal” matters. In her sermon, titled *El Pueblo*, Bishop Dottie shared that she grew up in Nogales, Arizona, a town that straddles the US-Mexico border. She shared that growing up, she was aware that there was an imaginary line where the border was, but everyone crossed that line without even thinking about it. Bishop Dottie shared that some people, for example, went to school on one side of the line and went to church on the other side of the line. Some of her extended family lived on each side of the line and they went back and forth to each other’s houses all the time.

Bishop Dottie shared that today there is now a big wall that sits atop that once imaginary line. It cuts the town into two parts and extends out into the desert in each direction. Here is a picture of the wall, recently fitted with razor wire to further deter crossing over. Bishop Dottie shared that further out, in the vast desert areas, the wall is not so secure. But in Nogales, where it would be easier to cross over, the wall is well-guarded. She shared why she thought it was this way. She shared that crossing the vast desert is very difficult and dangerous. Bishop Dottie told us that bodies are regularly picked up out in the desert. In order to save lives, she shared that people from churches along the US side of the border regularly go on walks in the desert, hiding water bottles, marking them with small flags. Without water, people die in the desert. Hagar sat under a small bush out there in the desert, waiting for her and her son to die.



But just as God had done before when Hagar was out in the desert and just as God would do again if she found herself cast out once more, God heard their voices, heard their cries. God heard Hagar’s weeping. God heard Ishmael’s cries. The God who sees is also the God who hears.

God's messenger comes to Hagar and tells her, *"Don't be afraid... Get up, pick up the boy, and take him by the hand because I will make of him a great nation."* The same promise that was made to Abraham is now made to Hagar. God's messenger spoke good news to Hagar. Opening her eyes, Hagar sees a well. Resourced with water, hope was restored. As the story concludes, we are told that God remained with Ishmael. He grows up, marries, and becomes the founder of another great nation. Ishmael is the father of Islam, the Muslim faith.

In a time of great need, God heard Ishmael's voice and God heard Hagar's voice. Perhaps we like to think that just God's people are heard by God, but this passage tells us otherwise. The people that do not know they are God's people are heard by God – Hagar, Ishmael, everyone. God not only hears, but God becomes present to those who are suffering unjustly, to those who are marginalized and cast aside. Through God's presence, eyes are opened. Resources, rescue, sustenance, and hope come into sight. And because God hears and responds to these voices on the edges, we who claim to follow this God should hear too. We who call on the Lord as our Savior are called to listen to these voices and to respond to these needs.

If we are true to our faith, we cannot simply listen only to those who are like us, only to those who are from our tribe, our clan, our family. We must hear the outcasts' voices too. We must, like God, hear the voices of the powerless and the abandoned and the lowly. And hearing, we must respond as the one who was abandoned and rejected responded to those in need as he walked this earth. We respond by meeting needs – clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, speaking and standing with the powerless, welcoming in the stranger and the outcast.

There is also a warning in this story that we cannot dismiss or glance past. We remember that the scriptures were written by people with a story to tell – the story of God’s people. Looking at the whole story and all of the characters, though, this story reveals an ugly side of our culture and even of our faith. Too often we can exclude or use and discard people for our own benefit and then tell the story in a way that makes it seem like it was all their fault. To ease our conscience, we can even tell ourselves that it is God’s will that some people suffer for our sake. It is never God’s will that anyone suffers. When we think in these ways, we are falling into the human sin of pride, thinking it is all about us. This line of thinking gives rise to unjust systems of privilege and exclusion. And it is this line of thinking that justifies slavery and war and sexual abuse and unfettered capitalism and all of the -isms.

In her book, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, author Delores Williams points out that Hagar’s experience mirrors that of black enslaved women in America. She writes, “Hagar’s predicament involved slavery, poverty, ethnicity, sexual and economic exploitation, surrogacy, domestic violence, homelessness, single-parenting, and radical encounters with God.” Sadly, people today find themselves in all but the last of these “predicaments.” In this sense, Hagar is everyone today who is abused, who is discarded, judged, excluded or looked down upon, who is blamed for their troubles, who is counted as ‘less than.’ Today these are the victims of domestic abuse, the working poor, immigrants and refugees, and indigenous peoples in most parts of the world.

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- Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, page 4

Author Steve Garnaas-Holmes, on his website *Unfolding Light*, offers this word of truth concerning the “predicaments” many people find themselves in today: “It takes some moral numbness to avoid seeing the image of Hagar and Ishmael wasting away in refugee camps or in the desert trying to cross the border.” I would add Gaza, the Ukraine, prisons, reservations, and detention centers to this list. These are all places where we can find the innocent suffering and crying out for help. I invite us all into a moment of silent reflection as I ask: Are these places where we have chosen to become “morally numb?”

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We worship a God who hears and responds. We rely on God to hear our cries and to respond to our needs, even as God hears the voices of all who cry out. And, again, because we serve a God who hears and responds, we are called to be a people who hear and respond to the voices of those crying out. So we must ask ourselves: Where are the Hagar and Ishmaels in our world? And how is God calling us to join in God’s work to care for and provide for the Hagar and Ishmaels of our world, to accompany the desert wanderers, to bring compassion and our resources to bear upon the suffering in our world, and to make space for all at the table, so that all may simply live? This is our call. May it be so for you and for me. Alleluia and amen.

Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. Think of a time when God heard and responded to your cries? How might this experience empower you to see and hear others’ cries when they are where you were?
- 2) *Pray*. Do you know someone who is like Hagar – abandoned, discarded, powerless, voiceless? How might you pray for them? How might your prayers lead to action?
- 3) *Study*. Read Genesis 21:22-34. What surprises you about this treaty? About Abraham’s status as an immigrant in a foreign land? About his ability to then negotiate a treaty?