

Call Me Ishmael—Or What We Don't Know Can Hurt Us

Genesis 21:8-21; Psalm 86

Whitefish UMC

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- † “Call me Ishmael....” So begins one of the great books of American literature. Most of us had to read *Moby Dick*, by Herman Melville at some point in our school years, right?
- † But how many of us “got” the significance of that famous line? And who is this Ishmael guy anyway? Does it seem like another useless literary question from your pastor who reads too much?
- † Today the lectionary presents us with one of the more uncomfortable stories in the Bible—the story of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, and Ishmael. It would be easy and tempting to skip over it. But if we did, we would miss some important truths about the nature of humanity and the dangers of our world today.
- † Because what we don't know about the Bible *can* hurt us. It's common among preachers to complain about how most even highly educated people are biblically illiterate.
- † John Buchanan, preacher at Chicago's Fourth Presbyterian Church and editor of the influential “Christian Century” tells the story of how a reporter called him after he preached a sermon during President Clinton's difficulties involving a certain intern.
- † Rev. Buchanan suggested that in the Bible God has a way of using morally flawed people for God's own purposes—“Like David,” he said. The reporter, who wanted to quote that sermon, asked “Who was that David guy?”

- † Then there was the time that Senator Barak Obama, then an unknown senator from Illinois, delivered a keynote speech to the American Library Association annual meeting. The Associated Press reported “ ‘In the beginning was the word.’ So begins both the book of Genesis and Barak Obama’s keynote address Saturday.”
- † Once again the press got it wrong. “In the beginning was the word” is the way the Gospel of John begins, not Genesis. The senator (whose own religious identity is questioned by some parts of the press) got it right. The reporter missed it.
- † Last summer, Stephen Prothero, head of the religion department at that great Methodist university where Tom and I met, Boston University, released a controversial book. It hit the best seller lists for several weeks in a row.
- † The book, titled *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know and Doesn’t*, rocketed this young scholar to the cable news shows on the political right and left.
- † Prothero says the book is an exploration of this simple question: “How is it that the United States is one of the most religious places on earth but most Americans don’t know anything about their own religions, much less the religions of others? In the book, he tries to answer that question historically, looking back at earlier times when learning to read and learning about religion went hand in hand.
- † Prothero makes the controversial recommendation that Bible and world religion courses be mandatory in all public high schools in America. He interprets biblical illiteracy as a civic problem. How can citizens understand the war in Iraq without knowing something

about Islam? Or debates about stem-cell research, capital punishment or gay marriage without knowing something about the Bible?

- † Even though his suggestion raises some difficult questions about just how it would be implemented, Prothero has a point. But I'd like to say that biblical illiteracy is not just a problem from a civic perspective, but from a faith perspective, too.
- † Let me be clear, I'm not advocating more Bible knowledge to shame you for not knowing more. I was a religion major in college, went to church for most of my life, and I still didn't know much about the Bible. When I went to seminary, I felt much more biblically illiterate than my African American or Korean classmates.
- † The truth is, I still have a lot to learn, and I'm paid to know something about the Bible! And yet I can't wait to explore more deeply the stories of our ancestors that inform so much of our life today. So let's begin with this challenging, troubling, and...if we look closely...hopeful story.
- † Even though we like to sing praises to "Father Abraham," the father of the faith to Jews, Christians, and Muslims, he is not always a very attractive figure. As we come to the story of the competition between Isaac and Ishmael, he's already lied and betrayed his wife by telling Pharaoh that Sarai is his sister and offering her to Pharaoh's harem to save his own skin.
- † In today's story, he doesn't measure up very well either. Nor does his wife, Sarah. The sympathetic characters are the secondary ones—the outsider, the excluded, the banished. But even they aren't perfect.

- † It makes you wonder why this story even made it into the Bible if not to make the point that God's people have always had trouble trusting God, let alone the outsiders the "them's" and the "others."
- † Remember that God has told Abraham and Sarah, about two thousand years before the time of Jesus, to pick up and move from their settled life and to a land that God will show them. They will begin a great nation, and God will bless them to bless every nation and all the families of the earth.
- † They obey God at first, go into an unknown place, but after awhile they grow impatient. They are supposed to birth a great nation—but there is a problem—they're getting old and they have no children.
- † So Sarah, worrying that God won't come through as promised, takes matters into her own hands. She offers Abraham her Egyptian slave girl, Hagar, so that Abraham can get the son they need for their nation-building project. Abraham takes her up on the offer, and Hagar conceives and gives birth to Ishmael, Abraham's first-born son. Hagar, the story notes, becomes haughty in her ability to bear a child, and tension mounts.
- † But then the unexpected happens and Sarah becomes pregnant. "God has brought laughter to me," she says. Father Abraham's second son is born to Sarah, and they name him Isaac, which means "one who laughs." The promise is fulfilled.
- † Ishmael and Isaac begin to grow up together as brothers and playmates, and Abraham loves them both. But then one day Sarah sees the boys playing and starts to worry that Ishmael will usurp her son's place. The Hebrew Bible uses a word that can mean both "play"

