

In the Hard Choices

Genesis 21:8-21

Stories of Genesis: When God Shows Up

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Worship at 9 and 10:45 a.m.

Before the proclamation of the Word I want to say two 'thank you's' this morning: the first 'thank you;' is to all of you who have sent cards and e-mails, given your prayers and your support for my last two weeks with an intense bronchial flu. I was not fit for anything of physical use because I could not breathe at times. But I'm back and your prayers have helped me come to recovery.

The second 'thank you' is to all of you who have so generously supported this church's ministry, particularly in the last month. Your generosity is rapidly bringing us to a place to where we will end this year in the black. We're not quite there yet but I believe it will happen because you've listened to the voice of the Spirit to support the ministry of the church. So thank you for your generosity.

Let me offer a prayer for the ministry of the Word: In the dry places, in the desert and in the beating sun, in the tough patterns of life where the decisions can be difficult, Lord God, speak to us through Jesus the Christ, in the power of your Spirit. Amen.

As summer approached, and during the time of my illness, I began to think that I might need a new hairstyle. Seeking some advice and counsel for this very difficult choice in my life, I decided to seek a pop magazine that had on the front cover "Sizzling Hairstyles." It was the NOVA magazine of Northern Virginia Living. In looking inside I was a bit taken aback because the only pictures of these sizzling hairstyles were of younger women in rather interesting, intense poses. Overcoming my fear that it would have nothing to do with me, I went on to read the article.

"Hair likes to misbehave during summer – particularly during the muggy days. But curls still rock," and I was encouraged by that, because the little hair I do have is curly in the back. "The wavy, beachy trend still dominates;" that encouraged me from my southern California days at the beach. But now there's a more relaxed style – easygoing attitude – artfully unruly waves" in other words, if you have messed up hair, you're in. "That soft, breezy natural wave... that beautiful, carefree curl – nurture it. Use surf spray with seaweed extract – it gives you tousseled look of salt water." And I'm thinking: why not just go out and soak yourself in salt water? "Take your hair and scrunch it with your hands; twist the individual strands with your finger to make sure the curls are tight." Use certain kinds of streaking substances to make sure that you have that natural look. And I wondered why there was no call for a gracious gray or a bold bald look.

Needless to say, I haven't changed my hairstyle. That's kind of where our culture is, at times: when we look at choices, we tend to trivialize the choice process, when underneath that there are some significant issues that haunt us day-by-day where the choices are very hard.

The key question in hard choices is: how do we know the will of God? This is a conversation that happens frequently in the church today: how is it possible to hear God's voice, particularly in the difficult decisions.

Abraham and Sarah had a major conundrum before them. They had two sons and in the story of the development of those two sons, Abraham, at the age of 75, was promised by God that his generations of ancestors would be more numerous than the sands on the shore. God promised that Abraham would have an heir. At the age of 86 (eleven years later) the heir still had not come and Abraham and Sarah decided to take matters into their own hands and say, "let's have a son through Hagar the slave woman." So at the age of 86, and Sarah, 76, their first child is born of the slave woman – Ishmael.

However, at the age of 99 God shows up again. And God is clear that the promised heir is to be born of Abraham and Sarah. Abraham, at 100 and Sarah at 90 – beyond the ability of their own ingenuity to have a child. Abraham is taken aback because he already has a son, and pleads with God: "Oh that Ishmael might live in your sight." Pay attention to Ishmael, God – he's my first-born son. And God says, "No. There will be a son of you and Sarah." So at the age of 100 and 90, Isaac is born. But then at probably around the age of 101 for Abraham, when Isaac is 1 and being weaned, Sarah sees that Ishmael is out playing with the one-year-old. Now that Hebrew word is not so much about enjoying life, but that Hebrew word has the implication that this teenage kid is 'toying' with this baby. And Sarah begins to be concerned about the healthiness of her own son.

How do they work through this conundrum of what to do with the tensions in the family? The book of Genesis is full of family tension. The spirituality developed by the leadership of God's ancestors – patriarchs and matriarchs – is always in the context of dilemma. There is no "functional family" in Genesis. Even Abraham and Sarah have tremendous undercurrent of dysfunctionality and disagreement.

When I was born, I had two older brothers: one five and one seven by that time. And by the time I was a toddler, they were seven and nine. They had pretty much lived life together and had developed a team effort to decide that I would not stand. So they plotted against me on a day-by-day basis. One day they lit a match and put it in my fingers and I watched it burn down; they went and told my Mom that I was playing with matches – a two-year-old child. I burned my fingertips.

