

“In the Wilderness,” by Rev. Dr. Mark Caggiano, 4/26/26

Genesis 21:9-19; John 10:1-10

*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.”*

In the reading from Genesis, we heard a difficult story. Sarah has given birth to a son, Isaac, from whom the nation of Israel would come. But Sarah was jealous of Abraham’s other son, Ishmael, whose mother was Hagar, the maidservant of Sarah. When the words “maidservant” or “handmaiden” are used in the Bible, it can almost always be translated as “slave.” It is a polite way in older translations to skate over a dark truth.

Hagar had been given over to Abraham for this purpose by Sarah. This was an ugly circumstance from the onset, as Abraham needed an heir, but Sarah had been unable to conceive. Hagar was ordered to serve as a concubine. In case you ever wondered where the author Margret Atwood got her dystopian material for the *Handmaid’s Tale*, here it is.

Hagar gave Abraham a son, who was named Ishmael. But matters worsened after, of all things, a miracle. Sarah became with child at the age of 90, while Abraham was then 100. The original reason for Ishmael was no longer pertinent, and what was once a blessing in the eyes of Abraham became a curse in the mind of Sarah.

The name Ishmael, like most names in the Bible, is interesting. It means “God has harkened” or “God has listened.” It could refer to his birth, meaning God has listened and finally given Abraham a son. It could also refer to Ishmael’s salvation in the desert, where God saved him and Hagar from death. In any case, we are reminded that God has heard the needs of someone, either Abraham or Ishmael, or both. God listened.

What about Hagar? What does the name “Hagar” mean? It could be translated as “flight,” “stranger,” or “immigrant.” In that sense, it is a descriptor more so than a name. There is also one minority tradition of translating her name a “reward.” A reward for being able to join the household of Abraham and possibly the reward of being saved after being abandoned by Abraham’s household in the wilderness. I might describe that as the “cup is half full” version. Which sounds better than the “you left someone to die in the desert alongside with your first-born son” version. Has a nicer ring to it.

Hagar was an Egyptian, which is not an extraneous detail. We are still centuries before the troubles faced by Hebrew slaves in Egypt, but it is worth remembering that Egypt is not always thought of kindly in the Hebrew scriptures. Long standing, historic animosities are often trace back to these stories.

In the Christian tradition, the story of Hagar has been used as a metaphor. Paul wrote in his letter to the Galatians that Hagar and the birth of Ishmael symbolize the “old” covenant, the agreement at Mount Sinai between God and Israel that served and still serves as the basis of the Jewish faith. This is, in Paul’s description, a covenant concerning a slave, or in this instance, someone who is a slave to the law.

Conversely, Sarah and her son Isaac are an allegory of a “new” covenant, that between God and the world through Jesus Christ. This is a covenant of the free, those freed by the sacrifice of Jesus. Those who do not have to follow anything like the law.

However, I would also note, that the religion of Sarah and Isaac and Abraham is by this metaphor being superseded by Paul's interpretation of the scriptures. It is all well and good to say one is new and the other is old, but it is quite another to say that even the new and metaphorical version will give way, in time, to Paul's personal outlook. I would also note that the religion Paul is marking as new has been reinterpreted and thus superseded in the same way, with Islam suggesting that it is one further step along the evolutionary lines of the Abrahamic tradition. What was good for Paul becomes good for later generations.

If that sounds presumptuous to anyone, I would point out that this presumption stands in a long line of religious tradition, as subsequent generations have repeatedly declared themselves to be wiser than the previous. Such is the nature of the passage of time. For example, about 700 years after the foundation of Islam, the Protestant Reformation and its leaders would take radical steps to sweep away traditions of the past. And group after group, denomination after denomination, have kept on sweeping and sweeping up until the present day. One of the few certainties in Christianity is that someone somewhere thinks you are a heretic.

Paul was likening the situation between Hagar and Sarah to that between Jews and Christians, the Old Testament versus the New Testament. His metaphor works in a certain way, but the proposed comparison effectively ignores the actual story. Sarah may have abandoned Hagar and Ishmael to the wilderness without a care. Abraham may have acquiesced to this almost certain death sentence for his own son, though he did so after some words of comfort from God. Ishmael would become the father of another nation, in his case the Arab people.

