



*God gives the full
measure of love,
and it is somehow
reassuring to learn,
even by suffering,
how large and powerful love is.*

—Wendell Berry

THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST **21 June 2020**

Invitation to Prayer — Psalm 86

Gladden the soul of your servant, for you, O God, lift up my soul.
You are good and forgiving, abounding in steadfast love.

Gathering Prayer

Gracious One in whom we dwell,
you welcome all and all that I am.

In the stillness, I bring my weariness and my aches and pains...
Receive all that I am.

I bring my joys and thanksgivings...
Receive all that I am.

I bring the weight of my concerns for the world and those I love...
Receive all that I am.

Gather me into the soul of your being.
Gift me with the love and peace for which I yearn. Amen.

Scripture Reading—Genesis 21:8–21

This reading picks up the story of Sarah and Abraham following the birth of their son Isaac. Lineage and inheritance were significant identifiers within Hebrew culture. They were part of the fabric and structure of what was seen as a well-ordered society. This backdrop brings tension to the narrative—namely, which child of Abraham will be his heir and carry his legacy forward? Ishmael as the oldest son is the rightful inheritor. However, according to the history of Israel, God's promise was given to Abraham and Sarah, bringing a twist to the plot.

Alongside this tension, the story intends to address some anthropological questions including: How did two separate nations arise from the same father? What is the relationship between the descendants of Isaac (Jews) and the descendants of Ishmael (Arabs)? Anyone aware of the tensions that remain in the Middle East can see this is very much a live question today.

But perhaps more importantly are the potential meanings this text might put forth—especially as we listen with the ear of our heart. Therefore, as we read, there will be places where we are invited to sit prayerfully. Rather than analysing or drawing conclusions, we are invited to notice without judgement what is happening within us. Also, as part of our quest for meaning, consider what modern day situations come to mind.

The child of Sarah and Abraham grew and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. 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."

Sit with the image of the two boys playing together without thought of the tensions within the adult world—tensions such as property, belonging, ownership and race.

The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. 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. As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring."

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.

Sit with the image of Hagar wandering in the wilderness, carrying Ishmael, a skin of water and bread on her shoulders.

When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. 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.

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. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him." 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.

Sit with the image of mother and child beside the well, drinking in the new but fragile hope.

God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

Going Deeper

This story is told from the perspective of the Abrahamic lineage out of which Israel arose as a nation. As with all telling of history, this perspective has its limitations.

- Whose voices, now and in the future, are potentially silent here?
- What questions and/or concerns does it raise for you?

It's been said that history has a way of repeating itself.

- As you sat with the images in the story, what contemporary situations came to mind?

It can bring insight to imagine alternative moves or different endings within a story. In doing so, we can uncover what is important to us and how we might be invited to respond to situations in our day.

- Consider the various turning points in this reading, moments of crucial judgement, decision and action. How might things have unfolded differently?
- What wisdom has been uncovered for you and what is God's invitation for you at this time?



Silent Meditation

You might choose to spend some moments in silent meditation.

How to meditate—from the World Community for Christian Meditation

To meditate, sit still and upright. Close your eyes lightly. Sit relaxed but alert. Silently, interiorly begin to say a single word. We recommend the prayer-phrase, “Ma-ra-na-tha.” Say it as four syllables of equal length.

Listen to it as you say it, gently but continuously. Do not think or imagine anything—spiritual or otherwise. If thoughts and images come, these are distractions at the time of meditation, so keep returning simply to saying the word.

Prayers of Intercession

All Encompassing Love, you draw near in our time of need. You attend to the cry of our impoverished hearts. Thank you for your steadfast and enduring presence experienced in the sun that warms our bones and the rain that brings green growth.

We pray for places in our world and country where disease, civil unrest, inequality and environmental strain gut and dishearten the people and the land...

Shine the light of your love on us.

We pray for these weeks of winter, for this time to tend to the soul with rest and stillness, to hibernate and reserve our energy but which can also test and deplete our spirits...

Shine the light of your love on us.

We pray for those we know who are struggling mentally, physically and spiritually, for those who are lonely or unsettled, for those doing it tough for whatever reason...

Shine the light of your love on us.

Disciples' Prayer

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.

Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
now and forever. Amen.

Blessing

May our eyes see the beauty
that surrounds us in each and every moment.

May our hearts stay strong
and may love always find a way to shine forth.

The love of God, the grace of Jesus Christ and the communion of the Spirit be with us all.

Reflections in Solitude — Week 13
Rev. Christine Gilbert for the St. Andrews by the Sea Uniting Church

On Monday, I was heading east on Pier Street, waiting for the light to turn green at the intersection of Brighton and Diagonal Roads and, for several moments, I watched the children playing outside at the Glenelg Primary School. It was a delight to behold the abounding energy of a variety of children running and bounding across the winter green grass.

Two boys caught my eye with what appeared to be a game of follow the leader. One of the boys took off in a sprint, performing feats of youthful skill like jumping to touch a high tree branch, leaping from object to object without stumbling, and bursting over the top of a hill to summersault down the other side. His friend followed behind, mimicking his precise moves without skipping a bit.