A little later on in life, when I was about nine years old, they decided to dig a deep hole and put me in it! And then they were told by my parents to fill up the hole and they forgot to take me out before they filled it up. And there I was up to my armpits in this hole; and my parents came out and said, 'you need to take him out of there.' So they decided to pull me out without digging me out. That

didn't work very well – one of the reasons I'm so tall, I think (maybe stretching it just a bit.) So I had a couple of older brothers that loved to play with me, with a certain look on their face.

In Bruce Feiler's book on Abraham about the three faiths that have grown out of Abraham's life and experience, he points out that the history of commentaries have not been kind to Ishmael. There's a tendency among the Jewish commentators and the Christian commentators to denigrate the son Ishmael, and Hagar, and to lift up Isaac. One of those commentators, Midrash Esteraba, noted: 'of the ten portions of stupidity in the world, nine were given to the Ishmaelites and one to the rest of the world. In the same manner, nine portions of robustness were allotted to the Ishmaelites and one to the rest of the world,' a reflection on that passage where it said that "Ishmael would grow up like a wild ass in the wilderness."

History has not been kind to Ishmael and those generations that followed him. Even in Galatians chapter 4, the Apostle Paul looks at the relationship between Sarah and Hagar and compares them in positive and negative ways. Paul says, 'let's face it – Ishmael was born of a slave woman and Isaac was born of a free woman,' and this is a parable for the difference between those that live in Christ and those who don't. It's better to be a free child born by a free parent than a slave child born by a slave parent. He points out that the slave child typically persecutes the free child.

There is a tension that exists in most families and institutions and organizations where those that are caught in patterns of slavery 'toy' with those that are trying to live life more freely. Conundrums exist in discerning the difference between what is free and what is slave. There is a tension that exists in moments of decision – the hard choices. In the stress of the decision, Abraham is beside himself, feeling that he will lose his son Ishmael because his wife wants to get rid of him. Abraham is stressed at the moment where he has to make that tough decision.

Is this another act of manipulation (as though he and Sarah had done that with Hagar the slave woman, in order to have a child)? Is this them pushing ahead without God's clarity? Is this their scheming or an act of redemption? Do we agitate or do we integrate in our lives? Do we intimidate or do we supplicate? Do we want to control, or do we want to get into the flow of the Spirit? Do we demand things to happen or do we enter into a discernment process to find out how God wants to lead us to make things happen? Do we make contracts and deals with each other in order to accomplish what we want? Or do we enter into God's covenant process, where God is intimately present in the conversation? Do we abuse or 'toy' with people rather than submit and be gracious? Do we spend rather than invest? The decision as to what we do in these hard choices is significant.

This past six weeks, after moving to Alexandria, I have been about the process of having our licenses developed and our cars registered and titles developed in the state of Virginia. I never realized that one simple process could be so hard. Six trips to the DMV and I still didn't get my one car title and registration done. I became very, very upset and started chewing on the poor man behind the counter. In an attempt to prevent ongoing terrorism, the process has created such resistance that the person who's in the midst of it becomes almost terrorist-tic in their reaction to it. And I know you can identify. Unclear directions, constant deflection into the future, saying: 'well, you don't quite have the right material.' And each time I go, I say, 'but last time you told me I needed this material.' 'Well they didn't tell you the right thing.' The sixth time I was there I was very upset and I started chewing on the woman behind the counter. And she finally looked at me and said, "Sir, I'll take care of you. I'll make sure this works with what you have."

The difference between acts of law and acts of grace. That's what the world's looking for. The difference between someone who is paying attention to the humanity of the person over against somebody who's making decisions for their own benefit or their own freedom to do the thing that has been told them to do.

So the woman behind the counter made the registration process work. And I was graced. In reflection I realized that I was beginning to push too hard. I was beginning to let the anger get the best of me. I was beginning to manipulate and control the situation, which is not an act of grace. And this is what happens to us day-by-day, in the hard choices. We can do things which seem ethically right in the culture. We can make our demands; we can exercise our personal rights. But what happens is, deep down inside, we discover they are morally wrong in the values of the kingdom of God. God's economy doesn't work that way. God doesn't want us to get pushy and manipulative.

Sarah was within her cultural boundaries to give Hagar to Abraham as a slave woman. But that was not God's desire. We can come up with our own human solutions to significant problems without paying any attention to God, and we create the conundrum and the mess worse than it was before. And so Abraham and Sarah are now needing to discern: how do they know God's will after making such a mess of the whole situation?

