



Sermon for June 21st, Pentecost Season, 2020

St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Coeur d'Alene

The Rev. Dr. David Gortner

[Genesis 21:8-21](#) [Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17](#) [Romans 6:1b-11](#) [Matthew 10:24-39](#)

Welcome back, everyone! Welcome to those who have come to the building, and to those who come together with us via Zoom.

It's good to come together again. In a time when we still watch and are cautious about our health during this coronavirus pandemic, we also take joy again in each other's presence, here and by Zoom.

We come together not just to be in each other's company, but to encourage each other in our life of faith. We come together to anchor our lives in God, to give thanks and praise to the God of Life, to pray for this world and its people, to bring our own lives before God and to seek God's help and healing and guidance.

We're walking this summer and fall through the early stories of the Hebrew Scriptures. We will hear some that are unsettling. Today is one of them. And it is a story that matches well what we are seeing in our world and in our nation today.

People in this world get mistreated.

People in this world get used, misused, abused.

People in this world get disposed of, shut out of sight.

I say these things not to be dismissive of suffering, nor to give us a guilt-trip.

I say these things to remind us of the world as it is. To hold up the mirror for the world to see.

It can be easy and tempting for us to identify ourselves with the suffering people in scripture. It can be especially tempting to see ourselves in the Gospel as the disciples that Jesus was saying would suffer. Some of us, indeed, have suffered at times in our lives for the sake of the Gospel. Some of us may have had home experiences where sons were set against fathers and fathers against sons, daughters against mothers and mothers against daughters – and not always for reasons as noble as following Jesus.

But, let's remember that the Gospel of Matthew was written at a time that followed serious oppression of Jews by the Roman Empire and some of the early persecution of Christians. It was not an easy time to be a follower of Jesus. Being a follower of Jesus meant splitting away from other loyalties.

It can be tempting to twist our reading of scripture so that we see ourselves most often as the oppressed and not the oppressor, Moses and not Pharaoh, the Israelites and not Egyptians, Abel and not Cain.

But the stories of scripture are there for us to see ourselves, and other people, in all of the characters.

It's unsettling, today, to hear and read about Hagar and young Ishmael being banished from Abraham's household because of Sarah's pressure. It's even more disturbing to go back further in the story and see how Sarah gave Hagar to Abraham to get her pregnant so that they could have offspring, since she herself had not been able to have children. And now, now that she has had Isaac, she wants to drive away the competition. It's even more disturbing to see Abraham's hand-wringing weakness in this situation. What a different story it would have been if he had said no to Sarah and set an expectation that there would be mutual care in their house. But instead, when he heard God telling him to follow his wife's demand, he set Hagar and Ishmael loose into the wilderness with a bit of bread and a jug of water – enough for them to find their way out of sight before they ran the risk of starvation or dehydration.

This is from the house of Abraham, the one with whom God made a covenant. This is from the patriarch of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This is sin, written into the very fabric of our story.

It's unsettling. You betcha, it's unsettling!

It is unsettling, how just this week a young black teenage girl was singled out among her friends as "not belonging" in a neighborhood in Florida, by a man who lived in the neighborhood and worked for the department of immigration. She was there with friends, and her grandparents lived in the neighborhood.

It is unsettling, the testimonies of men and women in the Poor People's Campaign yesterday that gave us a picture of just how impossible it is to live on minimum wage when rents and utilities and food expenses exceed their monthly wages, and then their employers restrict their hours in order to keep from them paying benefits.

When have you, I, any one of us seen someone being hurt or treated badly, just because of who they are? When have we seen, or participated in, or been the brunt of, little and big cruelties like name-calling, bullying, intentional hurting, neglecting or ignoring, labeling, refusing to help?

Hagar cries out. Hagar, at the end of her rope, cries out.

God comes. God provides just enough for the next step. Seems meager. But it will do. And God promises beyond the moment – a future strong for Ishmael and his offspring. Another beloved people – another people loved and held by God. Her story, and the story of her son, the other child of Abraham, exits the biblical narrative. But, it is to this line that many Arab Muslims trace their heritage.

God comes among those who are hurting and being mistreated. God comes, and God experiences the hurt and mistreatment right there with them. God hears, and comes.

How does God come?

Perhaps in the movement of little miraculous moments, like the welling up of a little spring of water. Yes, there are moments like these, thank and praise God.

But I bet, more often than any other way, God comes through the stirring of the hearts and minds and hands and feet of other people. God helps through others. God helps by opening others' eyes, letting them really see, unsettling them – and urging them to respond. God comes through people who step forward and dare to become allies of those who are at risk, on the edge, mistreated, neglected, forgotten, maligned and blamed for their condition.

Following Jesus is not simply a walk in the park.

This week I had the privilege of preaching for Coeur d'Alene's online Pride interfaith worship service, along with Pastor Heather Seman of Community United Methodist Church. The themes were about grace and about God's love that covers all. I talked about God's love that is for all people – ALL people – as it says in John 3:17: "For God sent his Son into the world not to condemn that world, but so that the whole world through him might be saved." I then talked about what it means for us to love – to love God with everything we've got, and to love other people as much as we love ourselves. I talked about how love is not just a feeling or sentiment or nice set of words, but how love is most truly an action and a total way of being.

Loving others as much as ourselves means turning from those opportunities to claim privilege or entitlement over others. It means turning from the easy solutions that make ourselves more comfortable at others' expense or neglect. It means staying with others even when things get hard. It means turning toward others that it would be easy for us to keep ignoring.

Jesus was turning a lot of people's worlds upside down. Not just the beggars and blind and poor that he was helping and healing, but the people around them who had become comfortable with ignoring them and leaving them to their own desperation. No wonder some were calling him Beelzebul, or the devil! And if we truly follow Jesus, and truly seek the kingdom of God,

then there will be some who see us as Beelzebul or the devil – because we are disturbing what people have mistakenly come to accept as the promised land of familiarity, because our actions themselves question the status quo.

So, Jesus calls us to follow him on this Way. This Way, where we dare to offer ourselves for others and to love others at least as much as we love ourselves. When someone is sick, offer a healing hand. When someone is being neglected, speak up, and step in. When someone is being treated badly, step in with care and dare to hold up a mirror of truth about what is going on. This is what it means to take up our cross.

And Jesus says not to fear. Do not fear those who can harm the body but not the soul. Do not fear.

This week, the Human Rights Education Institute in Coeur d'Alene held a chile lunch and panel discussion on Juneteenth. It was a lively and rich panel discussion. One Black woman, whose darker-skinned Latino husband has opened a series of restaurants around Moscow, talked about her husband's experience of being singled out for "special attention" by some of the armed militia in downtown Coeur d'Alene. She and her husband had only stopped for some Chinese food.

She said she had not even paid much attention to the armed men on the streets, "Because if I pay attention to all of these things that are forms of aggression around me, I will lose heart. I have learned to approach the world around me with love, looking as much as I can for the good and stepping away from looking at the wicked."

Imagine, learning to live without fear like this woman, even when there is so much that happens day to day that can bring on fear and anger and hopelessness. Imagine. What do Jesus' words, "Do not fear those who can harm the body," mean to her? Imagine. What do the angel's words, "Do not be afraid, I have heard the boy's cries," mean to Hagar, when she has been cast out and lost everything?

The words "Do not fear" are not empty condolences. They come with a promise, a witness to what God is doing right now and will do very soon. Jesus reminds his disciples that they are treasured by God the Almighty, the Lover of all creation and all humankind.

In the end, we will find ourselves when we dare to live. We will find ourselves when we dare to give. To give ourselves for the sake of others, to hear what God hears as the cries of God's beloved people around us, and to respond.

May we follow Christ, wherever he may lead us! Amen.