As I watched, I was taken back to my own days on the playground. I acknowledge that childhood is far, far from easy or without its bumps and bruises. Then and now, some homes and environments give rise to prejudice, hatred and addiction. Some children know the painful realities of poverty, abuse, and grief. Nevertheless, I remembered the kind of innocence I enjoyed then—a freedom from the complexity of global concerns and the paralysing weight of them. Life together was relatively simple and involved such things as being kind, respecting and befriending others and sharing.



In this way, I also saw and felt potential as I gazed on the playground. There, in the sea of blue uniforms, was a future not yet entirely shaped by what has always been or skewed by cynicism, fear, greed, and regret. For this reason, when I read Sarah's sharp and lamentable instruction to "cast out this slave woman and her son" upon seeing Ishmael and Isaac playing together, I felt dismay. Her words throw a bucket of ice water on visions of what might be and our hope for a different future.

In the context of their day, Sarah and Abraham's actions are, shall we say, understandable. They were formed by and concerned with the social structures and customs that maintained (and they thought upheld) life as God intended. There were longstanding justifications for why things were the way they were, namely the need for clarity when it came to paternity, inheritance and the care of women and children, at least the ones that were seen to matter.

Applied without wisdom and compassion, the promises made to Sarah and Abraham in scripture have resulted in an unfortunate and mixed legacy, some of which is hinted at in the story of Hagar and Ishmael's banishment. This horrific act supported with religious and societal laws of the time has been repeated throughout history, resulting not only in refugees and asylum seekers, but in all kinds of exclusion, inequality and violence.

Indeed, we don't have to look too far to uncover some of its legacy in our own land. In an interview during Reconciliation Week this year, Uniting Church Minister Aunty Denise Champion said:

We seem to be able to remember the 'war stories' very well [World War I and II], but we still have amnesia about what happened to Aboriginal people. ...Reconciliation Week is all about truth telling. It allows the truth to be told. Sometimes, things will happen that will make us stop and listen to the truth. If we are not listening to the truth, other things will continue to happen.

Perhaps the image of children playing this week—Ishmael and Isaac as well as the children I saw on the playground that day—might provide insight for us. What might it be to foster in ourselves and our communities a greater innocence? to find that primal place that is untouched by prejudice, hatred and fear? What would it look like to be freed from the warping effect of life's hard knocks and cynicism in order to see with eyes and hearts newly born? to be able to envision, with creativity and love, more lifegiving possibilities?

During our Emergency Relief Service this week, for example, we had the opportunity once again to introduce one of our volunteers and a friend who came for food support. Both have emigrated from a Middle Eastern country, the volunteer several decades ago and our friend more recently. I remember when I first arrived in Australia, it was a delight (and relief!) to speak with someone from the United States and to converse more easily given our shared culture and geography. So, I innocently thought the same might be the case for these two.

However, when they first met each other, I sensed a reserve. It dawned on me that something of Isaac and Ishmael's painful legacy may be playing out in front of me. For though they shared a country of origin, one of our friends is Muslim and the other Christian. The two chatted briefly and graciously, but I felt many unsaid things were going on below the surface.

Later, I wondered about the naivete of my actions. Did my projections get in the way of clear thinking? Would it have been more appropriate to allow this meeting to happen by chance, if at all? Did I inadvertently make things worse?

In speaking with our Muslim volunteer a few days later about the encounter, she gently suggested, "We're in Australia now... it is time for healing and a new story." So, despite the awkwardness of their introduction, it seems a glimmer of hope continues to shimmer. Only God knows what seeds were planted through their exchange.

A redeeming element in the story of Hagar and Ishmael is the recognition that, in God's eyes, *all lives matter*. Hagar was not left in her despair. She was



given a place of sanctuary where she and Ishmael could make a new start. It seems to me that those of us who long to be people after God's own heart might be emboldened by this thread in the narrative.



Do we hear the cries—and angry shouts—of the excluded, the impoverished, the pushed aside, disenfranchised and

dispossessed? What might these voices be saying about the way things are? What are the turning points and where are we called to be at this time in history?

God of Abraham, Sarah and Hagar,
God of travellers, migrants and refugees.
Thank you for the beauty and uniqueness
of this southern land which we share.

Grant your protection and grace
to all who shelter here.

Forgive the racism and destruction
that have been part of our history,
and our disregard for the pain and oppression
within the Australian community today.

Help us shed our provincial expectations.

Take away our cultural tunnel vision.

Open our hearts
to be caring neighbours to each other.

Direct our lives
to just and peaceful action.

God of a thousand faces,
help us also to acknowledge
you are worshipped in many languages,
in different songs
and rhythms of life from our own.

May we respect
these religious insights in each other
and assist each faithful expression of you.

We rejoice in you, God,
in whose image we are brothers and sisters
and by whose example in Jesus Christ
we know the breadth and depth
of your universal love.

Amen

Justice for Asylum Seekers, Resources for Worship,
Uniting Church in Australia Assembly