

First Reading

Genesis 21:8-21

8 The child, Isaac, grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned.

9 But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. 10 So she said to Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac." 11 The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. 12 But God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you. 13 As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring."

14 So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba. 15 When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. 16 Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, "Do not let me look on the death of the child." And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. 17 And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. 18 Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him." 19 Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink. 20 God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. 21 He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

Gospel Reading

Matthew 10:24-39

24 "A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; 25 it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher, and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household! 26 "So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. 27 What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. 28 Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell. 29 Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. 30 And even the hairs of your head are all counted. 31 So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows. 32 "Everyone therefore who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in

heaven; 33 but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.

34 "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. 35 For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; 36 and one's foes will be members of one's own household. 37 Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; 38 and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. 39 Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

I can only imagine the silence that hung over the campfire the night after Abraham and Sarah cast Hagar and Ishmael out into the wilderness. Hagar, whom Sarah and Abraham had forced into being a surrogate mother when they couldn't conceive. Ishmael whom Sarah had first claimed as her own, until she, herself, gave birth to Isaac, and Ishmael suddenly became not a child, but a threat to Isaac's inheritance.

I can only imagine the confusion that Isaac was feeling that night. He was old enough to be weaned, now, so in that culture, he was probably three or four years old—old enough to be aware of what was going on around him. Old enough to notice that his older brother wasn't there—his older brother, who always played with him. His older brother, whom he must have loved.

Isaac was old enough to recognize his family, and old enough to notice when members of it were missing.

Like our oldest son, Ben, when we moved from Kansas City, Missouri, to Mason City, Iowa. Ben was nine. In Kansas City, he had always been a racial minority in the classroom—one of maybe three or four white kids. Same thing in our midtown neighborhood. It gave him an early awareness of the diverse nature of the human race. A sense of the normalcy of that diversity.

But then, we moved to Mason City, a small city that was almost entirely white. It was maybe our second week there when we were getting back into the car after a trip to the grocery store, and Ben asked, “Where are all the *other* people?”

The issue of race is often painted as a Southern problem, but what I’ve learned, living all over this country, is that there is no white space in America that is white by accident. I don’t care how northern or western or rural that space is. If there are no people of color living there, it’s because they were either pushed out or kept out. In Iowa, my session was stunned to learn that, when the land for the church was bought in the 1950’s, the church leaders had signed an exclusionary covenant

as a condition of purchase. They had agreed that no People of Color or Jews would be allowed on that land after dark.

Likewise, in the church I served in Wisconsin, lifelong white residents had no idea that they had grown up in a sundown town—laws that had suddenly gone on the books during the Great Migration, when Black people from the South were looking for a new place to land. They also were unaware that churches all around had hosted Klan gatherings as routinely as churches nowadays host twelve-step groups. They had grown up there, it had been all around them, but they hadn't had to be aware of these things, and no one in their social groups had had to talk about these things, because they were white.

When Jesus, in our Matthew passage, declares that he has come, not to bring peace, but a dividing sword; and that he has come to set family members against one another; he's not saying that he aims to create trouble where there had been none. Instead, he means: no more false peace. No more stifling the truth, even if the truth sparks conflict.

We know how conflictual truth can be, don't we? Think of all the anguish extended families have felt since the 2016 election—unable to converse over the Thanksgiving table without tempers flaring. But the 2016 election didn't create those divisions—it simply brought to the surface truths that had been tamped down for a long time. If the only thing that had kept us at the table together was not talking about things that matter, then we were never really at the table in the first place.

But here's something that gives me hope—and it comes from that terrible story we just read in Genesis, of the casting out of Hagar and Ishmael. It's not the story that gives me hope—the story makes me sick. But notice how the story is told.

Genesis is part of the sacred scripture of Isaac's branch of the family—not Ishmael's. Ishmael's branch would become part of what we now call Islam. So this is Isaac's family story, carried forward by Isaac and his descendants—yet as soon as Hagar and Ishmael are cast out into the desert, the whole focus of the story is on them. God's focus is on them. Our focus, as the readers, is on them. The gaze of the story teller follows them out into the desert, and our hearts break as Hagar leaves her son under a bush so that she won't have to watch him die; our spirits

rejoice when God intervenes by providing them water, and an inheritance of their own.

Our sympathies and compassion are with them, because that's where the sympathy of the story teller lies. And the story teller is Isaac.

We are not privy to the painful silence around the homefire after Hagar and Ishmael are sent out of its glow, but we are given a glimpse into the heart of the little boy who is left behind. The confused little boy who is wondering "where are all the other people? Where is my brother?" And that heart is breaking.

Throughout our nation's history, we have asked our children's hearts to break, in silence. The white children and the Black children on plantations, who were often nursed by the same woman, playing together at her knee, until the white child, weaned, was yanked away and told they could no longer be friends. Imagine the confusion that neither child was free to express.

The white children who were taken to those gruesome picnics under lynching trees, where the adults laughed and pointed and the children learned to grin through their

trauma; and the Black daughters and sons of the man in the tree had to go to school the next day as though nothing had happened.

The white children following their parents' lead in spitting and cat-calling at little six-year-old Ruby Bridges on her lonely walk to school; even as they must have remembered their own first-day-of-school jitters. They must have felt her pain. But they had to feel it in silence, and so did she. They all had to act as though it didn't exist.

The peace we may think is now broken was never peace. It was anger, silenced. Tamped down. Smothered.

And anger, itself, is a secondary emotion. The emotion behind it is grief.

Black people and other People of Color are the primary victims of the sickness of racism; just as Hagar and Ishmael were the primary victims of Abraham and Sarah's actions—but we are all suffering because of it.

We are all in grief. Somewhere in our deepest hearts, a stifled voice has been crying, “Where are the other people? Where are my brothers? Where are my sisters?”

The turmoil around our tables and in our streets isn’t the end of peace—instead, it could be the beginning of it. It could be—if we keep at it. If we don’t let ourselves take the easy road of settling back into silence.

Isaac may have squelched his questions and revealed his grief sideways, through the subtle means of narrative viewpoint. Jesus, though, refuses to be either silent or subtle. He is *demanding his* family back. All the missing. All the outcasts. All the flesh-of-his-flesh, bone-of-his-bone siblings of every color; and he will overturn every table to make that happen.

That’s the cross that we take up, if we want to finally be alive.

So: Where is Hagar, Mama? Where is Ishmael, Daddy?

That's what we have to ask, and keep asking, until everyone is finally home.