

“Ishmael: God Hears”

Genesis 21:8-21

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Ronald L. Farmer
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An elderly man had suffered serious hearing problems for a number of years. Finally, he went to a specialist, who fitted him with a new set of hearing aids that allowed the man to hear clearly. A month later, the man returned to the doctor for a check up, and the physician said: “Your hearing is nearly perfect. Your family must be really pleased that you can hear again.”

The elderly man replied, “Oh, I haven't told my family yet. I just sit around and listen to their conversations. I've changed my will three times!”¹

Although it has spawned many funny jokes, hearing loss is, of course, no laughing matter. Over the past two decades, I've watched my mother struggle with gradual hearing loss, frustrated that she has trouble hearing what others say.

But there is another hearing problem we seldom talk about. Not being able to hear is hard, but harder still is the feeling that *you are not being heard*. At times, we've all had the lonely experience of feeling that even your closest friends and family members do not hear you. You feel all alone in your pain—be it physical or emotional or spiritual—and you cry out like the poet:

is anyone out there?
does anyone care?
this mess that i'm going through
will it always be there?²

What agonizing words! “Is anyone out there? Does anyone care?” I'm here today to testify that God's hearing is perfect. God has no difficulty in hearing my innermost voice, even in the cacophony of competing noises in the world. And in addition to hearing, God cares. That good news both gives me great comfort . . . and brings us to today's remarkable lectionary reading.

In order to appreciate the full impact of today's text about Hagar and Ishmael, we need to go back to the beginning of the Abraham story in the closing paragraph of Genesis 11. Abraham, or Abram as he was originally called, was born in the city of Ur in Chaldea, the southernmost portion of Mesopotamia, or modern-day Iraq. Abram's father, Terah, had set out with his extended family for the Land of Canaan, but for some reason when they came to the northern Mesopotamian city of Haran, the family settled there. After Terah died, God spoke to Abram and his wife Sarai, calling them to leave their extended family and move to Canaan. Boldly, Abram and Sarai responded in faith to God's gracious threefold promise: that God would give them a new homeland; that God would give them many descendants, who would

become a great nation; and that God would bless all the families of the earth through their descendants—quite a promise, indeed!

There was only one problem: Sarai was barren, unable to conceive. Year after barren year passed, and Sarai's faith waivered. She decided to give God a helping hand in fulfilling the promise. In that culture, it was customary for a barren woman to gain children by giving her husband her slave-girl to be a second wife. Any children born to the slave were legally considered children of the slave's mistress. So, Sarai gave her Egyptian slave-girl Hagar to Abram to serve as his concubine—a sort of second-tier wife.

Wouldn't you know it? Hagar became pregnant almost immediately. No longer did she feel like a slave; she was carrying Abram's child! She no longer felt subservient to Sarai, and apparently, it showed in her demeanor. Sarai was quite put out by this change in her slave and began to mistreat her. Not surprisingly, Hagar ran away.

As she fled west, toward Egypt, the Angel of the Lord appeared to her at a desert oasis. The Angel convinced her to return to Sarai and Abram, and shockingly gave her the same basic promise that God had given Abram: "I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted." And then the Angel of the Lord said, "You have conceived and shall bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael, for the Lord has given heed to your affliction."

Ishmael, what a wonderful name! In Hebrew, Ishmael means "God hears." God heard the cry of Hagar's heart and comforted her with a divine promise about her son.

Fast-forward thirteen years. Abram's and Sarai's faith in God's promise is teetering on the edge, so God renews the threefold promise and gives them new names, which signifies a new relationship or status. Abram is now called Abraham, meaning "father of a multitude." Sarai, becomes Sarah, which means "princess." And wonder of wonders, a year later Sarah gave birth to a son! They named their son Isaac, meaning "he laughs." Every time Sarah and Abraham looked at Isaac they would recall their doubting laughter at God's promise that they would have a son in old age. Ah, the promises of God!

Everything should be wonderful now, right? Wrong. When Sarah saw Ishmael playing with the toddler Isaac, she grew jealous, concerned that the role of family heir would fall upon Ishmael rather than Isaac. She demanded that Hagar and Ishmael be expelled from their camp, and after some protestation, Abraham relented.

The scripture lesson for today focuses on the plight of the exiled Hagar and Ishmael. In their flight to Egypt, they ran out of water in the middle of the desert. Death seemed certain, and Hagar began to sob with the love of a mother for her child. Suddenly, the Angel of the Lord again appeared to the distraught Hagar, telling her not to be afraid. God had heard her and her son Ishmael—whose name, you'll recall, means "God hears." The Angel reminded her of the divine promise that the descendants of Ishmael will become a great nation, and then opened her eyes to the location of a spring of water.

Thus endeth the story. But inquiring minds want to know more. “What happened to Ishmael? Was the divine promise fulfilled?” Oh, yes, indeed. It was fulfilled far beyond anything Hagar could have imagined. You see, Ishmael is the father of all Arab peoples, and through him Islam, our cousin religion, traces itself back to Abraham—just as Judaism and Christianity trace themselves back to Abraham through Isaac.

Ishmael, God hears. What a wonderful name! It signals a promise to every human being. God is not deaf. God is not implacable or impassable. God is not without feeling or emotion. Not at all! The story of Ishmael teaches us that God knows every human misery. God hears every painful sob.³ As Alfred North Whitehead so eloquently put it, “God is the great companion—the fellow-sufferer who understands.”⁴

Ishmael—God hears. God hears you and me. Always.

And that’s today’s good news. Amen.

¹ Adapted from *Jokes4All*. web.

² Excerpted from Lu, “Cries Unheard,” *Hello Poetry*. web.

³ Daniel B. Clendenin, “Ishmael: God Hears and Sees,” *Journey with Jesus*, June 19, 20005. web.

⁴ Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, corrected edition, edited by David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: Free Press, 1978; New York: Macmillan, 1927) 351.