

“Creating Promise From Pain”

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Genesis 21:8-21

50 years ago today marks the beginning of the Detroit riots, a clash between black residents and a white police force. These riots left 33 black and 10 white people dead, more than 1,400 buildings burned and more than 7,000 people arrested — many of whom were locked up not for violent crimes, but for curfew violations.

All of the holding cells were overflowing and people were held for days on unconstitutionally high bond in unsanitary conditions, like bathrooms on Belle Isle, and on busses.

Then there were people like Bill Goodman, a young lawyer at the time, who donated his time pro bono to represent these people who were unjustly jailed and persecuted. He stood by them and for them in the face of an unjust system.

Race tensions between white police and black residents are spiking again today. Did you hear this past week about Scott Naff, the white police officer in Virginia who was denied the food he purchased at a McDonald's drive through?

Naff paid for his food and then pulled up to the window to receive it, and was greeted by a man who took one look at him in his police uniform and said “I ain't serving no cops.”

Almost weekly, we hear about shootings of civilians by police and police by civilians. This is an indication of race

tension, distrust that lead people to make choices that create a mess. And many people pay the price as a result throughout this society and the world.

It makes me sad and it makes me angry.

This is nothing new. People have been making a mess of things and causing pain since the beginning.

Today we are looking at the story of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar and the mess and pain in their lives.

The story of Hagar is a troubling one for a number of reasons. First, we have Abraham and Sarah who have been promised a child through whom the world would be blessed. Then they don't really trust God's promise. They are not sold on the idea that God can or will really bless them in this way. Abraham and Sarah's go through a season of tension and are failing the faith test.

Come on Abraham! Get it together man!

If this is not enough, we see Abraham and Sarah taking matters into their own hands, and it isn't going well.

READ GENESIS 16:1-4

Sarah suggests that since God can't or won't provide, they needed to make it happen of their own volition, in their own way. Do we ever feel that way? God doesn't seem to be working the way that we want, so we act out of our selfish interest to make things happen? This is what Sarah and Abraham did.

Sarah's slave Hagar is much younger and Sarah suggests that Abraham have a baby with her — so that at least they can

have a child in the house to inherit the promise that God made to Abraham's offspring.

Hold up for a second. What? Sarah suggested this? No way! What woman in her right mind would suggest that her husband have a baby with another woman?

Before we judge them too harshly, we have to understand that in those days in that part of the world, this was well within the rights of a slave owner. Also, it was common for men to marry multiple women. Remember that Sarah was Abraham's half sister and it seemed to be okay for him to marry her. So, culturally and morally things were much different for Abraham than for us.

However, even though it was within their rights to do this, we recognize that their intention was to side step the power of God and take things into their own hands. Immediately there is a storm of contempt brewing because of the actions taken by Abraham and Sarah — and it gets worse once Sarah had baby Issac several years later.

READ GENESIS 21:8-16

At this point in the story Hagar was consumed by her grief and it limited her vision. It limited her thinking. It limited her options. It limited her heart — she didn't have it in her to look upon her son Ishmael as he died.

Pain and grief will do that to us. We recoil into a very small world, a limited life because that is all that we can handle.

One might look at this story and say "That is so sad, and messed up!" Not many would argue with that sentiment.

What started out as a creative way for Abraham and Sarah to "make things happen" was revealed to have ill motives effectively eliminating God from the picture. Instead of trusting God to provide, they were working to manipulate the situation based on a lack of faith in God. Don't forget, this is the same God they wanted to bless their son.

See how things can get all twisted up?

Of course there is going to be tension here between who Abraham and Sarah saw as the true son, Isaac and the half-blood imposter who is actually the first born and stands to steal away God's promise from the true heir.

All of this tension was the result of Sarah and Abraham's choice, and they knew it. The only solution seemed to be getting rid of the half-blood first-born — to get rid of the mistake they made so that everything could return to the way it was supposed to be in the first place.

So, they sent Hagar and Ishmael out in the wilderness, and to satiate the guilt a bit, Abraham gave them a bit of water and bread, not nearly enough to survive.

