

Title: Fathers and Sons, Part 1

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, when we feel we are lost and have nowhere to go, we can retreat into ourselves and forget your presence; give us strength and wisdom to recognize your presence and accept your help to guide us through the trials and travails of this life, with the knowledge that we will see you in the next life, through the gifts of your son Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

There are many instances in non-fiction, fiction, and film about mother and daughter relationships, both positive and negative. The movie *Terms of Endearment* comes to mind about a mother-daughter relationship. There are fewer father and son writings and film examples, though the *Godfather* comes to mind.

The Bible, on the other hand, has few mother-daughter relationship stories, though Ruth is a mother-in-law-daughter relationship. There are many father-son relationships in the Bible. This reflects the patriarchal society in those times and the complexity of those relationships in that society.

I am going to talk about two father and son relationships this week and next week. Both involve Abraham and they are not particularly pleasant stories. Abraham had two sons, Ishmael and Isaac. Our Old Testament story today is mainly about Ishmael and his mother Hagar.

In Genesis, God often tells Abraham that he will have so many descendants that it will be impossible to count them. God says Abraham will have more descendants than the stars in the sky. And back then without all the light pollution, they could see a lot of stars. God says that Abraham will have more descendants than the sand on the sea shore. Only the hardiest bean counter would make the attempt to make these kinds of counts.

Yet in spite of these promises, God seems to fail at following through. Abraham and Sarah have no children. Abraham and Sarah struggled so much, they gave up hope. This in spite of the fact that God promised them descendants who would be too numerous to count. Though Abraham is depicted as having faith in God, there is, perhaps, a sense of Abraham hearing God repeatedly promising all these descendants that it just got old. "Oh, it's you again God. A lot of descendants, right. Yeah, yeah, I've heard it all before."

They might have thought it cruel for God to continue to promise descendants and not to give them even one child. How can they have descendants without any children?

Out of desperation, Sarah gave Abraham permission to lay with her servant, Hagar, so that there would be someone to receive their inheritance. Ishmael was the product of that union.

It was common in ancient times for wealthy men to take slaves as concubines. It was less common for such a liaison to be proposed and condoned by the wealthy man's wife. Of course, jealousy would almost always be the product of such a union. The practice was also common in this country when slavery was condoned, even for presidents of the United States.

When Ishmael was still young, God appeared to Abraham at the oaks of Mamre. God appeared to Abraham as three persons. There are obvious Christian implications here, but it is likely God had two angels as companions. Abraham was told that when they return in a year's time, Sarah will have born a son. Sarah was in her nineties. Menopause was a long, long time ago.

Sarah overheard the conversation from their tent, for they were nomads. On hearing she was to give birth, Sarah laughed. They accused Sarah of laughing and doubting God. Sarah said, "I did not laugh." God said, "Oh yes, you did laugh."

Sarah bore Isaac, whose name is rooted in laughing.

Abraham threw a big feast when Isaac was weaned. Isaac is about three years old and Ishmael is about 17. Sarah became jealous of Hagar and her son. Ishmael was older and might inherent. Sarah feared that her son would have to work for the son of her slave. So, Sarah told Abraham to cast them out. Abraham didn't like the idea. Ishmael was Abraham's flesh and blood.

God assured Abraham that God would care for Hagar and Ishmael. God will make Ishmael a great nation. Arabs claim Ishmael as their ancestor and their connection to Abraham. Abraham feared for Hagar's and Ishmael's livelihood and their very lives in the wilderness. Yet, Abraham trusted that God would keep them safe.

Abraham gives them food and water and sends them out into what the Bible says is the wilderness of Beer-sheba. The wilderness of Beer-sheba is the Negev desert. Hagar is given a few things to eat. Isaac and Sarah get a feast.

The Negev is a very desolate place. It is a place of dirt and rock for miles and miles. Negev in Hebrew means dry. There are occasional wadis where some plant life survives. Beersheba is an ancient city and is one of the largest cities in modern Israel. It's really hot there.

It is in this desert that Hagar finds herself as she struggles to survive so her son may live. Hagar could not bear to see her son die of thirst so she walked away from Ishmael, about 50 yards, and turned her back on him so she may not see him. Hagar wept tears she could not afford to lose.

God seemed to have been busy with other things and then hears Ishmael. Ishmael means God hears. A messenger is sent to give Hagar assurances and reminds her that Ishmael will be a great nation. It was then that Hagar sees a well and life.

Ishmael grew up to be skilled with the bow. Hagar, the Egyptian, not the Horrible, obtained a wife for Ishmael from Egypt. It is unlikely that Ishmael ever saw his father again. After all, Abraham told them to leave and not come back. Fathers and sons have it rough in the Bible, in Greek myths, in Shakespeare, and on and on.

In spite of being a tough love story of a father and his two sons, this is a story of salvation to those who are outcast. When all hope is lost and death is inevitable, God will be there.

I was recently asked at hospice to call the sister of a patient who was not assigned to me, but I was the only available chaplain, at that time. The sister was distraught at the decline of her brother whose body was being ravaged by cancer. She was a nurse and took over the caregiving needs, assisted by the patient's spouse.

She was seeing her brother, whom she loved, slowly losing abilities as the tumors spread and grew. She was so deeply grieved that she could no longer feel God's presence. She felt alone and spiritually adrift in her grief. Her tears kept her from seeing the well that was in front of her.

She confessed that she typically saw the negative. Her brother, on the other hand, would always see the positive. When the tumors in his shoulder took away the use of his right arm, he said, "I still have my left arm."

By the end of the call, she said she was in a better place than she was when she called the night on call nurse.

Like this caring sister, like Hagar, no matter what kind of wilderness we find ourselves in, God will be there. Sometimes, we just need to wipe away the tears and see what is front of us.

Yet fear can keep us from recognizing God's presence. We typically call this presence, the Holy Spirit. Jesus tried teaching the disciples over and over again that God will always be with them. What need the disciples or us fear if God is with us? We, too, are Jesus' disciples.

Fear is, perhaps, the most primary emotion we have. Some might argue anger should be considered, but most of our anger is rooted in fear. God's love transcends fear. Yet fear is so primal that it is hard to discard. With God's help, we can mitigate it.

Perhaps this prayer of St. Ignatius of Loyola is one we can use to help us in times of anxiety and when we have feelings of being lost:

Lord Jesus, teach me to be generous,  
teach me to serve you as you deserve,  
to give and not to count the cost,  
to fight and not heed the wounds,  
to toil and not to seek for rest,  
to labor and not to seek reward,  
except that of knowing that I do your will.  
Amen.

Text: **Genesis 21:8–21** (NRSV)

<sup>8</sup>The child grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. <sup>9</sup>But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac.<sup>a</sup> <sup>10</sup>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.” <sup>11</sup>The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. <sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring.” <sup>14</sup>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.

<sup>15</sup>When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. <sup>16</sup>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. <sup>17</sup>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. <sup>18</sup>Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.” <sup>19</sup>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.

<sup>20</sup>God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. <sup>21</sup>He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt. <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>a</sup> Gk Vg: Heb lacks *with her son Isaac*

<sup>1</sup> [\*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version\*](#). (1989). (Ge 21:8–21). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.