

Trinity Church
June 22, 2008

6th Sunday after Pentecost
RCL, Year A, Proper 7

A Sermon Preached by The Rev. James C. Ransom

*As we have been baptized into your death, O Christ, so we pray that we may live
in your resurrection and be filled with your Spirit. Amen.*

A good friend once said to me, “No matter how smart you are, there is always someone who is smarter; no matter how much you have, there is always someone who has more; if you have received one blessing, there are others who have received two or three: the purpose of life is not to be the smartest, or to have the most, or to gather blessings; but to receive each circumstance of life as a gift from God meant for your delight and consolation.” It is this truth that is at the center of the readings that this day has given us: to receive each circumstance of life as a gift from God meant for your delight and consolation.

In order to hear this wisdom from Scripture as well as from a well-meaning friend, it requires openness to God’s Word that goes beyond trying to get the Bible to say what we want it to say. Several years ago a small group here at Trinity, led by Deacon Lauren Welsh, engaged in a spiritual development program called *Renovare*. Introducing members of the group to Bible reading, Lauren wisely said, “If we want to receive from the Bible the life ‘with God’ that is portrayed in the Bible, we must be prepared to have our dearest and most fundamental assumptions about ourselves and our associations called into question; we must read humbly and in a constant attitude of repentance. Then we can grasp the spiritual values that God has made available to all humanity in his written Word.”

It’s in this humble wisdom that I want to explore the story in Genesis about Hagar and Ishmael, her son. Most lectionaries leave this story out, or when it is included, the reading is arranged in such a way that the listener is led to think that this story has to do with God choosing Abraham’s and Sarah’s son Isaac — the child of promise — over Abraham’s and Hagar’s son, Ishmael — the son of faithlessness; and that it is through Isaac that God will raise up a people to praise him, and Ishmael will be cast aside with no blessing at all.

As descendents of Abraham and Isaac, we teach our children to sing: “Father Abraham had many kids; many kids had Father Abraham; and I am one of them, and so are you; so, let’s all praise the Lord.” We have the blessing; we’re blessed and you aren’t.

Just when you think you are special, that you have a blessing others do not, God’s Word turns our pride on its ear. Abraham rose early, took bread and water, gave it to Hagar, and put the child Ishmael in her arms and sent her out into the desert. It was what he knew he had to do, but it saddened him deeply. I must accept this circumstance as a gift from God, and find even in this some consolation.

When the bread and water ran out, Hagar gave herself up to the inevitable. I see her as one of those hollow-eyed women of Darfur, holding her dying child in her arms. She put Ishmael under a bush, and sat at a distance so as not to see him die, and she wept. And Ishmael howled in hunger.

As the story goes, God heard Ishmael’s cry. This is a child of Abraham, I recognize his voice. He was born in faithlessness, to be sure, but my heart goes out to him. My compassion flows to him like a wellspring of living water. Someone wrote: “Salvation is a word for the divine

spaciousness that comes to human beings in the tight places where their lives are at risk, regardless of how they got there, or whether they know God's Name." Isn't that just what happened to Ishmael? God's angel says to Hagar: Do not be afraid. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast. Open your eyes and see the well of water God has given you. God has blessed him. He will be the father of a great nation. Ishmael is the child redeemed by God, blessed just like Isaac — the child of promise. It is the only way to read the story. Ishmael's and Hagar's circumstance was given to them as a gift of faith by Abraham, and God made it a delight and a consolation.

It's not Jews or Christians who have read this story as a story of blessing, but Mohammed, the Prophet of Islam, who dictated it in this way in the Koran. The children of Ishmael are also Abraham's children, and inheritors of their own blessing. God, the compassionate one, has blessed them. It is their delight and consolation.

What the Bible story says to me is that God's desire is that through Abraham everyone is blessed. No one is left out; even the child of faithlessness.

This is what Jesus is saying to us when he says that God accounts for every sparrow, God counts every hair on your head. So, do not be afraid, you are valued by God at least as much as the sparrows. So, here's the deal. You need not be afraid that you are unworthy of blessing. Ishmael, after all, was blessed. You need not hoard your blessing apart from others; after all, just because Ishmael was blessed, it doesn't take anything away from Isaac, the child of promise. The blessing we receive flows out of God's abundance in which God desires that all of us, every last one of us, should be blessed in every circumstance of life. And that God's blessing is for our delight and consolation.

Living humbly in this wisdom from God's Word, Jew, Christian and follower of Islam can stand together as Abraham's beloved children.