

## Pentecost 3A

Let's talk about sin, about screwing up, about failure—and about divine promises. Abraham's family is the family of promise. God has promised to make a great nation out of his children and their children. This chosen people will shine as a light to the world, demonstrating to all what God's faithfulness looks like and what human life can be like when it is built on a foundation of trusting God. At least, that was the plan. But pretty quickly it becomes apparent that the problem with a chosen people is that it, necessarily, involves people.

Today's story from Genesis is the end of a kind of prologue, a moment when the story of God's people reaches a fork in the road and takes a definite turn. A massive crisis in the early history of the promise is resolved; a long-running debacle of sin and failure reaches its crest and somehow God works this disaster out for good. A huge mess is tidied away—but somehow the story survives and we find ourselves having to interpret it and to let it interpret us.

I think some background might be helpful here. God first made promises to Abraham, especially about progeny, while he was still pretty young. But then something happened—or rather, something very specific didn't happen. Abraham and his wife Sarah keep getting older, and no children come. So they get desperate and Sarah hatches a plan. She comes to Abraham and says look, God won't let me have kids, but I have this slave named Hagar. Take her as a wife and maybe we can get kids that way.

There's a lot to dislike about this plan. First, it's always a bad idea to hotwire God's plans, even if it's often unclear how we can best participate in those plans. Second, it's an extraordinarily short-sighted proposal: honey, we're too old to have kids together—why don't you try to have kids with this younger woman, whom I'm used to bossing around. I'll still be her mistress, but she can, in a different sense, be your mistress. That should go really well. And third, it's not at all clear to me that Hagar had the option to say no. Now, this kind of odd home life would not have been unusual in the culture that wrote this story or in the culture in which the story is set. And Sarah seems to give Hagar to Abraham as a wife, even as she remains a slave. But our culture has a name for sexual proposals to which one cannot say no, even in the context of a marriage that seemed to represent a step up. Even while allowing that no neighbors would have looked askance at this arrangement, by our lights I think this is rape.

The fact that this kind of works only makes things worse. Hagar gives birth to Ishmael and starts despising Sarah. Sarah blames Abraham for this and Abraham tells Sarah that he won't interfere with how she wants to treat Hagar. So Sarah beats Hagar until she runs away, but God sends her back with a promise that her child will also be a child of promise—a new promise, but still a promise. And then finally Sarah does get miraculously pregnant and Isaac is born and we are more or less caught up to today's story—when things don't get better.

There really aren't any heroes here. The challenge is not to see any of them as monsters, but as normal broken sinful folks who have, between them, ruined all of their lives and threatened God's promises. Abraham isn't a monster; he's just a coward who makes commitments that he is unwilling or unable to follow through on. Hagar is a woman who was a victim before she was a villain, fundamentally miscalculates the power-dynamic in her home, and then almost pays the ultimate price. And even Sarah, in

my mind the closest thing to the villain of the piece, is worth at least our pity. A desperate person who feels that God has denied her the one thing that would most give her respect and worth in her culture, she takes drastic measures that backfire on her, making her even more miserable. It is from her pain that she hurts others.

They're not monsters, but between them these three adults have created this mess of their lives that they can no longer live with. They did it with pride, jealousy, slavery, lust, greed, and cowardice. They did it with sin—some of it awful, some of it totally understandable—and they managed not only to ruin their own lives, but to imperil the promises they have received from God. They had this beautiful purpose, this wonderful plan, and now Abraham and Sarah are on the cusp of being murderers and Hagar and Ishmael are on the cusp of being killed.

Now I do hope that the specifics of the story don't resemble your life; but I suspect that most of us can recognize the situation where we've made such a terrible mess of our lives, partially through our own faults and even sin and partially through other people's different choices and bad luck. I suspect that you, like me, have been in this place where all the promise and hope and deeply trusted plans that you had relied on all lie in ruins.

And here's the gospel: God is not fazed by our disasters. In this story of human-made tragedy, this situation that is absolutely untenable, God's response is to find new ways to pour out blessings. I can't help but imagine God shaking God's head and saying "Alright, alright: I'll make another great nation, too. I'll start new stories, besides the one I had planned, and weave them for the good of my world." And I think this is how God tries to respond to our sin and failures, as well. We can mess up so badly that we lose things we cherish. God does not guarantee that we will never have pain and loss. But God's faithfulness does not waver, and God's commitment to teasing good out of our mess of pain is intrinsic to who God is.

However much you may have lost, whatever size of the mess you've created, God is not done with you yet. God will not write you off, give up on you, move on to the next person. It may not be the case that our recovery, our redemption, restores everything we lost or jeopardized. But it is the case that God is working even now to find new ways to shed blessings upon us and to call us more deeply into the promises that sustain God's people.