But Paul ignored the outcome of the story. He ignored the importance of Ishmael, because Paul was trying to make a point. He did so by valuing Isaac as an allegory and then completely rejecting everything that Isaac and the other patriarchs of Israel represented. If you take Paul at his word, we should have cast aside the Hebrew scriptures entirely, which would make the Bible whole lot shorter.

Paul was preaching that those who follow Jesus should be free from the law. What law? The Law of Moses. The old laws are therefore to be set aside, in a sense, only to have a new set of laws take their place. What laws? The laws of Paul. The "laws" that Paul offered as his own opinions, plus quite a few suggestions. And yet these opinions and suggestion are now for all intents and purposes the traditional laws of the Christian religion. That may have been the work of others, rather than Paul, but the effect is the same.

These are not the laws of Jesus, by no means. Not the teachings of Jesus, truth be told. To be fair, Jesus is admittedly more than an allegory for Paul. And Jesus is far more than a man. But when Paul renders Jesus, the messiah, to be more than a man, Paul also leaves aside Jesus the *teacher*. Much like Abraham, Isaac and Moses, he is not to be followed.

Jesus becomes divine rather than relevant.

This reminds me of a quote by Dorothy Day, the famous Catholic writer and activist. During her lifetime she was often called a living saint, to which she responded: *Don't call me a saint. I don't want to be dismissed so easily.* And so, Jesus can be worshipped, and seen as the sole source of salvation, and yet Jesus can be strangely ignored as a man. All that Jesus taught about helping and loving, all he said about that which you do to the least of my brothers that you do unto me. Not important.

Paul does not say that directly, calling upon folks to worship Jesus rather than listen to him – it would take a few centuries for that to happen – but the most important step happened in the writings of Paul. Or, the most important omission, because the ethical content of Jesus teachings is not frequently mentioned, unlike the crucifixion and resurrection. At some point Jesus becomes far more important as a symbol than anything he had to teach. And somehow that has translated into a practice of no longer for *following* Jesus. We no longer have to follow what Jesus taught, that those repeated lessons are not nearly as important as how Jesus should be perceived.

I recall a conversation I had years ago with an old friend. She worked for the UUA and had previously taught my children in Sunday school. She mentioned in passing that a member of her family was a fundamentalist Christian. And like any family member from a different faith, this man felt the ongoing need to send to her materials to demonstrate the error of her ways. You know the person, the one who forwards unwelcomed postings from the internet with the underlying message that you are the misguided one, you are the one sporting a tinfoil hat.

In one installment, her relative shared the opinion that one must not become involved with any religious tradition that suggests that God requires anything of us in this life. No works righteous, as the terminology goes, but salvation through faith alone.

The suggestion that the actions of our lives in any way have an influence over whether we will enter into the Kingdom of God, that is misguided heresy, at least in his fundamentalist view. There is nothing we need to do in this life. Nothing that will affect whether we enter into a better or worse afterlife.

And in case you are wondering, I utterly do not believe any of that. I am Team Works Righteous all the way. I am merely mentioning this description as a very common version of Christianity. One that you are likely to hear about and one that I think openly and utterly rejects the purpose of Jesus' life and ministry.

Obviously, I have opinions on the subject.

For example, abandoning a woman and a child in the wilderness would have no bearing upon one's personal salvation. By this logic, you cannot look at the good and bad deeds of a life and determine who is saved. The actions of our lives are completely unrelated to our prospects for salvation.

So, we might say that Abraham should not worry about his actions. However, and quite sadly, by *some* interpretations of Christianity, Abraham existed before Jesus and therefore could never be saved. Along with the entirety of humanity before the year 33, give or take. But if you were born afterwards, and were baptized mind you, you get to enter into the great eternal lottery. You have the possibility, if not the certainty, of salvation.

Compare that absolute bar against salvation with the possibility of it for some folks who came along later. Hitler was a Lutheran, Stalin was an Orthodox Christian. And they might be fine. They might be fine because, by one version of Christian thought, nothing that they did mattered in this life. Nothing that they did mattered – when I wrote that last night, I had to get up and take a walk.

