

Sermon 062517

The Child of the Promise

The word *promise* is big in the news these days. If you watch newscasts more than two or three minutes a day, you hear about promises, mainly from politicians.

President Obama promised this. President Trump promised that. Republicans made this promise, and Democrats made that promise. Politicians make many promises during their campaigns for office, but my guess is that a pretty small percentage of these promises are actually fulfilled. The subject of our Old Testament reading this morning is promises, and here is how St. Paul describes it. From the Letter to the Galatians, Chapter 4: *For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise.* You may wonder about whether or not politicians' campaign promises will be fulfilled, but there is no need to worry about God. God always keeps his promises.

Our Old Testament reading is from the Book of Genesis, the first book of what is known as the Pentateuch. Pentateuch is a Greek word meaning five books, so the Pentateuch is the first five books of the Bible – Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. The Hebrew name for the first five books is Torah. According to the Introduction to the Pentateuch in the *English Standard Version of the Bible*: “The Pentateuch is not simply the beginning of the Bible; it is also the foundation of the Bible. It serves to orient the reader for reading the rest of the biblical story line. It introduces the key promises that show God’s purposes in history and that lay the

groundwork for the coming of Christ. Its theological ideas and ethical principles inform the rest of the bible so that the subsequent books assume its authority and appeal to it as they evaluate people's deeds and character."

In Genesis 12, an important story line begins as God calls Abram to be a source of blessing to all humanity, and God makes Abram a promise. *Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."* God's promise to make Abram a great nation must have been a little puzzling since we learned in Genesis 11 that Abram's wife, Sarai, was barren, unable to have children. In Genesis 15, Abram tells God that this is a problem, but God confirms his promise.

After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." But Abram said, "O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir." And behold, the word of the Lord came to him: "This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir." And he brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to

number them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.

Despite God’s promise of many descendants for Abram (Gen 12:2)—and that by biological descent rather than by adoption - Genesis 16 finds Abram and Sarai still childless after eleven years in Canaan. Sarai, becomes impatient and decides to take matters into her own hands. She therefore, names her Egyptian servant Hagar as her surrogate, intending that Hagar’s biological child should be counted as Sarah’s own. But as most often happens when we preempt God, things do not work out as Sarai had planned. Sarai has seriously complicated the fulfillment of God’s promise. She finds her own status diminishing as Hagar’s pregnancy progresses. Agitated over this misfiring of her plan, Sarai treats Hagar harshly, and Hagar runs away. In the wilderness, an angel meets Hagar, pronounces an oracle about her as yet unborn son Ishmael, and sends her back to Abram’s household where Hagar’s son Ishmael is born. The name Ishmael means “God hears.” We see in this episode that in spite of human meddling God is a God of hearing, seeing, and mercy.

In Genesis 17 God again appears to Abram and once again confirms his promise.

When Abram was ninety-nine years old the Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly.” Then Abram fell on his face. And God said to him, “Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall

be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. The name change is significant. The name *Abraham* is a play on words with the word *abhamon* which means “father of a multitude.” The Lord confirmed his promise by giving Abraham a new name.

God didn't leave out Sarai; she also got a new name. *And God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. The name Sarah means “princess.” I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her.” Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, “Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?” And Abraham said to God, “Oh that Ishmael might live before you!” God said, “No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. The name Isaac means “he laughs.” I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I have blessed him and will make him fruitful and multiply him greatly. He shall father twelve princes, and I will make him into a great nation. But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year.”*

There is an interlude in the Book of Genesis in this story of Isaac and Ishmael with the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, and then the episode where Abraham passed

Sarah off as his sister to protect himself from King Abimelech. The story resumes in Genesis 21 with the birth of Isaac. *The Lord visited Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did to Sarah as he had promised. And Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age at the time of which God had spoken to him. Abraham called the name of his son who was born to him, whom Sarah bore him, Isaac. And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac when he was eight days old, as God had commanded him. Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him. And Sarah said, "God has made laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh over me." And she said, "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age."*

Finally, we come to this morning's Old Testament reading. *The child grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac.* Old Testament scholar Allen Ross says that the use of the word "playing" is something more complicated than children's play. On the surface the activity may have seemed harmless, but Ishmael probably did not take Isaac or the promise seriously. The English word "mock" thus suits the context here. "Mock" has a wide range of meanings including deride, scorn, ridicule, and imitate. Sarah saw a problem here with Ishmael as a threat to Isaac's inheritance and the fulfillment of God's promise. *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."* This was difficult for Abraham because he loved his son Ishmael, so he turned to the Lord for

direction. *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. As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring."*

So with minimal provisions, Abraham cast out Hagar and Ishmael into the desert. Before long they were out of water, and Ishmael cried out to God. *God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.* Some people today claim that this is the beginning of Islam, but I don't think so. Ishmael maintained a relationship with his father because in Genesis 25 *Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people. Isaac and Ishmael his sons buried him in the cave of Machpelah...* I think that Ishmael was the father of several Bedouin tribes, but not the father of Islam.

God's approval of Abraham sending away Hagar and Ishmael was not a sign of divine abandonment of Ishmael, but was for the protection of Isaac. I think that Hagar deserves our sympathy since as a slave, she had no control over her destiny. She simply got caught up in Sarah's decision to take it upon herself to make God's promise of a child come true. She was the abused and rejected woman, but God was with her. It is important to remember that God wants to be the God of the outcast, the rejected, the abused, and the dying. It should be

encouraging to us that God did not let Hagar and Ishmael die in the desert, but gave them new life.

Psalm 100 tells us that *God's mercy is everlasting and his faithfulness endures from age to age*. That is exactly what the story of Isaac and Ishmael is all about. God fulfilled his promise to Abraham that he would have an heir, and fulfilling his promise to protect Ishmael. It seems severe to send Hagar into the desert with Ishmael, but the son of the slave wife could not remain in the household as a possible threat to the inheritance of Isaac, the child of the promise.

In Galatians 4 St. Paul says *So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman*. It is through faith in Jesus Christ that we also become children of the promise. This story of Isaac and Ishmael makes it clear that anytime something becomes a threat to the fulfillment of God's promises, the threat must be removed. Again from Galatians: *But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such*

things there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

In conclusion from this morning's Epistle: We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. The death he died, he died to sin, once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Amen.