



**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School**

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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**Twenty-Fourth Sunday After Pentecost    November 8, 2015**

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**“His Eye is On The Sparrow”**

*The Account of Hagar and Ishmael (Gen. 21:8-10;14-21)*

Rev. David K. Groth

**COLLECT:** Almighty and ever-living God, You have given exceedingly great and precious promises to those who trust in You. Grant us so firmly to believe in Your Son Jesus that our faith may never be found wanting; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

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One of the most basic human needs is to be included, to be welcomed, to be invited, to be an insider. One of the most painful is to be excluded, kept out, pushed away, to be an outsider.

When I was a youngster, and we still lived in town, it seemed that life in the summer was one continuous baseball game. We gathered at the field. Someone produced a ball, another brought a bat. But first there's that necessary ritual.

The two oldest and biggest, Tim Koepnick and my brother Andy, would appoint themselves captains with the right of choosing members of their team. Because the talent pool was very limited, the question of who chose first was important. Sometimes it was decided by the toss of a coin, sometimes by stepping the hands up the bat.

The winning captain was allowed to make the first choice -- which he did -- of the best player remaining in the pool, usually Yogi Wheeler because he was big and had a strong arm and a strong swing. The losing captain chose next, usually choosing my older brother Paul, because he was fast, and then John Langhoff went, because he had long arms to pull in errant throws at first base. And so it went, on down the line. At the time I was the youngest and smallest boy in the neighborhood. I was one of those standing among the remnants, waiting to be chosen, glove in hand, favorite baseball hat on, standing there wide open and vulnerable, hoping not to be last. "Please God, let me be chosen before Vicky Koepnick" who was younger still and mostly disinterested. There was only one thing

worse than being chosen after Vicky, and that is, if there was an odd number present, being chosen by no one, a left-over, sometimes even the cause of an embarrassing dispute over which team would be forced to take me. One of the most basic human needs is to be included, to be on the inside. One of the most painful is to be excluded, pushed away, on the outside.

There is in the Bible an ongoing story of God gathering in those who are excluded and rejected. And that on-going story frequently challenges us, our culture, our community, this church, and our personal faith. One of the earliest of these stories is of Hagar and Ishmael.

You recall God had promised that Abraham and Sarah would be the parents of a great nation, God's chosen people. Abraham and Sarah are rich and established. They have flocks of sheep and goats; they have tents and slaves. What they do not have is a son and that's a problem if they're going to be the parents of a great nation. They're getting along in age, already long past the years of bearing children. The promise was made many years before, and Abraham and Sarah lose their patience and their trust in the promise. So, consistent with custom, Sarah suggests that her favorite slave, Hagar, an Egyptian, could become the mother of Abraham's son. Reading this, you just know there's trouble ahead. But at first, Abraham and Sarah think their plan is a good one. After all, it yields the intended result. Hagar gives birth to Ishmael. Abraham has an heir. But then things quickly become complicated. Miracle of miracles, Sarah becomes pregnant in her old age, and has a son, and calls him Isaac.

This is, of course, wonderful, but it also creates a problem. What to do now with Ishmael and Hagar? Ishmael is actually Abraham's oldest son. As the oldest, he's the legal heir. He has status. He has a claim on the family's wealth and name and patrimony. But Abraham and Sarah know that Isaac is the one promised and given by the Lord. What to do now?

Sarah knows exactly how to deal with the situation. Hagar and Ishmael had already become a daily irritant in that household, so Sarah concludes there is no room for Hagar and Ishmael. They have to go. She tells Abraham, “Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that slave woman’s son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.” Notice, Sarah dehumanizes them. She doesn’t even call them by name any more. Abraham is reluctant but ultimately agrees. In a pathetic gesture, he gives Hagar a little bread and water and throws her out into the desert with her infant son.

The big picture, the big story is still about Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachael. Hagar and Ishmael are now unnecessary distractions. They are tangential to the story. They don’t even need to be mentioned again. But the biblical narrative follows their plight. In the wilderness the inevitable happens. The bread and the water run out. Humans, particularly babies, cannot survive long without water, and so Ishmael starts to die of dehydration. Hagar will die too, but Ishmael is going to die first. Hagar can’t bear to watch, and so she sets the boy under some bushes and walks some distance away and begins to grieve in earnest.

Can you see her out there, sobbing for her son, but also fearing her own death? The baby cries, and God hears the cries of the infant belonging to a foreign slave woman. He actually sends an angel to her, and the angel says to her what angels are always saying in the Bible – “Do not be afraid – fear not.” “God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. Lift up the boy and hold him fast, for I will make him into a great nation.” Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink.”

God dares to care about this outsider that everyone else in the story wants just to go away. God remembers all the children, especially those everyone

else wants to forget. God's people may not find it in themselves to have compassion for an unwanted infant, but God does have that compassion. He does not exclude them.

