

God's Providence

Texts: Romans 6:1-11, Genesis 21:8-21
Kirkpatrick Memorial Presbyterian Church – June 21, 2020
Rev. Michael F. Atzert

Bob Benson writes this beautiful poem called “Laughter in the Walls.” “I pass a lot of houses on my way home – some pretty, some expensive, some inviting – but my heart always skips a beat when I turn down the road and see my house nestled against the hill. I guess I’m especially proud of the house and the way it looks because I drew the plans myself. It started out large enough for us – I even had a study – two teenaged boys now reside in there. And it had a guest room – my girls and nine dolls are permanent guests. It had a small room Peg had hoped would be her sewing room – the two boys swinging on the dutch door have claimed this room as their own. So it really doesn’t look right now as if I’m much of an architect.

But it will get larger again – one by one they will go away to work, to college, to service, to their own houses, and then there will be room – a guest room, a study, and a sewing room for just the two of us. But it won’t be empty – every corner, every room, every nick in the coffee table will be crowded with memories. Memories of picnics, parties, Christmases, bedside vigils, summers, fires, winters, going barefoot, leaving for vacation, cats, conversations, black eyes, graduations, first dates, ball games, arguments, washing dishes, bicycles, dogs, boat rides, getting home from vacation, meals, rabbits, and a thousand other things that fill the lives of those who would raise five. And Peg and I will sit quietly by the fire and listen to the laughter in the walls” (Bob Benson. *Laughter in the Walls*. As in Charles R. Swindoll. The Tale of the Tardy Oxcart. Nashville: Word Publishing, 1998. pp. 200-202).

That is, I think, a wonderful portrait of the family. Life moving along. Not all peaches and cream – but being honest to admit the arguments, black eyes, bedside vigils in life. At the same time, the house is filled with laughter, memories, and a thousand other things. It would be

such a good thing if all families were like that – if all families got along and experienced the potential of the kind of love and caring that you can hear and feel in Benson’s words. If only.

Certainly, that is not the case in our text for this morning from Genesis on this Father’s Day Sunday. There is some serious family drama going on in Abraham and Sarah’s family. There are some dynamics at work that make the situation seem both impossible and hopeless. After years of not being able to conceive, something unusual happens. Sarah gets pregnant and gives birth to Isaac. So, maybe God was not as out of His mind as they thought. Their laughter turned into joy as they welcomed this new little bundle of joy into their lives. And now, they all become one big happy family, right? WRONG! Could not be further from the truth. Sarah feels threatened and angry about the situation she put together, and so, she decides that something must be done. And the timing of it could not be more perfect.

“The child grew and was weaned, and on the day Isaac was weaned Abraham held a great feast. But Sarah saw that the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham was mocking, and she said to Abraham, ‘Get rid of that slave woman and her son, for that slave woman’s son will never share in the inheritance with my son Isaac.’” Now, as I see it, Ishmael was probably just being a normal big brother, pestering and taunting his younger brother. Even as the younger brother myself, this is how I picture the scene. This is Sarah’s chance. She tells Abraham to do something. Get rid of that kid. So, Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael away.

Brokenness in the family. Expectations, wrong choices and decisions. Relationships strained beyond repair. There is so much going on in the text for today that is still evident in today’s world. Isaac is clearly the chosen one. He is the one about whom God referred when God made the original promise and covenant with Abraham. What about Ishmael? He did nothing wrong. He was just being a normal boy with his younger brother. Why should he be

shunned and banned from the family because of Sarah's insecurities? Is there even a way for the situation to be resolved to make everyone feel okay?

So much like what many face today. While there are some families who are close and things are just wonderful, I am finding that in more and more cases, families are messy. There are harsh feelings. People have been cut off from others – either by their own accord or by someone else. For some, today's holiday brings some not so good memories about fathers and growing up. And some of us wonder how this could happen. How families could be so divided and torn apart. Because at their core, family is...well, family. They are the ones who are supposed to have your back, guide, support, and encourage you when you need it – the place where we first learn of God and His ways.

The pattern of this kind of behavior will continue throughout Abraham's line. This will be the first of many questionable actions by members of his family. We will see stolen birthrights, selling the favorite child and then telling the father that the son was killed. And so, it is hard for us to fathom how families could treat one another like this. How we can be treated by our relatives in ways that are harmful. Why can it not be different? Where is God in all of this?

Despite the shunning, regardless of the family dynamics, God was in control in the life of each member of Abraham's family. God hears. “ ‘Do not be so distressed about the boy and your maidservant’”...God heard the boy crying, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven and said to her, ‘What is the matter, Hagar? Do not be afraid; God has heard the boy crying as he lies there. Lift the boy up and take him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation.’

God heard and saw to it that His plan and will were carried out. Isaac would continue in the line that was part of God's covenantal promise to Abraham and Sarah, and God promised to

not only take care of Ishmael, but to make him too a great nation. There is belief that Ishmael became part of the line which began the Muslim religion, but there is no further mention other than in genealogy in the biblical text of Ishmael following these verses.

This story, though, is about God, and God hearing and responding despite the brokenness in families and in the world. God is able to remain in control even though there is extreme turmoil in Abraham's family. Abraham's loyalty is indeed tested – does he stay true to his wife, Sarah and son, Isaac or does he choose his son, Ishmael and maidservant, Hagar? God provides.

There is no doubt that this is a difficult text, with many questions that we do not have comfortable answers for. But there is good news. God continues to work and live and move despite the messes we may be in in our lives or with our families. God is bigger than any family problem or estrangement. And He will work things out according to His plan and purpose.

God may provide a way to mend and heal relationships – to help families find a way to reconciliation. God is God – He has the capacity to do just that. Or He may not. We just have to trust that God is at work in those details of our lives. We have to trust that God remains in control of everything and everyone in this world. He knows what is best for us, and God will take care of us regardless of the broken relationships we may encounter and harsh feelings we may experience. The hurt, the anger, the bitterness – God hears – and He cares about it, and cares for us. Let us pray...

Our Heavenly Father, we admit that texts like these trouble us. Why would you spare Isaac and provide for his family and agree to banish Ishmael and Hagar to the wilderness? Why do you allow families in our time to be broken and estranged? Sometimes, it makes no sense to us. Help us, we pray, to remember that You are bigger than all of our situations and that You hear and are in control. Give us strength to reconcile where we can and peace where reconciliation is not possible at this point. We pray all this in Your Son's name, Amen.