As long as they were baptized, as long as they were nominally Christian, they still might make the eternal cut. And in case you were wondering, under this religious perspective, this theological outlook, the six million Jews who died during the Holocaust, they could not be saved. That led me to take a longer walk.

As a person with many friends and colleagues who are Jewish, with family members who come from other faith traditions, I will tell you most strenuously that such an understanding of Christianity is profoundly misguided. I will leave it at that.

Unitarians have a broad range of ideas on the matter of God. Some believe in God, some do not. Some will take half an hour to describe it to you, which is pleasant over coffee. But one matter of general agreement among Unitarians is that we need to act in this world. We do need to lift a finger. We do need to lend a hand. We must help bend the arc of the universe toward justice because it will not get there on its own.

Unitarians classically believed that you were required to cultivate character. To educate and discipline yourself as a moral and ethical person. And I still believe that. I still believe we are called upon to work and to struggle and to understand. We are required to *care*. We need to raise our voices in protest and with concerns as well as in praise and thanksgiving.

We need to worry about the Hagar and the Ishmaels wandering in the wilderness, even if they are not like us, and yes even if they are doing something we do not completely like. We need to concern ourselves with that which will destroy their bodies because failing to do so will destroy our hearts, our minds and, most surely, our souls.

Hagar whose name could mean stranger or immigrant. Hagar who God did not forsake in the wilderness, so why should we? Why should we ignore the moral teachings of the Bible because someone centuries ago decided that Jesus had nothing to teach us, whether that be some Protestant Reformer 500 years ago or even Paul himself.

And you might very well say that isn't it a little presumptuous of me, some random guy preaching in a little stone church on the outskirts of Boston, to declare that these leading lights of Christianity are wrong. That they threw the baby Jesus out with the bathwater. And yes, it is wee bit presumptuous.

But I will say this – I am right and they are wrong. And I am more than willing to debate anyone on the subject. It might be hard to schedule John Calvin onto the debate calendar, but I am guessing some others might take up the standard of battle.

And here is my reason for this. It does not come from our Unitarian ancestors, but from our later compatriots from the Universalist side of the family. Universalists believe in universal salvation, that we will all in time return to the embrace of God. And I sincerely believe in that, with one important distinction.

When we stand in the divine presence of God, the creator and the preserver, the almighty source from whom all blessings flow, it might feel like heaven. Or, it might feel like hell.

When we return to God, we will add our stories to the vast story of all life on this earth. We will share what we did and we will share what we did not do. We will share all that and we will share why we did or did not do this or that. And we will also learn the stories of others, their acts and

omissions, their reasons and prejudices, their whys and why nots. We will understand what our lives meant and what their lives meant.

And if those lives were filled with love, with care for others, with good wishes for the world and hard work in the service of the good, then I imagine it will feel like heaven. And if not, if we have fallen short of the teachings of Jesus, if we have not loved God and loved our neighbors, then it might feel like something else.

In my imagination, we are building heaven every day. We are filling our eternity with joy and laughter, with decency and fellowship. The simple treasures that make this life worth living that we not only enjoyed but which we shared. That we made possible for others to receive. When Jesus taught us that which you do to the least of my brothers and sisters, that you do unto me, he was describing heaven. And when we failed to do so, he was describing hell.

But I also do not believe in eternal hell either. I do not believe in infinite punishment for a finite life of sin, to quote the Universalists. In my grand musings about the afterlife, that feeling of hell, that sense of punishment for what we did and did not do will last for a time. But it will only last until we are forgiven. Forgiven by the people of our lives. Those we hurt. Those we neglected. Even those we loved. All of them. All of them including ourselves. And, I am guessing, that for some of us, we will be the hardest judges of ourselves.

Unitarians may agree on very few things, but we agree that this life matters. We agree that those we come across in this life matter. If we allow hell on Earth to endure, do we imagine that we will deserve anything more than what we permit when our time on this Earth is done?

It would be only fitting that true heaven and hell will take the shape and measure of that which we do to the least of our brothers and sisters. Funny thing, I got that line from the Bible. I got it from someone who is worshipped like God, but whose teachings somehow get ignored in spite of that high esteem. However, I am betting on him when I offer you my very presumptuous opinions. Amen.