

3rd Sunday after Pentecost, yr. a, June 21, 2020

Genesis 21:8-21; Matthew 10:24-39

Do Not Fear – Rev. Dr. Deborah M. Jenks

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It's really tempting when reading scripture to simply skip over the hard parts; to just not deal with them. Abraham and Sarah, the great father and mother of God's own people, those great examples, role models, of faith, banish a child and his mother to the desert?! And then there's Jesus, calling his disciples and sending them out to proclaim the gospel and heal, telling them, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace on the earth; I have come not to bring peace, but a sword. ... set a man against his father, daughter against her mother, one's foes will be members of one's own household. 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; and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me."?! Tempting as it is to ignore or change the scripture readings, maybe, maybe we need to put ourselves right in the middle of, this clash between scripture and the world around us and see where God leads us.

When we share our faith in God who is loving, forgiving, who promises peace and reconciliation and salvation, who promises to "make all things new", the world often turns around, points to the scripture we hold up as the Word of God, and asks us hard questions; questions that can lead to scorn or accusation, rejection, or simply dismissal of our faith as foolish. So it's tempting for us to

push aside those hard words of scripture, those words of Jesus, which make us uncomfortable, easy to ignore the contradictions that are evident in the behavior of those whom God calls as God's people. We gravitate to the parts we understand, what makes sense to us, the verses of scripture which comfort us, sound nice to us, help us to "live happily ever after" in this world, rather than look too closely at – come face to face with - what would cause us and others to disagree, to be at odds with one another, to question our way of life, the things we believe about ourselves and others, the questions that challenge the values our society and culture hold up as right and good.

The story of Sarah's jealousy and the casting out of Hagar and her child Ishmael fathered by Abraham is really like a snapshot of all the jealousy, all the insecurities, all that can frighten, threaten, and divide us from family, friends, and neighbors. It also fits right in to the terror and the suffering of the world in which we live – a world that seems to see "others" as disposable, of less value simply because they are poor, or Black, or Latino, or "other" than us.

God promised Abraham that his son would be the Father of many nations. And God fulfills that covenant promise with both Abraham's sons, even as fathers and sons are set against one another. According to religious and cultural tradition, Abraham and Sarah's son Isaac is the father of Israel and Abraham and Hagar's son Ishmael is the father of the Bedouin Arabs and the father of Islam.

To this day the fruits of that early jealousy and family division tear apart families and nations and cause suffering and violence.

And then we hear Jesus say to us, who call ourselves by his name, “Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have come not to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father and a daughter against her mother ... and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household.”

If God is good and loving, why does God allow suffering, injustice, calamity and disaster, other terrible diseases to afflict people? If God is so good and all powerful why did God allow evil in creation? If God is God of Life, why is there death? Why do bad things happen to good people? These are essential questions for us as people of faith. They are the questions every single human being on this earth struggles and wrestles with. They are the questions we are asked and will be asked continually by those who look for hope, comfort, inspiration, who yearn to live in the light and not the darkness.

So how do we respond? What do we say and do? How do we live out our faith in God whose desire is to make whole, to redeem and save? As people of faith, as religious people, these are the hard questions we will be asked whenever we proclaim our faith in any kind of a public way, whenever we worship, whenever we commit ourselves to pray for someone, when visiting

others in the name of Christ, when saying “no” to the world when the world says “yes”, whenever we take a stand and say this is wrong and this is why.

The biggest temptation I face as a person of faith, as a minister of the gospel of Jesus, is the temptation to “explain God”. And in trying to justify, rationalize, explain “why” in relation to God, I find myself trying “to be God.” Or rather the kind of God I imagine others want and even I might want; trying hard to make everyone happy, to make things right, to minimize conflict and discomfort and suffering, to have an influence on what others think, or ask, or say or do. It takes a lot of struggle, mistakes, and hard experience over and over again for God to remind me that not even God is the way I try to be like God.

Another big temptation related to this is to confine our faith and our relationship to God to the small part of the world – the private, individual world – that we think we understand or have some control over. By doing this we can – for awhile – bypass the hard questions, avoid having to face and confront them, whether from others or ourselves. We can create our own idyllic safe world and personal relationship with God, and shut out the big bad world outside; or at least justify our own salvation in contrast to the world. And then we can encourage, exhort, cajole, or wish others to do the same and look on it all as the will of God.

But the scriptures tell us over and over in many and various ways, that this is not the way God works. God does not save some at the expense of others.

God does not make things right by doing violence to us or others. God does not will the suffering of others as payment for sin. God does not force God's self or God's will on human beings. The reason we wrestle with the hard questions is that, "God leaves us free to love or not to love, to forgive or to refuse forgiveness. But God is never ... indifferent to human affliction; God suffers ... with each person. There is a pain that God experiences, a suffering felt by Christ." (Bro. Roger, The Sources ... p.19)

The whole of the scriptures – the Hebrew Scriptures, the Gospels, the Epistles – accurately and in detail describes a very familiar pattern of the world; a world that creates winners and losers. When there are those who win the war, there are those who lose it. When there are those who get to the promised land, there are those who get kicked out. When God is seen as on the side of one, then God must be against the other. But there are woven into this dark pattern of the world, threads of light that transform the darkness; when God makes the first last and the last first, when those who lose their lives for God's sake, find them.

Hagar went and wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba. When the water was all gone, she placed the child under one of the bushes. She then went away and sat down opposite him ... For she said: I cannot bear to watch the child dying. As she sat there opposite him, the child loudly cried and wept. God heard the voice of the child, and an angel of God spoke to Hagar ... "Don't grieve so deeply, Hagar. Don't be afraid for God has heard the voice of the child where he

is. Get up, go and pick the child up and hold him in your arms, for God will make of him a great nation.” Jesus says to us, “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them can fall to the ground without your Father (God) knowing. ... So do not be afraid; you are worth much more than many sparrows.”

In answer to the hard questions – the questions by which we and the rest of the world seek to know God, live in close relationship with God, and share God’s healing, redeeming, transforming love for all that God creates – questions like; who out there in the hostile world would ever hear the cry of one small child or even care, we can say, “God hears the voice of the child”, and with Hagar and Jesus and so many others before us, we can hold the child in our arms, give the child a drink in the name of God, on behalf of God. Amen.

Source cited:

*The Sources of Taize: No Greater Love.* Brother Roger of Taize, GIA Publications, Chicago, 2000.

