

Title: Telling the Unflattering Stories
Date: 6/25/2023 (Proper 7, Year A)
Location: St. Alban's Episcopal Church
Service: 10am Holy Eucharist (Hybrid)
Readings: [Genesis 21:8-21](#); [Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17](#); [Romans 6:1b-11](#); [Matthew 10:24-39](#)
Video Link: <https://youtu.be/7syBRdOEnE8?t=1303>

Let us pray in the words of the Psalmist:
Gladden the soul of your servant,
for to you, O LORD, I lift up my soul.
For you, O LORD, are good and forgiving,
and great is your love toward all who call upon you (Ps 86:4-5).
Amen.

Sometimes, preaching feels a lot like playing the lottery.

Some Sundays, everything fits together right away. Some Sundays, we have to dive deeper and expand our field of vision. Since we follow a predetermined calendar of readings, we can't just pick and choose, unless something big is happening.

To back up, in the Episcopal Church, we use the Revised Common Lectionary. You can find the chart of Sunday readings starting on BCP 889. This three-year cycle of readings was created with Lutherans, Catholics, and other denominations. So, if you walk into one of their churches on any given Sunday, odds are good that you will hear the same readings you would hear at St. Alban's...or at least the same Epistle and Gospel.

There is one variable. During the season after Pentecost, we can choose to follow Track One **or** Track Two. This applies only to the Old Testament reading and the Psalm attached to it. Once you pick a track, you stick to it for the season. You can't just jump the track if one Sunday you end up with a reading that brings up questions or issues that you'd rather gloss over.

We are following Track One. This means that we'll read through a book or two of the Old Testament. So, from now through Thanksgiving we are going to work our way through the highlights...and lowlights... of Genesis and Exodus.

If we were following Track Two, we'd read a passage from the Old Testament that goes along with the theme of the gospel. We'd jump back and forth between different books from one week to the next.

Reading through Track One makes it harder to ignore the gnarly Old Testament stories. This week we have Sarah and Abraham throwing Hagar and Ishmael out of their household. Next week we have Abraham nearly sacrificing Isaac. Oh fun.

This is not to say that the gospel readings are easy. This week, the gospel has Jesus saying to the Twelve Disciples,

"I have not come to bring peace, but a sword" and

“I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother”
and

“Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”

Here at St. Alban’s, we take great joy and pride in creating a welcoming environment. Our hope is that this is a place where **everyone** will find love and acceptance.

Imagine, if instead **this** is what we tell everyone who walks through the door:

“You will not find peace here.”

“This will put you on opposite sides with your parents and your siblings.”

“You will find life, but only if you first lose it for the sake of Jesus.”

How many newcomers do you think will stick around?

How many of us would have stuck around if this was the first thing we heard?

More than that, this gospel reading is paired with a most unflattering story from Genesis. Even though we trace our faith all the way back to Abraham and Sarah, they don’t come off very well in this story, and by extension, neither does God.

To dive deeper into this story, we start by expanding our field of vision. We rewind all the way back to Genesis 15. God promised Abram that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars (Gen 15:5) and that they will have the land between the river of Egypt and the river Euphrates (Gen 15:18-21).

This might sound great to Abram, but there is one not-so-tiny problem. Abram’s wife, Sarai, had not given him any children. So, where are all these descendants going to come from?

Finding herself in a tough spot, Sarai gave him one of her slave-girls, Hagar, so that he could father children. According to the customs of the time, she could also claim her slave’s children as her own.

Problem solved, everybody just goes on with their lives and wait for God’s promises to be fulfilled, right?

But once Hagar conceived, Sarai thought that Hagar didn’t give her the same kind of respect as she once did.ⁱ

Maybe seeing her slave-girl get pregnant when she couldn’t
was more painful than she thought it would be.

Maybe she was afraid Abram would think less of her now that it
seems likely that **he** wasn’t the reason they didn’t have any kids.

Sarai was influenced by expectations around women and reproduction, and by expectations about what a normal woman should aspire to and what a normal family should look like. These kinds of social and religious expectations aren’t just a thing of the past; they still exist today.