- and “mock,” for Ishmael’s behavior toward Isaac, echoing Hagar’s earlier mocking of Sarah.
- † So Sarah goes to Abraham and asks him to do something: get rid of Ishmael and his mother, both of them. Abraham resists at first, but he does as Sarah asks. He sends mother and child off into the desert with only a little water and bread, knowing that they will soon die there.
 - † In a terrible scene, when the food and water run out, Hagar, herself dying and unable to do anything to help her child, lays Ishmael underneath a bush and walks away because she cannot bear to watch her child die. She sobs, and the child cries.
 - † But something unexpected happens: God hears the cry of the child (whose very name means “God hears,”) and sends an angel, who points Hagar to water and delivers another promise. “Come lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.”
 - † Moving off the stage, Hagar takes Ishmael home to Egypt. He marries an Egyptian woman and fathers twelve tribes that come to be associated with Bedouin tribes in the Arabian desert. He becomes the ancestor of the Arab people and their connection to Abraham.
 - † In the Koran, instead of banishing them, Abraham escorts Hagar and Ishmael and settles them in Mecca; one of his later descendents will be the prophet Mohammed.
 - † Okay, so that helps explain some of the animosity between the Judeo-Christian part of the world and the Muslim part, right? But there’s more to it than that. Some people like to say that all world religions are basically the same—they just have different ways of telling the story.

- † I don't think that's right. I don't think we have to slip into moral relativism or religious relativism or whatever you want to call it in order to fully respect the beliefs of Muslims (or Hindus or Buddhists for that matter). Our scriptures tell us that when God created humankind, God knew all of us as good—God's covenant is with all people.
- † Over the centuries we've made the mistake of thinking that those who don't share our faith, our race, our belief system don't share our humanity. At best they are to be tolerated as second class citizens. At worst they are to be eliminated. And of course it's not just people of our faith who sometimes think and act with that attitude—it applies to other religions, too—as we know painfully well.
- † James Killen writes: “Wherever people believe that they must live in competition with each other, one is almost sure to fall into the role of chosen, the advantaged, and the other will fall into the role of the disadvantaged, the outcast.
- † In the human situations with which you are familiar, who are the chosen ones and the outcasts? Who are the advantaged and disadvantaged in each family, in each class at school, in each business or industry, in each community, and in each nation—and the community of nations?
- † Can we see how, at each of these levels, there are outcasts who are struggling to push themselves in and to make a place for themselves? Can we see how the advantaged are always feeling threatened by this and reacting by defending their advantage? Can we see how the conflict keeps developing?”

- † Now put some familiar faces on these characters. In your family, your class, your workplace—who are the insiders and the outsiders? Where do you fit? How does this help explain whatever conflict you feel in your life, let alone the ones that exist on a global scale? Is there a better solution to either defending your insider position or pushing yourself forward to gain the advantage?
- † And where is God in the sad story of Ishmael and Isaac, in the story of the outsider and the insider? God has another solution in mind. Even though God allowed/told Abraham to accommodate Sarah’s jealousy, it’s clear that God loved and protected both Isaac and Ishmael—both sons of Father Abraham?
- † Where is God in the sad story of the conflicts in your family? In our community? In our world? God loves and protects the insiders and the outsiders—even though it’s hard to see how sometimes.
- † What if we who love God do as Jesus asks of us and love our neighbor and ourselves ourselves, too? Even in situations where we can clearly identify ourselves with one side or another, can we resist the temptation of Abraham and be courageous enough to put creative love to work in situations of conflict instead of pushing someone else aside or letting ourselves be trampled?
- † A couple of thousand years after the story of Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael and Isaac played out, Jesus reminded his disciples, afraid that they would be shoved aside and put to death along with their master, of God’s steadfast love with these words:
- † “Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet none of them will fall to the ground apart from your father. And even the hairs of your head are numbered. So do not be afraid.”

- † As Jesus died, the outcast on a cross beside him said, “Master, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” And Jesus replied, “Today you will be with me in paradise.”
- † I love the story told in the Ken Burns series on the Civil War a few years ago on PBS. There were a number of scenes of the fiftieth anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg in 1913. A group of old Confederate and Union soldiers returned to commemorate the occasion.
- † Old films show the men talking over old times, swapping stories, and eating together. Then there was a re-enactment of Pickett’s Charge. The old Union soldiers took their places, as they had fifty years earlier, on the rocks on Seminary Ridge.
- † The old Confederate soldiers took their places on the farmland below. After awhile they started to move forward across the broad, flat field where many had earlier died. “We could not see rifles or bayonets,” an eyewitness said, “but canes and crutches” as they made their way across the field.
- † As the Confederate troops got near the Union line, they broke into one long defiant rebel yell. Then something quite remarkable happened. Unable to restrain themselves any longer, the Yankees burst from behind the stone wall and flung themselves upon their former enemies.
- † Only this time, fifty years later, they did not do battle with them. Instead they threw their arms around them. Some in blue, some in gray, the old men embraced one another and wept.

- † What a difference fifty years made. In that moment they understood that they were created not to do battle with each other but to love each other. For a few brief moments these veterans lived out that truth.
- † May we, too, then learn from our ancestors and from our history—in our families, our jobs, our world—that we are meant to love each other and not do battle. Because God loves each of us, and when we know that, it can't hurt us.
- † Amen.

Sources:

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