

## **“Call Me Ishmael”**

June 25, 2017

A Sermon by the Rev. John C. R. Silbert at Trinity Presbyterian Church; Butler, Pennsylvania  
The Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year A

*Text: “The Lord said to Abraham, ‘Why did Sarah laugh, and say, ‘Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?’ Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.’ But Sarah denied, saying, ‘I did not laugh’; for she was afraid. He said, ‘Oh yes, you did laugh.’”*

Genesis 15:13-15; NRSV



[Image Credit: Jean Baptiste Camille Corot, “Hagar in the Wilderness” (detail), 1835, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York]

*“The fact is that the story of God’s redemption of this cosmos is not a pretty story all the time. It involves real people with real foibles, sins, and pettiness. And in Genesis 16 and 21 in the stories involving Hagar and then also Ishmael, if God comes across at times as rolling with the punches and doing his holy best to make good come out of a fair amount of lousiness, that may itself be a sign of hope for the rest of us, including all of us in the church yet today.”*

The preceding words from the preacher-teacher Scott Hoezee are well taken as we look at these stories from Holy Scriptures; especially the stories we find here in Genesis.

Let us pray: Our Father and our God make us masters of ourselves that we may become the servants of others. Take my lips and speak through them; take our minds and think through them; take our hearts and set them on fire, for we would see Jesus this morning, in his name and for his sake, we pray, Amen.

Perhaps some of the greatest words in American fiction come from the opening lines of Herman Melville's book, *MOBY DICK*: "*Call me Ishmael.*" These words are uttered by one of the minor characters in Melville's novel who, nevertheless, forms one of the points of view for the story. Ishmael is a sailor on the whaling ship *Pequod* that has been wrecked at sea in pursuit of its quarry. There were myriad ocean-going vessels that formed the massive fleet of ships that was the American whaling industry burgeoning off American waters like Nantucket Island in Massachusetts in the Nineteenth Century. The story is rooted there in that part of the world.

These opening lines are quite interesting! There is any number of names an author could assign to such a person narrating the story. That the story is fiction, any name is as good as another, right? . . . But Melville opens his epic novel with these words:

*"Call me Ishmael."*

If you know the Biblical story, those three words are dynamite -- they're loaded -- because they come with a whole lot of literary baggage. With this brief introduction, Melville has focused the reader on the fact that the narrator is the lone survivor of this wreck of the *Pequod*, and then goes back to tell the story of Captain Ahab and his search for the great white whale, and all the events along on the way. Eventually, of course, the story becomes the maniacal focus of Ahab and his pursuit of *Moby Dick*, the great white whale -- a pursuit that leads to the whale's winning in the end, destroying Ahab and the *Pequod* in a brutal turnabout at sea.

The point of the story, as far as Ishmael goes, is not only to focus on the troubles such focused obsession creates, but also because he is the last one left; he's the only one that survives! And he is cast adrift, out there by himself; alone in the wilderness of the sea. It is, in a way, the "aqua-version" of the young boy and his slave-woman-of-a-mother, Hagar, cast into

the desert; passed over; of no account . . . The brutal result of the obsession of the slave-woman's owner, Sarah, the wife of Abraham.

Can you imagine?

You load up a woman with bread and water and throw her out into the desert . . . Such was the peculiar life of a slave. There was no standing; there was no position.

Ishmael really draws the attention of Sarah in this passage; Sarah for her part does not come off well in this -- neither does Abraham, quite frankly!

Being Bible detectives here we can note that the words "playing with" or "enjoying" or "kidding with" Isaac are actually playful variations on Isaac's name. "*When the child was weaned, Ishmael was enjoying -- or playing with -- laughter (Isaac).*" That is what the text is actually saying here; that is how it reads. There isn't anything wrong with that. Sarah doesn't see it that way; reading her mind based on the text, "*I don't like the way they are enjoying one another's company . . .*"

Also, to be honest, because Ishmael was first born, he had certain rights in that kind of society that might not filter down to Isaac, even though Isaac was the son of the wife . . . But, of course, we know that economics has never entered into relationships in past history. . . I'm kidding! Property, money, influence, and power often get in the way of good relations.



The sermon cover-picture is a detail of a larger painting by Jean Baptiste Camille Corot's painting from 1835, entitled, "*Hagar in the Wilderness*" (pictured on the left)<sup>ii</sup>. You see from the cover detail that Hagar is clearly distraught, while her son, Ishmael,

lying on the ground beside her looks to be about nine or ten years old. More than likely, he was about fourteen or fifteen based on the chronology of events in Scripture. It would have been hard for her to carry him on her shoulder let alone toss him under a bush as the text here in Genesis 21 indicates.

As you see from the original painting, Corot has painted a much vaster wilderness in which these two are found in the lower foreground. The wilderness looks rather benign; it looks like a really big park . . . But if we take a look at the actual wilderness of Beer Sheba, we see it is



quite different (pictured at left)<sup>iii</sup>. It is really is a desert! There isn't much of anything that can shield or protect anyone stranded there. . . It is an immense place; inhospitable at best. It is not a good place to run out of water and bread!

One of the main aspects of this story is that it concerns Abraham saying good-bye to his first-born son, Ishmael. The photograph at the right shows a life-sized installation-sculpture by George Segal in the Perez Museum of Art in Miami, entitled, "*Abraham's Farewell to Ishmael.*"<sup>iv</sup> It expresses the complex of relationships that effect and are affected by this farewell. This is not a farewell of house guests who have been visiting . . . Abraham is saying good-bye to his son! We see the primary focus of the embrace between father and son; we see Sarah behind and to the right (nearly hidden) -- looking a little like a



menacing presence (think Lord Sith from *Star Wars*!). Sarah's presence here is reminiscent of the debacle we noted before the sermon: it isn't a clean and pretty narrative in the Scripture; it is not tied up in a pretty little box; it is loaded with toils and snares, rough edges, and a lot of pettiness. "Get rid of that slave girl and her son!" But don't forget -- Hagar, the slave-woman, is Sarah's property! I guess you can have varying relationships with your hired help . . . But pretty quickly she throws the hijab over her head and says to Abraham for him to get rid of her and her son. Notice the distance between them. Hagar, as the sculpture suggests, is already turning away to look into an unknown future . . . wow.