What happened to Sarah, and by extension Hagar, is an example of how a toxic culture can poison the way we feel about ourselves and set us against one another. A toxic culture insists that there is only one way to be normal and natural even though there has always been a range of what's normal and natural when it comes to the ways that humans look and behave.

Whatever the cause, or causes, Sarai treated Hagar so harshly that she ran away.

When we were helping out at Rio Grande Borderland Ministries last week, Ana the director reminded us that asylum seekers aren't leaving their home by choice. No one would choose to do this if they didn't feel like this was their last resort.

In a desert culture, families and clans stayed together for survival. Hospitality to strangers was important because it was crucial for survival. When Abram followed the call of God to leave his extended family in Ur, that was seen as a risky move, and **he** was a rich man who owned a great number of livestock and slaves. As for Hagar, when she walked into the wilderness, she was pregnant and alone. That tells us something about how bad things were.

God found her by a spring of water and told her to go back and submit to her mistress. To sweeten the deal, God promised to so greatly multiply her descendants that they cannot be counted. So, she went back to Abram and Sarai and gave birth to Ishmael.

I've always wondered, I still wonder, if this was the only way for Ishmael to become the prophet and patriarch of Islam that we know him as today.

Thirteen years passed, and God appeared to Abram again. This time, God renamed him Abraham and his wife Sarah, and promised that Sarah would have a son. Sarah laughed at the idea of her getting pregnant in her old age, but in due time, she gave birth to Isaac.

God promised Abraham an abundance of offspring, but when Sarah saw Ishmael playing with Isaac, she didn't see him as part of that promise, she saw him as a threat. She told Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away. She would send them to their deaths, even though Ishmael was a child that she and Abraham had claimed and thought of as their own for thirteen years.

Abraham was upset, but he didn't know what to do. He didn't stand up for his son. He didn't stand up for the woman who had given him his first-born son. What was he afraid of? Why couldn't he help Sarah see that there was more than enough inheritance to go around?

Amidst Abraham's struggles, God gave him an out. God assured him that Ishmael will be fine and that a nation will also be made out of him. This was all Abraham needed to hear. So, one early morning he sent Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness. He could

have sent them off with some livestock and some servants or slaves. But all he gave them was some bread and a skin of water.

This time, they ran out of water. Hagar was so convinced that they were going to die that she put Ishmael under a bush and walked away so she didn't have to watch him die.

Hagar was an enslaved person. Sarah gave her to Abraham. She had no choice in the matter. When Sarah treated her badly, there was no one she could go to, no one to protect her. She'd met God once before. She's the only person in the Bible to give God a name, "El-roi", which meant God of seeing, or God who sees. But that didn't guarantee her and her son safety or security.

Families are complicated. Humans are complicated. It's tricky to talk about Mother's Day and Father's Day in church because there are all kinds of parents, and all kinds of relationships between children and parents. God sees that. God has seen that throughout the ages.

God wants us to experience true peace. Sometimes there is peace because we want to avoid conflict; we avoid talking about hard and unpleasant things. Sometimes it might seem easier to suffer in silence than bring up problems that disturb the peace. But that's not true peace.

Someone told me recently that a sign of a healthy community isn't that there isn't any conflict, but that conflicts can be resolved. That applies to families, too.

Maybe the patriarchs and matriarchs aren't role models as much as they are cautionary tales. Or maybe they were God's way of telling us that God will help us find a way even when we keep finding ourselves at a dead end.

Jesus didn't come to pick fights. Jesus came to show us that God loves us, that God wants us to move toward life and light, even when we humans make it hard on each other...and on ourselves.

Sometimes that means dying to habits that are killing us and dying to ingrained beliefs that tell us we are something less beautiful and less worthy than a beloved child of God. Sometimes that means dying to relationships that are strangling us and pushing us to fit into a box that neither we nor God constructed. Pushed too far, that box can become a coffin.

Sometimes this is the way to true peace, to having a real, authentic relationship.

This is not easy, but God sees us, God hears us, and God is with us, showing us that there is another way, that we can be part of a better story, one that is more loving, liberating, and life-giving.

This is the good news Jesus preached. May we walk out of these doors and **live** this good news and **be** this good news, that we **are** and we **can be** part of a better story.

Amen.

ⁱ The New Oxford Annotated Bible (Third edition). HB 33