



SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE REV. CANON CRISTI CHAPMAN, CANON FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH AND STEWARDSHIP
THE THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, PROPER 7A, JUNE 21, 2020
GENESIS 21:8-21; PSALM 86:1-10; ROMANS 6:1b-11; MATTHEW 10:24-39



UNDERSTORY

Only once in my life have I seriously worried about running out of water. It happened on a hike in college at Enchanted Rock State Park.

Enchanted Rock is located in the Texas Hill Country about 80 miles west of Austin. While the park is enchanting, to call it a “rock” is misleading. The stone itself rises about 400 hundred feet off the ground. The exposed part of the rock covers a square

mile and stretches another 60 miles underground. Geologists estimate Enchanted Rock is over a billion years old, which makes it one of the oldest exposed surfaces in the world.

Wow, is it exposed! There are no trees or shrubs there. Instead, only a few tiny creatures make their home on the rock. Their existence is totally dependent on tiny pools of water that form from

pop-up thunderstorms. To say that water is precious is an understatement.

The day we went was hot and humid. We expected that. What we didn't expect was how thirsty we would be, or how little water silver camping canteens hold.

Like the desert, Enchanted Rock isn't a good place to run out of water. Like Hagar so long ago, we couldn't make our water last that afternoon. Unlike Hagar, we were the ones who put ourselves in danger.

Today's Old Testament story is one of the hardest lessons in all of scripture. The contempt Sarah feels toward another human being is palatable. Abraham is distraught by his wife's response, but his discomfort is outweighed by his inability to say no to such cruelty. Even God's initial response is questionable. The exile of Hagar and Ishmael has haunted people for generations. How is there any good news here?

Old Testament scholar Ellen Davis says it is precisely these challenging stories that we need to lean into more. To faithfully follow the Biblical tradition means resisting the urge to ignore parts of the past we don't like or that make us uncomfortable. Davis says tradition earns its authority *because* it is willing to acknowledge the past and to learn from it. "A living tradition," she says, "is a potentially courageous form of shared consciousness. [Unlike] an ideology, tradition preserves ... mistakes and atrocities as well as insights and moral victories."¹

We are a people of story. The Biblical story forms the foundation for our faith. The stories we share reflect where we have come from, who we are, and who we are becoming. Those stories give meaning to our experiences and our existence. But for those to make sense, we need the complete story.

The Bible, like our own lives, is messy. That messiness is not a flaw. Instead, it reflects the complexity of human life. We are incomplete without that messiness. So is God. That same messiness is the means by which God comes to us, honoring and then transforming human struggle. Without the messiness, the story of God's interaction with us is incomplete.

Sarah may reject Hagar, but that is not her only move. It isn't our only move either. As Davis argues, a faithful response involves "radically rethinking what has formerly been accepted."² That includes delving below the surface beyond the discomfort and wondering what else God might be up to. Davis calls this "critical traditioning."³ That kind of faithful response is not limited to biblical scholars or preachers, either. Critical reflection applies to every aspect of your lives and mine, too.

Today, Jesus continues his counsel to his new team. Discipleship is about offering the life giving, liberating love of God to all people. Jesus tells us that discipleship is also about being a student. To be a disciple is to be a life-long learner. Disciples are curious about the world around and within themselves. Discipleship also means taking on

¹Ellen Davis and Richard Hayes, eds. *The Art of Reading Scripture*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 168-169.

²Ibid, 170.

³Ibid.

responsibility for learning. That responsibility includes looking at the stories we have been given and then realigning our lives more in line with God's narrative. That is what critical reflection is. It is Gospel work, and that makes it our work as disciples of Jesus.

This summer, the Cathedral will practice that intentional reflection together as a community. The clergy at Saint Mark's will offer a series that critically examines racism and the systems that continue to perpetuate injustice against people of color. For those of us who are white, this work may be difficult and awkward. It may make us uncomfortable. But that is not a reason to ignore or reject the hard parts of the story or our roles in them. Instead, this work represents one step on a long journey. For some, this will be a first step. Others are seasoned travelers. All of us are urged to participate. The Spirit is stirring. As disciples, our responsibility is to listen and then to act..

But don't think this is only about an intellectual exercise. God does meet us in the heady work, but God really longs for hearts and lives to be changed. That is what critical reflection is really about. That place of conversion will be different for each of us. The discomfort we feel gives us a clue where to start.

Jesus comes to disturb the peace. But it's not God's peace he wants to disrupt. Instead, Jesus is interested in disturbing manufactured peace. That peace is designed to keep some people safe while others live in fear. That peace raises some people up while others wither. Jesus comes to disrupt the cycles that maintain such an unhealthy peace. Jesus comes to nudge us, too. Whether you have grown comfortable with this designer peace or have grown weary that change will never come, Jesus comes to disrupt you and me both.

I want to be very clear. When Jesus talks about the sword, he is not talking about a weapon that will be used to commit violence. For far too long, the institutional church and other human power structures have made that mistake, with catastrophic consequences. Jesus does not sanction the use of violence to bring about change. The upheaval Jesus calls for should never be used as a weapon against another person or group of people. No person should live in fear because of the color of their skin, their sexual orientation, gender identity, or the ways they describe and worship God.

Instead the sword Jesus talks about is about making choices. It's about examining how you act in the world, and then having the courage to speak up and make different choices that ensure justice for and to raise up all people.

Sarah and Hagar teach us something about those choices. Sarah has it all. God's covenant is hers, and she has a son to carry on the covenant into the future. Yet, she can't trust that there is enough of God to go around. Despite the abundance all around her, Sarah chooses to focus on scarcity.

Hagar uses her final breaths to call out to God. When all is lost to Hagar except a painful death, God shows up and gives her life. God transforms Hagar's life-threatening thirst into life-giving hope. God's blessing is Hagar's and her son's to savor, just like it is Sarah's, and just like it is ours. Hagar discovers abundance in the midst of scarcity.

What are you being called to rethink in your life? What is challenging about that? What might God be up to through your discomfort?

Sarah's discomfort undoes her. She forgets God, and she forgets who she is as a beloved child of God.

Hagar, by comparison, sees God face-to-face and lives. Not even Abraham or Moses could do that.

Four times today, Jesus tells us not to fear. God whispers this same counsel to Hagar. Do not be afraid. Embrace what lies ahead. Trust that it is God who calls you into this critical work, and it is God who is initiating the change.

Then when you are thirsty, come to the well and drink. Be filled by the life-giving waters of God. Those are the waters bring lasting justice and peace. There is plenty for everyone.

AMEN.

Genesis 21:8-21 [*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. 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." The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. 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 Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba.*

When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, "Do not let me look on the death of the child." And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him." Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink.

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.]