Sometimes people can come to believe that those who do not share my faith, or my race or my ideology, also do not share my humanity. At best they are second-class citizens. At worst they forfeit the right to life itself. So when another boat overloaded with Syrian refugees turns over in the Aegean Sea, we hardly take notice. They are so far away, and maybe not of the same worth in our minds . . . dime a dozen. But the truth is God loves them and sent his Son Jesus to die also for them. Jesus reached out to the very people everyone else wanted to forget. We simply cannot read scripture and avoid seeing the holy, inclusive love that God has for the world. Said another way, you cannot claim the faith, you cannot claim the name of Jesus, and then ignore those whom he loved, the sinners and outsiders.

Centuries after Abraham and Sarah lived, in a twist of irony, roles would be reversed. The children of Israel will be slaves in Egypt. And Hagar's people, the Egyptians, will be their masters. And when the Israelites escape, they will wander into the wilderness just like Hagar and Ishmael did, and before long they will have nothing to eat, nothing to drink. And just like Hagar and Ishmael they, too, will feel abandoned, forgotten by God, left to die of hunger and thirst. And like Hagar and Ishmael, the people in the wilderness will discover that God has not forgotten them. God is with them. He hears their prayers, and saves them. Is. 49, "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? Though she may forget, I will not forget you!" (v. 15).

Isn't that one of the promises of baptism? "I will not forget you. I will not forsake you. You have the freedom to turn your back on me, but as long as you live I will never turn my back on you." That's good

news because one of our greatest needs is for acceptance. Conversely, there is nothing more devastating than feeling abandoned, unwanted and forgotten.

One of the things POW's fear most, even more than physical pain and torture, is that they will be forgotten. "Will you forget me forever?" the psalmist asked. At times that can be your fear and mine. When nothing seems to be working, when the life you have is not the life you bargained for, the marriage you have is not the marriage you were hoping for, and the job you have is not fulfilling, when life's meaning and passion and purpose have dissolved, when you've been crushed by overwhelming responsibilities, forgotten by friends . . . precisely then the promise is God has not forgotten you. God does not turn a deaf ear. God shows up in whatever wilderness we may be in and has water for our thirst, manna for our hunger, and love for our deepest need. God does not abandon or forget. God does not exclude.

God loves all the people of the world, even those who reject him. "God so loved *the world* that he sent his Son" Jesus said. So no one can say God doesn't want to save me. "God wants all men to be saved" Paul wrote. "Make disciples of all nations" Jesus commanded. "Invite everyone you see to the wedding banquet" the King said in the parable, "both the good and the bad." No one is to be excluded. And in our psalm for today, Ps. 117, the shortest one in the Bible, just two verses: "Praise the LORD, **all** nations! Extol him, **all** peoples! For great is his steadfast love toward us, and his faithfulness endures forever. Praise the LORD!"

In our Gospel lesson, Jesus is preparing his disciples for the time when they will be unwanted, excluded. You will be arrested, beaten, and dragged into court. "You will be hated by all because of me." In the face of all that he says, "Fear not," repeating the message of the angels. And then he says, "Consider the

sparrows. They're a dime a dozen, yet not one falls to the ground apart from God's love and compassion and powerful presence. So do not be afraid. You are worth so much more." That is, no one and nothing can push us out of the story, marginalize us, or remove us from God's amazing grace and love. We can remove ourselves, exclude ourselves, but God will not do that to us.

Whenever I read that passage about the sparrows, I have to smile and think about Charlene Knox, a woman at Grace Lutheran Chapel in St. Louis. She's large and beautiful and jovial and very black; she's an ever present fixture at the church's Daycare program. She worked hard to raise four children and send them through Lutheran grade school and high school. She is one of Jon's baptismal sponsors. She knows Law and Gospel. When she proclaims Law to the children, (or to their parents), it is thunder and lightening from Mt. Sinai. And when she consoles with the Gospel, when she plops a child on her lap and wraps her substantial arms around that child and rocks and sings, it is Jesus welcoming the little children and blessing them.

I was walking down the stairs one day at Grace and heard Charlene singing to herself in the Fellowship Hall while getting some things ready. She was singing, "His Eye is On the Sparrow" an old African-American spiritual. I said, "Charlene, we've got to have that in the sanctuary". She said, "Pastor, you've been eavesdroppin'!" After a considerable amount of begging and cajoling, she finally consented, so long as it could 1) be from the balcony, 2) unaccompanied, and 3) without amplification, and 4) while people are doing something else, such as going to communion. I said "fine" and a few weeks later there she was, singing out her heart, her strength, her trust, her faith.

"His eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me; his eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me."

By leaving the main story, and telling us of God's

concern for Hagar and Ishmael, a slave woman and her son . . . I believe that is what God wants each of us to know. “His eye is on the sparrow, and I know he watches me.”

Amen.