

Father Abraham
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Father's Day
Genesis 2: 4b-8, 15

Our scripture for today is a hard text for Father's Day. It is about Abraham, and opens at the feast to celebrate the weaning of Isaac. Abraham's other son, Ishmael, was at the party with his mother, Hagar, Sarah's slave, Abraham's wife.

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

It's a strange story for Father's day—for any day. It's told as an example of the faithfulness of Abraham, and I'll give you that, Abraham was pained on account of the child, but he exiled Ishmael and Hagar anyway!

He was faithful to the Word of God, but not kind. It's hard to know what to do with this story. Abraham means "Father of many," but he wasn't much of a Dad, by our standards. This is behavior that would bring Abraham before Freddie Brenneman in Family Court, and I can't believe she'd be that easy on him. He's a powerful, wealthy patriarch. He had choices.

Abraham is a paragon of faith. He has already left the land of his birth, and built a new life as a nomad, and then a rich and powerful war lord, a leader of many. He has a strong personal relationship with this God who has called him and promised to bless him; but it's a relationship in which Abraham is willing to contend with God, to argue with God: in the story of the destruction of Sodom, Abraham argues famously that God not sweep away the righteous with the wicked. Courageously, persistently, repeatedly, Abraham calls God toward mercy for Sodom. He's not a model of blind faith or unquestioning faith.

So why won't he do for Ishmael what he will do for Sodom? Why is he so literal in this story? Why doesn't he argue with God for a more compassionate course? Why doesn't he figure out a way to mitigate the danger to his own son?

What is happening here? We know that Abraham has been promised the land, and descendants to inhabit it, out-numbering the stars, but after waiting decades, Sarah, his wife, gives her handmaid, Hagar, to Abraham as a wife. And immediately, Hagar conceives. Then we are told, "Hagar looked with contempt on her mistress." Sarah is furious, jealous, and complaining. And we get Abraham's first abandonment of his son, Ishmael, while Hagar is still pregnant. Abraham says to Sarah, "Your slave-girl is in your power; do to her as you please." Then Sarah dealt harshly with her, and Hagar ran away. Hagar is still Sarah's servant, but Abraham's wife, and Abraham does nothing to protect her. It's not an admirable trait.

I think God created us as two parents not just because it takes varied gifts to raise a child, but also because we are meant to draw each other back from our worst excesses, to be a moderating influence on our worst character traits. A good parent does this, but Abraham doesn't. He lets Sarah be abusive.

I'm particularly sensitive on this issue. My life, and my whole family's life, including my mother's, might have been different, safer, if my father had been willing to help my mother find a saner limit. In some real ways he abandoned us, and let my mother do as she pleased. Good parents, good spouses, don't do that.

In today's story, Ishmael is 16 or 17 years old. That surprised me. I had always pictured Ishmael here as a toddler or very small child. But in the story, Abraham was 86 when Ishmael was born, and 100 when Isaac was born, and now they are celebrating Isaac's weaning. In those times, and still in many places, life is precarious for the very young. Now Isaac is probably 2 or 3 years old, the family is celebrating: the dangerous early years are passed, he's likely to survive. Up to now, there has been a chance that the line of descent may have had to pass through Ishmael. But now, with her son safe, seeing the two sons playing together, Sarah, says 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.*

We're told the matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. But God reassures Abraham, telling him not to be distressed, and to do as Sarah tells him. It's through Isaac that his offspring shall be named, but God will make a great nation out of Ishmael also.

All right. I understand this. Abraham is given a clear word from God that he needs to send his first son, and Hagar, away. And he's given a promise that Ishmael will not only survive, but will become a great nation. I understand that we are often called to do things that are hard, that our children, or even our spouses, wish we didn't have to do. I understand that often life, especially a faithful life, involves sacrifice, not least for those who love us. We have to do things that are not in the short term best interest of our children; or not in their interests at all. We move to take a new job when it would be better for the rest of our family to stay put. People divorce: sometimes there just is no other way; but it's not always the best thing for our children, just a painful necessity. We may have to work long hours, when our children need us at home.

What do good parents do when they are called to do something that is hard for their children or their spouses? We live this reality. What does a good parent do? That's where this story is so hard for me. I can understand that somehow Ishmael has to be sent away. But why this way?

Abraham doesn't say a word to him or to Hagar. He doesn't explain. He doesn't tell them of the word of promise God has given him about Ishmael. He doesn't provide for them. He doesn't find a safe way for them to travel and a safe home for them at journey's end. He gets up early in the morning, and takes bread and a skin of water, and gives it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, and sends them away and they wander about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba, the heart of the Negev desert, terrible territory. It feels when you're there like you could be on the moon, it's so desolate.

She is despairing, and he is nearly gone, a woman can't cast a 16 or 17 year old under a bush unless he's nearly perishing. That's the human consequence of the decision that Sarah made and the way Abraham carried it out.

And then grace intervenes. God hears the son's cry: the name *Ishmael* means *God Hears*, and God opens her eyes, so that she can see the water that is at hand. It doesn't say God miraculously created a well; God helped her see what was there. Often, that's how it is: grace is not so much magic, as insight. What we desperately need is at hand, but until God helps us, we don't know how, or where, to get the help we need.

Abraham banishes Ishmael, but God is with him. That's Grace. It's grace for both of them. In many ways, Abraham failed Ishmael. It certainly must have seemed like that from Ishmael's point of view. But God was with the boy, and he not only survived, but thrived. That's grace. Grace for Abraham that God mitigated the consequences of Abraham's banishment of his son. Grace for Ishmael that he was not alone, and though he didn't have Abraham, this famous, powerful man as a dad, he has a strong mother, and a promise, and a hope, and a future. That's grace.

I've been reading Chris Hedges' new book, *Losing Moses on the Freeway*. It's a look at how we live, or fail to live, the Ten Commandments in our lives. Chris has a father he admires, who loved him, who is an example for him of what a father should be. But he raises an important question looking at the 5th commandment: Honor your father and your mother. What if your father or mother is not honorable? What if they've been abusive? What if they've been absent? What if you have never felt loved as yourself, never even seen for who you are? For people with great fathers this is a joyful day, but it's not uncomplicated for many. What if your parent, mother or father, was not honorable?

“All parents” Chris Hedges says, “for better or for worse, shape our lives. They condition our responses years after they are gone...The imprint is unavoidable. It marks us into old age.” To those whose parents were abusive, Chris says, “We cannot undo abuse, but we can find a way to honor life, even their lives, by turning that abuse into compassion not only for ourselves, which is necessary for healing, but more important for all who suffer. Those who use personal pain to mitigate the pain of others, who take the experience of suffering and use it to lead a life of compassion, honor their parents even as they rise above them. They honor life, which is what their parents gave them. They honor what is holy and good. They take out of tragedy a regenerative power. They fulfill the commandment.”

We are each our father’s child. If that’s good news, then rejoice and be glad. It’s a great gift. Be thankful! If this day is painful and full of ambivalence, then redeem the day, honor your parents, honor life, by living it differently. That’s grace. Amen.

Benediction

For all her craziness, my mother gave me many gifts, and among them, most powerful were her repeated words, “It can be different for you.” Those are powerful words of promise. None of us had a perfect parent. None of us is a perfect parent. Some of us do awful things. It is never too late. It can be different. Grace intervenes. Life can be different. At the end of Abraham’s long life, when Ishmael was nearly ninety himself, he returned to help bury his father, the two sons together. While only one inherited, God was with them both. And with you. And with me. That’s Grace. Thanks be to God. Amen.