The consequences of their actions wrecked havoc not only on Hagar and her son Ishmael, who looked to be fatally abandoned under a bush, but also inner turmoil for Abraham and Sarah.

After they looking at the mess that they had created, I can imagine they felt pretty low.

We all can probably identify as we look back at our choices, things we have done or not done, and see what has resulted. Dwelling on these things in hindsight has us think less of ourselves.

We replay them in our head over and over again. We say to ourselves,

“If only I had done things just a bit different. I could have said ... I could have done ... If only I had not done ...”

How many times have you allowed yourself to be consumed this way? You replay the events of the past over and over and cringed each time. As a result you feel very small. It leaves you feeling ashamed, embarrassed, disempowered, and even insignificant.

When we do this, we allow the mistakes of the past to continue creating pain in the present and effectively determine our future (a much smaller future) by the decisions we make about what we will never do again, or will always do again.

Years ago, while working in the Claims Department at Citizens Insurance, I was sitting around chatting with my team of perhaps eight to ten people, all of whom were women except me. One of my co-workers was wearing what might have been a new blouse that had a black and white pattern on it.

Now, I have always been an extrovert, and as an extrovert I have often opened my mouth to speak long before thinking about how others might respond to what I was saying. Us extroverts are much more susceptible to inserting our feet into our mouths. I'm sure none of you here know anything about this.

I had lived on a farm and raised cows, some of which were Holstein cows that have the black and white pattern in their coats. I looked at my co-worker seeing a similar pattern. Very innocent, right?

So, I opened my mouth and said “Oh, your shirt looks like a cow!”

As soon as the words were out of my mouth I heard gasps from around the circle and knew there was nothing I could do to take back those words, which I was sure instantly caused her great emotional pain and embarrassment.

Those words would live on forever in my head. No take backs. Ouch! I made a bit of a mess of things there.

I don't know but I can imagine that my co-worker went home and burned that blouse and who knows in what way that left a scar in her psyche. I don't know, but can imagine she may have made different choices about her clothes after that day. She may have even thought differently about her own body after that one comment by me. I'll probably never know.

We can truly mess things up sometimes.

Back to our story from Genesis. Hagar was weeping in the wilderness having left Ishmael to die a distance away under the bush. We don't get any indication that she has any hope. We don't hear her crying out to God. She is truly lost in pain and anguish. You could call this despair.

This is the pivot point in the story. Enter an angel who announces God's heart of redemption, of healing, of forgiveness.

READ GENESIS 21:17-21

The ones who were sent out onto the margins to be forgotten, and around whom was unbearable pain, have not been forgotten. God reminds Hagar that she and Ishmael have a place in God's plan. God continues to hold a special commitment to Ishmael to bless him and make him into a great nation — even when Abraham and Sarah had not been faithful.

Even when Hagar was feeling alone and in despair, God heard the cry of the innocent. Even though Hagar didn't know it, God's Spirit was there, and ministered to both her and her child out on the margins.

Hagar, recognizing how God met her in the middle of her despair, called God "the one who sees" because God saw her out where she was forgotten by everyone else, and gave her and her son a second lease on a life of abundance.

This is a God who promised Abraham a son who would grow into a great nation, but now there are two sons. Is God big enough, creative enough, to, even in the midst of unfaithfulness and rebellion, offer enough grace to honor the promise to two different sons?

The creative Spirit of God is indeed big enough.

We serve a God of the margins. Consistently, God stands with those who are left alone, stuck in pain and despair, and forgotten by others.

God did not intervene to prevent Hagar and Ishmael from being sent to the margins, but instead God creatively

adjusted to meet them out there in the wilderness, the place in which they suffer to offer them hope.

The good news this morning is that God transforms our pain into promise. We serve a God of transformation.

Have you been suffering?

Have you felt abandoned?

Have you felt alone?

Have you felt like your choices have left you worthless and disempowered?

God is standing with you there. God will transform your pain into promise.

Now, let us look out into Birmingham and into the communities in which you live, and ask: Are there people who are suffering, abandoned, alone and disempowered? As God does, do we have enough grace and love to also stand with them?