Here is what I want you to take away from this sermon and the scriptures: Hagar and Ishmael are outcasts, throw-aways; they are disposable, no longer needed -- actually, they are no longer wanted. But according to the Scripture in Genesis, and given reaffirmation by no one less than Jesus Christ, that matters to God. There they go, off into the wilderness, where the food runs out and the water runs dry and the wilderness is desolate and they cry out to God and he hears them.

And if you have ever been in an extreme place and felt that you were alone -- where you, too, have been cast out for some reason, put aside off in a corner, shunned -- wherever you have felt isolated from others, you are not truly alone. You may be isolated from the community, you may be cut-off from your spouse or family, but you are not alone.

In Genesis 16, we read about Sarah's desire to engineer the promise God has made to Abraham to be Father of many nations by having him have relations with her slave-woman, Hagar! Sarah gives Hagar to Abraham in order to get started on the nation building! This may offend our modern sensibilities, but it is Sarah (she was actually called "Sarai" at this time) who is seeking to make things happen! Sarah herself was barren, so she takes it into her own hands and says to Abraham, "*Here, have a child with my slave-woman.*" Hagar gets pregnant. And all

of a sudden it is Sarah that feels isolated! In that culture it is not enough simply to be the married woman; one's ability to produce children was a status-raiser. Soon enough, as Hagar's belly grew, so did the animosity between these two women! Such is this rancor that Hagar flees from the verbal and psychological abuse. As she runs, the Angel of the Lord appears to her and says, *"What are you doing? Go home, go back there."*

And it is interesting in this passage from Genesis 16 that it was in that very desolate and lonely place that Hagar ends up giving God a name, *"the God who sees me"* ("Beer lahai roi" in Hebrew). She returns home, empowered by this visitation of God to her in her distress, and gives birth to the son who is named "Ishmael" -- *"God hears."*

Now, five chapters later, we read that God heard the sound of the boy crying. *"God heard the sound of the child named 'God hears crying.'"* Isn't that interesting! God heard Ishmael; God heard Hagar; God saw Hagar. Even though their status was nothing, God saw and heard them in their distress.

Effectively, Jesus said to his disciples, *"Look, it is going to be tough sometimes; you will feel ostracized, put out beyond others; you will find yourself in extreme places, but don't worry about that. God knows even when a sparrow falls to the ground -- 'Are not two sparrows sold for a penny?'"* Birds were part of the sacrificial system and purchased by the many to be used as sacrifices; a lot of sparrows in that kind of economy amounts to a lot of pennies! And not even one of them falls without the Lord knowing about it. . . And Jesus adds that God counts every hair on your head (And some of us have more hair than others!). Letting that sink in to the disciples, he concludes, *"You are worth more than many sparrows."*

We sometimes want to divorce the God of the Old Testament from the God of the New Testament realized in the person of Jesus Christ; somehow they seem to be at odds, we think. They are not at odds! It is the same God. And the loving care, the loving-kindness that sees and

hears the abandoned slave and her child in the desert is the same one who is counting the hairs on your head, recognizing you as worth more than many sparrows.

Sometimes all we need is that feeling that we are not alone, all by ourselves in our distress. All we need is the realization that someone else can see and hear us; someone who is God's representative who can offer us a shoulder to lean on, to offer that listening ear, who hears and sees on God's behalf -- enough to see in our own distress what is truly possible. We are so often so bound up in our own distress that all we need is someone else to be with us in that space in order to help us see, in our distress, what we were unable to see that are right there to be noticed.

What does God do when he hears the boy and the woman in distress? The Angel of the Lord comes to them saying, "*Do not be afraid*" -- a phrase that many angels say! Then points Hagar's eyes to a well nearby . . . "*Go drink of the well.*"

When we are so bound up in our distress, we sometimes need someone else to point to the resources we cannot see that are near at hand. We simply need someone to care enough for us so that we can see them too, and then act on it.

Folks, if you ever feel you are in that place of extremity, of the ostracizing effect of being alone, "*There's a wideness to God's mercy like the wideness of the sea*" -- the words of an old hymn that links us back to Ishmael, the narrator of our opening illustration! And whether the vastness is a great sea of torment, or a vast desert of desolation, God sees and hears us where we are. God is an infinite God, yes, but the truth is he is also a very intimate God with each one of us.<sup>v</sup>

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Scott Hoezee in commentary on Genesis 16 and 21 as found at the Center for Excellence in Preaching at Calvin Theological Seminary -- <http://cep.calvinseminary.edu/>.

<sup>ii</sup> Jean Baptiste Camille Corot (French), *Hagar in the Wilderness*, 1835, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, NYC.

<sup>iii</sup> From a photo of the Wilderness of Beersheba found at <http://www.bibleplaces.com/wilderness/>.

<sup>iv</sup> George Segal, *Abraham's Farewell to Ishmael*, 1987, curated by the Perez Museum of Art; Miami, Florida (found at [www.cavestocanvas.com](http://www.cavestocanvas.com)).

<sup>v</sup> Don Clendenin, from his blog Journeys with Jesus, on Matthew 10: "His Eye is on the Sparrow – the God Who Sees and Hears."