

Changing the Lenses
Preached by
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United Church of Fayetteville
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For Reflection

"It is not enough to be chosen. We need an ongoing blessing that allows us to hear in an ever-new way that we belong to a loving God..."

Henri Nouwen

Hebrew Scripture: 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.

Epistle Reading: Ephesians 3:14-21

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God. Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.

Meditation: *Changing the Lenses*

Today is known in the liturgical calendar as "Baptism of the Lord" Sunday. While we are not telling that particular story, it is a good time to look back through the family album of parents and children, to see what snapshots from the past can tell us about our life together today. We are going to go almost all the way as far back as our faith's ancestry.com will take us—to Abraham and Sarah—the father and mother of nations—the ancestors in faith for three peoples of the Book.

The first picture in the album is of Abraham, Sarah and Lot, standing in front of a huge pile of luggage with a bunch of cousins whose names no one remembers anymore. The caption notes that Abraham is

moving the family to Canaan, as God told him to do.

A few pages later, we pause at a series of pictures. In all of them, Abraham and Sarah have begun to show their age. Sarah looks angry, and next to her, is a pregnant woman, who, the caption tells us is Hagar, Sarah's maid. Hagar looks smug.

Oddly, in the next picture, looking reasonably happy, it is Sarah, holding the newborn named Ishmael, while Hagar sulks in the background. Abraham merely looks confused. The margin notes in the album tell us that Hagar served as a surrogate when it appeared Sarah wasn't going to have any children. Taking life into their own hands hadn't made any of them as happy as they had expected.

The next page causes us to do a double take. If Abraham and Sarah had been showing their sand-swept age until now, in this picture they looked positively ancient. But it's Sarah who has us squinting and tipping the picture—she looks... pregnant. The caption assures us that she is finally pregnant with the God-promised child.

Next, Abraham looking proud and shell-shocked. Next to him, Sarah is laughing until the tears have run down her face. With not previously seen joy in their faces, they name the child, Isaac—that is "Laughter." We can't help smiling back at that ancient picture.

Later still, there are four pictures on the page. First, is a picture of a party. A small boy is playing amid a pile of presents. His older brother Ishmael is laughing and playing with him. Off to the side, Sarah, eyes narrowed to slits, is clearly furious. The next shot is Sarah pointing to the barren desert, while Abraham hands a jug of water to a crying Hagar, Ishmael clinging to her hand. The last two pictures on the page at first look almost identical, until we peer at the subjects. In one, Ishmael stands at the center surrounded by a large crowd of people—his family. The matching snapshot next to it has Isaac at the center of his own family photo.

Trying to make sense of the picture, we seek out our oldest family member to see what ancient lore can tell us. He taps at the top picture. "There is your answer. Sarah saw Ishmael, Hagar's son "laughing."

"What do you mean—that's our answer—she saw him laughing?"

He leans in and whispers, "Sarah had a condition we don't talk about much—it's sort of a family secret. Sarah suffered from a vision problem."

"A vision problem?"

"Something about the lenses in her eyes. She could only see things through an off-center lens of resentment and envy. You know what nearsightedness is, don't you?"

"Of course. It's when we see things best that are closest to us."

"Then for Sarah?"

"She could only see things that upset her, when she wasn't the center of things?"

"Exactly! Sarah had it bad. She always noticed if someone got more attention than her or her child."

"Okay... so what's wrong with laughing at a party? Aren't people supposed to have a good time?"

"Sure. But remember that her son was named 'Laughter.' With Sarah's vision problems, when she saw someone laughing, she stopped thinking of God's fulfilled promise. When she saw someone laughing, she thought of them as 'Isaac-ing' – taking Isaac's place or threatening his inheritance or worse yet, taking Isaac's place in God's plan. She saw Ishmael, 'Isaac-ing' at the party and was afraid if she didn't do something he might usurp Isaac's birthright."

"But God made the promise about Isaac."

"Yes. But that's the problem with that lens defect. It makes you so scared, that when you think you are not in the center of things, true or not, you feel threatened. All of a sudden, if you can even remember your own blessings, you become afraid someone is going to take them from you, or that they are not as valuable as you once thought. Sarah's vision literally made her sick.

Finally, Abraham didn't know what else to do but give her what she wanted. Things were really hard for Hagar and Ishmael, but you can see here at the bottom of the page, that God kept the promise to Ishmael as well as to Isaac."

"So, vision problems didn't really matter—didn't change anything at all?"

"Of course, they did. Father and son, Abraham and Ishmael never saw each other again. Ishmael and

Isaac—even though they were half-brothers—there is a feud between their families down to this very day. Ishmael’s people have never forgotten his abandonment and Isaac’s still worry that someone is going to steal God’s promises from them.

“Sarah’s lens defect changed everything but one thing. God’s vision is not affected by human sight problems. God has God-sightedness. No matter what happened, Isaac never looked any less blessed to God, nor did God see Ishmael’s success as taking anything away from Isaac or God’s plan. There was promise and blessing enough for everyone—even if they were different. And for Sarah, God simply grieved that she couldn’t enjoy her blessings. That’s pretty much the end of their story, but with more descendants than stars in the sky, we have to move pretty quickly now.”

He flips rapidly through pages. We catch glimpses of kings and wild-eyed folk on street corners, prisoners of war and destroyed cities. Then a series of shots of another preacher—even one of his horrible execution. Then it’s hard to figure out the story line—there is so much going on at once. Temples, cathedrals and mosques, cities, forests and fields. A few individual portraits but mostly pictures of large groups of people that look a lot like those old shots of Ishmael and Isaac with their families. We flip back and forth: some folk are rich, others not; they have different eye, hair and skin colors. They are all smiling—but still there is something. