

Children's Sermons: "Ishmael, Left to Die," Genesis 21:8-21; January 10, 2010 Rev. Craig Sherouse, PhD.

Introduction to the Sermon Series and Scripture Reading

Jesus never told us to "grow up." Rather, he told us to "grow down" – to become like little children. But most of us ignore the spiritual lessons children have to teach us. We even ignore the children's sermons in the Bible. Last August, our ministerial staff read the profoundly impactful book, Too Small To Ignore, by Dr. Wes Stafford. He is President and CEO of Compassion International, a wonderful Christian ministry to the poor children of the world. A book has never more emotionally impacted me. It is the story of Stafford's experience of being abused for years in the African boarding school he attended, which was for missionary children. It tells of his idyllic childhood, growing up in poverty in an African village. It tells of his shattered life of abuse away from home. It tells of God using that background to make him into one of the world's chief advocates for children. It tells of the devastating role of poverty in children's lives.

Reading this book made me realize that I had never preached a sermon series on the children in the Bible. So I went to work and have uncovered fifteen key Bible stories that star children. Today we start our first year's installment of seven of these stories. Our first such story is a rather vicious story, but then the Bible is an honest book. I'm not surprised, given the history of the neglect and abuse of children, that the first story of a child is of Ishmael, Abraham's son, being banished to the desert and left to die. But, there is more to the story! May we hear some Good News! And may these Children's Sermons help us to grow down!

⁸The child [Isaac] grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. ⁹But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. ¹⁰So 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." ¹¹The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. ¹²But 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. ¹³As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring." ¹⁴So 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. ¹⁵When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. ¹⁶Then 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. ¹⁷And 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. ¹⁸Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him." ¹⁹Then 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. ²⁰God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. ²¹He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

Sermon

This story has some of the most painful themes of human experience. Family strife. Sibling rivalry. The stresses of a blended family. The breakup of a home. The abandonment of a child by a father. A desperate mother driven into the wilderness with her only child. Heat, starvation and thirst. Only a bush for comfort. The tears of a mother and the cries of her dying son. Doubt, jealousy and hatred. Incredible loneliness.

Mother Theresa, who saw more suffering than most, said this: "Being unwanted, unloved, uncared for, forgotten by everybody, I think that is a much greater hunger, a much greater poverty than the person who has nothing to eat ... Loneliness is the most terrible poverty." This story is about the pain of that most terrible poverty.

But this story is also about the presence of the mysterious, compassionate, listening, intervening God. The God whose promises will be fulfilled. The God who is present amidst the deepest, most painful experiences we have. The God who comes in response to our lonely cries. The God who gives wells in the desert, and a future to a dying boy.

Here's the story, again. Abraham, who is a biblical hero of faith, isn't much of a hero at home! God had promised Abraham and Sarah at least six times that, despite their old age, she would conceive a son and this son would be the father of a great nation. But they doubted and forced the issue. They used Sarah's slave girl, Hagar, as a substitute, a kind of ancient surrogate mother. And you can count on it: Distrusting in the promises of God and God's faithfulness has devastating consequences. The pregnant Hagar began to show contempt toward Sarah. Sarah dealt with her harshly, and Hagar ran away into the wilderness. An angel appeared and promised her that her son would be the father of a great multitude. She returned to Sarah and bore Ishmael.

Thirteen years later Sarah did conceive and Isaac was born, the true son of promise. But Sarah doubted that Isaac would stay the chosen. Ishmael, the very child of Sarah's despair, instead of serving as a confirmation of God's goodness, becomes for Sarah and Abraham a living threat to the promise. The final straw was when Sarah saw Ishmael playing with Isaac. The text is unclear what the exact issue was. Ishmael was laughing at or with Isaac, I mean, hadn't Sarah herself laughed at the prospects of Isaac – an old woman giving birth? Isn't that why she named him "Isaac," a name that meant "Laughter?" What's the big deal? Big brothers laugh at little brothers all the time!

The Hebrew language says that Ishmael was "Isaac-ing" at Isaac. And maybe that is why it was the final straw for Sarah. He was becoming too much like Isaac, threatening to supplant him. So Sarah convinced Abraham to cast Hagar and Ishmael out into the desert. And God confirmed to Abraham that it was all right and that Ishmael would also make a great nation.

Most of us would have just as soon that God had stayed out of the story at this point. It is difficult to accept God endorsing such mistreatment of a mother and child. But we see through a foggy glass, and God sees the big picture. God knew that there would be an angel and a well in the desert. God knew that Abraham – who would soon be called on to sacrifice Isaac – needed to learn how to let go of the dearest things he had. Perhaps God knew that Abraham might not even be that tested with Isaac if he had another "heir in waiting" with Ishmael. Perhaps God used this tragedy to get Ishmael out of the potential of even greater danger. God knew that some of Ishmael's grandsons would buy Isaac's grandson, Joseph, from his jealous brothers and deliver him to Egypt. God knew there was a bigger story that was unfolding, despite the jealousy and abuse. I believe that God hears the cries of every child. But that can be hard to believe in the face of the rampant suffering of children. But I believe it. I believe God heard Ann Frank's cry, and that he hears the cries of the child soldiers in Africa and the cries of the children at St. Jude's Hospital. I believe he hears those cries and the cries of anguishing mothers and fathers, just as he heard the cries of Ishmael dying under the bush and Hagar weeping a bowshot away. It is hard, but I choose in my faith to believe that God hears!

Over the years, I have counseled people who were abused as children. Many have struggled with their faith. They had begged God to deliver them from their abuser, and it did not happen soon enough. Did God not hear their cries? I have no easy, clichéd answer. But I choose to believe that God hears!

Wes Stafford, whose book so impacted me, struggled to find an answer from God to his cries amidst his abuse. But he has found the answer! For thirty years he has been an advocate for children, and his story is dramatically impacting pastors and churches. I started an email dialogue about the text of the upcoming sermon this week. One of our members, a public school teacher, emailed me this: *"My school is made of up of about 375 preschool through second grade children, half of whom live in poverty. My life is changed daily because of the lessons I learn from these resilient children. I believe for many of them our doors represent a safe haven from the life they experience at home. I was talking with a first grade teacher today who, before Christmas Break, went to the hotel where one of her students lives, and the student was crying and saying she wished they didn't have to stay home for two weeks because she loves her teacher so much and would miss her. Two days in, and that child is not back at school yet. We have no idea where she's gone or if she will be back. We have such a great responsibility to the children that cross our paths."*

I have never known of an angel speaking to a suffering child or crying parent, like happened to Hagar and Ishmael in the desert. But I believe God sends angelic messages and help through us – through teachers and parents and neighbors, and doctors and nurses and counselors, and lawyers and judges and politicians, and coaches and ministers and missionaries, and grandparents and aunts and uncles – through people like us who simply listen to the Spirit and do what we can do. To be a safe haven. To give a word of hope. To help children see the well that God has provided in the desert. To even be that well! The angelic answer comes quite simply when we learn to love more. When we grow down and become more like these lovable, loving, trusting, crying children. When they become our children, we can become their wells in the desert!

Is there a more vexing problem in the modern world than the mid-eastern problem? At the core of that problem is the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Muslims believe that the northern Arab tribes are descended from Ishmael. So the biggest problem in our world – the hatred between the Jewish people and the Arab/Palestinian/Muslim people – somehow goes back biblically to this story. Is it really too simplistic to think that the Arab-Jewish relationship would be different if two mothers had just loved each other and each others' children? If they had just grown down? The ways we treat each other in our homes, the ways we love one another have major, long-term implications! The most vexing problems there are might not be there if we would just grow down and love up.

Mother Theresa was right: Being unwanted, unloved, uncared for, forgotten by everybody – I think that was the greatest hunger and thirst that Hagar and Ishmael felt in the desert. Loneliness is the most terrible poverty there is. But the love of Christ, found and shared when we grow down and become more like children, is the solution to the world's most vexing problems. It is the solution to our families' brokenness and to the deepest loneliness there is. God has always had a plan. And that plan will never be thwarted, despite the doubt, jealousy and abuse in this story or the horror that our sin did to Christ on the cross. Love conquers all!

Two weeks ago, we provided love – food, water, shelter and friendship – for the homeless by hosting CARITAS. This corner of River and Gaskins became a well in their dessert. One of our guests is a match stick artist and made this cross for us as a gift of love. On the back are these words: *"This is my Match Stick Cross. The wood is to represent the light He shines upon us and the red is to represent the blood He paid for our sins. Amen. God Bless, Stephen Jan. 2010"* I could almost believe God sent us an angel to sleep in Spence Hall for a week and deliver to us this message of child-like love!

Jesus on the cross perfectly shows us the God of this story – the God who is present amidst the deepest, most painful experiences we have. The God who comes in response to our lonely cries. The God who gives a future to his dieing children. The God whose promises will not be broken. The God who will bring his will about, despite our ill will. This is our cross – the solution to our deepest hunger and thirst, our loneliness. This is our well in the dessert!