Some reflections on how they listen to God, for the voice of God in the midst of their hard decisions:

They see and sense something is not right – particularly from Sarah. Now there's an irony to this, because Sarah before is the very one who encouraged Abraham to take the slave woman, Hagar, to have a child, which was not God's desire. And Abraham had already listened to Sarah one time, almost like Adam listening to Eve, and had gotten into deep trouble. And here he is again: should I listen to this woman who got me into such a deep problem in the first place? And here's the irony: God's voice shows up and says, "listen to her." At this moment, Sarah is the voice of God. In the previous moment, Sarah was the voice of the Devil. Let's not be too sure that the voice of God and the voice of the Devil can't show up in the same person.

They faced the wrongness of the situation that they had created. Sarah knew that it wasn't right for this older teenage son to be toying with their infant child. She knew she saw foresaw that the future did not bode well for that relationship, so get him out of the house. Abraham struggled with the timing to act and what to do, because this was his first son, and you don't do anything to hurt the first-born son. They struggled with the timing to act and Abraham, it clearly says, experienced the distress of the moment. He just couldn't believe he had to give up the son.

The hard decisions are always stressful. The difficult moves are always painful. They may be the best things to do but they do not

come at low cost. But Abraham and Sarah listened to the voice of God. God's voice clearly entered into the conversation. They had developed, over a period of time, an ability to hear God when God spoke. And they listened to the trusted voices in their relationship. When we're in a difficult place, we discern the voice of God and we listen to the voices of those people around us who walk with God and whom we trust.

They also aligned themselves with the previous promise of God: you will have a son and that son of the two of you will be the one who stands in the ancestral process.

And they said "Yes" to freedom in the Spirit; they said "No" to a pattern of slavery and abuse and manipulation. And it was coming at high cost, because in order for them to say "Yes" to God and "No" to what had not been God's will, they had to let the slave woman go, with the child. It seems like a harsh decision. There are moments when we have to make decisions where we are damned if we do them, and damned if we don't do them. But there is a perspective that God brings as to which damnation to take. They're hard decisions. But those decisions are often corrective of past mistakes, because we often dig our own deep holes, and busy ourselves. But the important thing is that they finally do listen to God and make the tough decision and they finally do send the son and the mother out into the desert with a little bit of food and water.

I know a couple that adopted a child and unbeknownst to them, they discovered that the child had been in terrible, terrible pre-birth abusive situations as well as post-birth. The child grew up to be a sociopath. They couldn't do anything with the son. He was bound and determined to do himself in, or to do other people in. And they finally came to the hard conclusion that he would have to be institutionalized the rest of his life. And they made the hard decision to put him in jail.

Some of those decisions come with guilt and shame. Maybe we didn't do the best job raising our children; but the decision at the moment to listen to God's voice may be a decision for redemption in the future. This past week we've seen the conviction of a Ku Klux Klan leader who, after 40 years, is finally convicted of the crime of killing three social activists in Mississippi. Eventually what God does with the tough decisions is bring about justice when things have been done poorly... and buried... and hidden.

The good justice sometimes takes a long time to come to. I've had hard decisions in my life on numerous occasions. Things that I just didn't want to decide to do. And I was damned if I did, and damned if I didn't. So I sought the advice and counsel of other trusted people and sought the presence of the voice of God in the midst of the decision, and made the decision with a sense of guilt and sometimes shame. 'Lord, are you sure this is the right thing to do?'

Here's the overwhelming result of their terrible decision: the mother and the child are out in the desert and there is no food or water, and they're dying. But what happens is that God shows up. In the midst of them being rejected and sent out, God meets them in the desert. God's gracious to them in the hard place; and God continues to be gracious to Abraham and Sarah. So out of the terrible decision, God's grace prevails over all. There are no winners or losers here – there's only God's grace.

Are you faced with a hard decision in life? That's the ultimate solution: Lord, may your grace prevail in this hard decision, and may we not do damage.

The Apostle Paul, in Galatians chapter 5, says that "We are children not of the slave, but of the free. For freedom in Christ has set us to be free." In Jesus Christ, because Jesus walks with us and the Spirit speaks to us, God is present. And we have a resource to depend and lean into the community and the voice of God. And that voice is a voice of grace, even when the decisions are terrible. It's only those who don't listen to God, who do not know how to discern the voice, who do not have a community of people to reflect the truth around and be gracious among – that are out in darkness.

So today you are invited into the Word – the presence of the living God. Surround yourselves with people whom you can trust and live in community, and discern in the hard decisions, where God would lead you to go. May it be so, Lord Jesus Christ, as you lead us.

Let us pray. Lord, many of us here face very hard decisions. We've made tough choices in the past. We do not know whether we've done ill or good. But we lean into your grace. You are the only judge and arbiter of justice. Help us to live your way, in your economy. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.