

The Rev. Jake Miles Joseph
 Plymouth Congregational Church, UCC on June 25, 2017
 “God Has Heard Us Where We Are” Genesis 21:8-21

Will you join me in prayer? Great and good God who loves us, makes us, and journeys with us, I pray that today I might speak a word of inclusion, peace, and love that is good, pleasing, and right with you—our rainbow, our rock, and our grace-filled Redeemer. Amen.

Gerhard and I have discovered the perfect antidote to stress, the cure (yes, the cure I say) to taking oneself too seriously, the solution to pretention, and a self-care mechanism that I believe could revolutionize ministry and work related stress. At least for me, since I am married into a Venezuelan and trying to learn Spanish, this amazing new thing in my life is the Latin American soap operas genre known, as “telenovelas.” These are short, compact, human emotion filled Spanish-language sitcoms with complicated scenarios and drrrrramatic acting remind me that the Sacred can be found in even the most unlikely situational comedy, plot twist, or family drama.

These short but powerful shows all are **replete** with intense close-up shots, catchy theme music, ridiculous over-the-top comedy, intense loss, marriage, death, betrayal, love, hate, also something that appears to be both love and hated at the same, often there is magic or curses, cautionary tales, morals of the story, and hope lots of hope! Additionally, I have noted that almost all of the Telenovelas have a loving and wise (and VERY religious) grandmother character that is actually, at the conclusion, the behind the scenes mastermind of everything! **This is proof that God is actually a Venezuelan grandmother!** More pointedly and seriously, these short televised stories are shorthand for the wholeness and complexity of the human experience.

Now, aside from being a nice way to distress in the evening from the very real stresses and scenarios of ministry and public advocacy in 2017, I have learned a little something about Biblical Studied from watching these shows: **The book of Genesis in particular and most of the Bible is best understood when we pretend (while we are reading) that we are acting out a Telenovela Spanish Soap Opera!**

Yes, when I thought of this comparison, I too thought it was sort of a funny joke to tell to start the sermon and help us relate to this complicated ancient text, but then I remembered that these stories started out as oral tales and community entertainment many thousands of years ago. A quote from Amherst College professor of Religion and scholar of Genesis, Dr. Susan Niditch, from *The Women’s Bible Commentary*, helps get at this Spanish Soap opera nature of Genesis. She writes, “The group of narrative and genealogical traditions called the book of Genesis describes the origin of the cosmos and its first inhabitants and **unfolds the life stories** of the earliest ancestors of ancient Israel. To read Genesis is to immerse oneself in the worldview and values of a distant and foreign culture, of a people who believed in a deity, Yahweh God, imagined as parent, river, spirit, traveling man, and warrior, communicating with ancestors through dream visions and waking revelations. To read Genesis is to encounter a people...Theirs is a

different world and a different way of imagining and ordering reality from our own; yet they too love spouses and children, resent siblings, mourn the loss of kin, fear and face deprivation in the form of famine and infertility, attempt to take stock of the comprehensible and make sense of the incomprehensible features of their existence.”¹
Telenovela!

The story of Genesis is a script, the story, the drama, the intrigue, the popular culture account, the soap opera (la telenovela) for ancient people that helps them make sense life. These stories, all of which would have started as oral accounts were part of what gave people context for survival. So... Today, we pick-up the story midway through these very dramatic, scandalous, and strange set of events. We turn on the Biblical TV in the middle of an episode.

So let me recap: back in Chapters 15 and 16, Sarah was upset that she couldn't have children, so she recruited Hagar to be a surrogate. Sarah's plan worked and Ishmael was born. Problem solved, but then God gets in the way. Then, as Hal preached on last Sunday, we have the story of the strange men showing-up, receiving hospitality, and then suddenly it turns out that the strange men are actually God and God is planning to have Sarah have a baby of her own, although Sarah is very old. Everyone laughs—that is the comic relief of this telenovella of Genesis. Sarah had her own baby named Isaac, and now in today's episode of this very intense family epoch, Sarah (who was sympathetic in the last episode) now (turns into the villain) as gets rid her family of the former liaison, Hagar, and her offspring Ishmael. She does this by sending them OUT into the loneliness, the isolation, and the dryness of the desert of Beer-sheba to die. See, I told you that the book of Genesis is a soap opera. One minute you are rooting for or crying with a character, and the next second you have to reassess everything! **Genesis isn't the white washed, easy, clear, linear, Creation account that the Conservative Christians want it to be. It is messy, dangerous, hard to understand, entirely entertaining, and not at all ethical Telenovela from many thousands of years ago.**

June is Pride month for the LGBTQ community. Today's episode is the Pride Month episode in this Telenovela, because it is a story of God taking the side, as God often does in surprising ways, of the oppressed, the outcast, the one who is not to be heard from or seen again—the character at the margin. According, again to Sharon Niditch, “the God of Genesis, with whom the important value judgment² lies is partial to marginalized people...”

Verses 15-20: **15** When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. **16** 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. **17** And God heard the voice of the boy;

¹ Susan Niditch, “Genesis,” in *Women's Bible Commentary*, Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, edit. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press 1998), 13.

² Susan Niditch, “Genesis,” in *Women's Bible Commentary*, Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, edit. (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press 1998), 20.

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.**

18 Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.” **19** 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.

20 God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow.”

The boy’s name was Ishmael, and his name in Hebrew reflects the miracle of God’s presence, because, “Ishmael” or “Yishma e’l” in Hebrew means literally means, “God has heard” or “God listens.”

In our soap opera today from a far off time, in a far off land, in a forgotten language, we can still find something Sacred that speaks to us in deeply important ways. Today, what speaks to me in this time of our world where everyone tries to put words in God’s mouth, tries to say “God says” or “The Bible says” or “God never changes” or “God doesn’t like” or “God condemns” or “God hates...” God hates...(It would seem God’s main business these days is hating). In this world where so many claim to speak for a God who hates, today’s episode from Genesis still communicates one simple idea... A God who listens in the midst of the chaos, the family drama, and the political intrigue! Ishmael! Our God is a God who hears rather than condemning or ignoring to death in the desert... or a spiritual, emotional, physical, mental, deeply profound death in **closets** of falseness and thirst for authentic contact. Ishmael. God hears, God listens...

Friends, here at Plymouth this past week I heard the Open and Affirming movement referred to in the past tense... “The Open and Affirming thing **was** great... but now its time for something new and more exciting.” I have heard this before. How many of you, and please don’t raise your hands, think our work of being an Open and Affirming church or denomination is done now that you have hired two out gay associate ministers in a row and that marriage equality is achieved? From my network, I can tell you that the fear, the anger, the backlash is coming strong... and it is scary. We (we the LGBTQ community) need you to be diligent, to pay attention, and to continue to learn the complexity of gender and sexual orientations. It isn’t easy and it can be exhausting, and yes the vocabulary is always changing, but this soap opera of a political season we live in isn’t safe for Gerhard, and me for anyone with an L, a G, a B, a T, or a Q in their identity. The church listened, we have moved, but we must keep-up and not give-up.

Ishmael... God has heard! Not only has God heard, but the text says that God heard Ishmael where he was... rather than where he was not. God meets us where we are, sisters, brothers, siblings in Christ!

God has heard us where we are when we find ourselves in times of discernment for our identities and our relationships. Ishmael!

God has heard us where we are if we are gay or lesbian. Ishmael!

God has heard us where we are if we are bisexual. Ishmael!

God has heard us where we are if we are queer or transgender. Ishmael!

God has heard us where we are if we are liberal or conservative. Ishmael!

God has heard us where we are if we are lonely, overwhelmed, hurting, calm, and anxious... Ishmael!

God has heard us where we are if we are young or if we are old. We are heard, met, saved, loved, beloved.

God hears us and comes to us with solutions, with life, with promise of good things to come no matter who we are or where we are in this Telenoleva we all call life!

Here is what to take away from today's scripture... the Bible is basically a long and complicated Spanish language soap opera—or really it is better and more correctly understood if we think of it that way rather than as a solemn tome from a God who doesn't give a crap. Additionally, our very Telenovela-like episode today from Genesis is fundamentally about how God meets us in all of our diversity. **God is not static, hatred filled, old man in the sky. She is a Venezuelan grandmother!** As the ancients attest to, God manifests in many forms, change is part of the nature of God, and so God doesn't yell at us... rather we have a God who still listens, still accompanies, and celebrates the diversity of sexual orientations and gender identities present at Plymouth and our world.

For nobody who wrote Genesis, Leviticus, or any other ancient text would ever claim that God was done hearing us out and negotiating with us for good, for wholeness, and for the arc of the universe that bends towards justice. That wasn't what God was like in ancient times; we see that clearly in the text. God has always been and will always be unchanging in only God's unpredictability, free-agent nature, and willingness to listen deeply to us in our lives. Amen.