

Proper 7

Father's Day

- How is God's faithfulness revealed to us, and what should be our faithful response to God?
- But first: Happy Father's Day
- And in an ironic twist of fate, our first reading from Genesis has what is probably the most distressing of many depressing stories in the Bible about Fathers Who Fail.

Hagar

- It's the story of Hagar, who was chosen by Abraham's wife Sarah to bear Abraham's son
 - And it seems that Hagar had little choice in the matter.
- When Sarah's son Isaac was finally born, Sarah looked for any excuse to have Hagar and Ishmael sent away, and Sarah finally convinces Abraham to expel his first son and Hagar into the desert. And Abraham goes along with it.
- Theologian Phillis Tickle (in *Texts of Terror*) holds up Hagar as a symbol of countless women trapped and abused by the power of men.
 - Patriarchy and racism are written all over Abraham's horrific abandonment of this Egyptian woman.
- And yet, there is hope in this story:
- It is a seemingly hopeless situation that Hagar finds herself in:
 - She's out in the wilderness and out of water, and her son is dying of thirst,
 - Hagar gives up any hope of saving her son, she gives up on saving herself, she gives up on God. All she can do is weep.
- Yet although she was abandoned by Abraham, and although she felt abandoned by God,
 - Yet...God does for her what God does for all of us..."God meets us where we are."
 - God opened Hagar's eyes and she saw a well of water

- God opened her eyes so she should see what was there already.
- ...to see what she couldn't see because she had given up hope.
- God is a God of faithful surprises, who doesn't meet us in only when we are in church, or even in a church via Zoom,
 - God makes his love known to us in unexpected ways and places,
 - in ways that we can understand and appreciate at the time
 - And the God of faithful surprises gives us great hope, no matter how dire the circumstances or how hopeless our conditions seems.
- We can find another glimmer of hope in the Hagar and Ishmael story later on in the book of Genesis in a little vignette that I have skipped over for over 50 years
 - Five chapters after this story, the 25th Chapter of Genesis reports that after the death of Sarah, Abraham married Keturah, who also bore him many sons.
 - and after years of separation, it seems that Ishmael and Isaac were seemingly reconciled enough so that both of them joined to bury Abraham in a cave near Mamre, next to his wife Sarah.
- That brings up the questions: "Who was Keturah? And how did Ishmael and Isaac get back in contact for the funeral?"
 - Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes that a number of medieval rabbis held that Keturah was none other than Hagar.
 - After all, names were fairly fluid in the region and changed as circumstances changed: (Abram, Abraham; Jacob, Israel, even Saul, Paul)
 - Rabbi Sacks tells us that medieval rabbis believed that after Sarah's death, Abraham found Hagar, redeemed and married her, and thereby reunited Isaac and Ishmael —
 - And Rabbi Sacks sees in this tradition a Scriptural basis for friendly relations today between Jews and Muslims.
- In other words, God continues to be present in surprising ways,
 - God is faithful to us and reaches out to us in ways that, in our blindness, we don't recognize and offer in ways that we only partially understand

Faithful to God

- We know that God is faithful to us, yet there is a question we must continually ask ourselves, “how faithful are we to God?” “What keeps us from following God? What keeps us from completely dedicating our lives to Jesus?”
 - This is, I believe, the subject of the instructions we hear in today’s lesson from Matthew, in the instructions that Jesus gives to his disciples before he sends them out on their first missionary journey.
 - Jesus is very straightforward about where we should place him in our grand scheme of things:
 - “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.”
- Throughout the Gospels, Jesus invites people to be free of those things that keep us from following him, from following God,
 - whether that is money, or our status in society or empire, our own inflated opinion of ourselves, or loyalty to family.
- Those things that keep us from God are different for each person and different in different circumstances.
 - What kept Hagar from God was her despair, as she “cast her child under the bushes” and seemingly abandoned God in her despair of losing her son
 - For some of us families get in the way:
 - An example that comes readily to my mind is St. Francis of Assisi,
 - who believed that his ability to follow Jesus was blocked by his father’s riches and his father’s desire to keep Francis in the family business.
 - And when Francis divested himself of his father’s goods and his father’s clothes, his father never spoke to him again, and spat in his direction as they passed by each other on the streets of Assisi
 - For some of us, it’s crowd pressure that gets in the way:

- We blindly go along with the supposed wisdom that's been passed down from generation to generation, and we refuse to think that things could be different
 - And we become unable to see what new ways that God has in mind for us.
 - "We've always done it that way..."
- Some people take preemptive actions so they won't have to experience rejection by others. These preemptive actions may lead us so far even as to deny Jesus.
- What does denial look like in the year 2020?
 - Fear of being held up to ridicule for giving money to a street beggar
 - Fear of drawing attention to ourselves, so we end up doing nothing
 - Letting a racial slur slide on by
 - Allowing ourselves to be overwhelm with demands that really are only administritivia and time-wasters and not advancing the Kingdom of God
- As we read through the Gospels, it seems that many of the people that Jesus encounters have their own stumbling blocks that prevent them from following God
 - That, like Hagar, prevent them from seeing the water that is already in front of them.
- As for **myself**, my greatest stumbling block in completely following Jesus is my own lack of humility.
 - ("...Well, we knew that all along.")
 - (It isn't humility as was described in the song, "Lord, it's hard to be humble...")
- What do I mean by lack of humility?
 - My lack of humility comes because I am a child of the space age, a follower of the Gospel according to Apollo 13,
 - which has as it core belief the opinion that no matter how bad the situation has become,(or how desperate we are) we can engineer our way out of it.
- However, I also realize that following the Gospel of Apollo 13 is antithetical to a life of faith.
 - The Gospel of Apollo 13 leads me to rely on my own efforts, without recognizing my dependence on God

Sunday, June 21, 2020

- It leads me to believe that I can rely on my own reason, without opening myself to the possibility God working in unexpected and surprising ways
- When I find myself following the Gospel of Apollo 13, I often belatedly discover
 - that I missed seeing those pools of water that are already in front to me,
 - and that I missed many opportunities to fully enter into the world that God has in store for me.
- Humility is no doubt the long pole in the tent of my spiritual life
 - And I hope that, with a much prayer, that I might become a humbler, and holier follower of Jesus.

I say this to you today, being mindful of the words of Psalm appointed,

“For you are great; you do wondrous things

For you alone are God.”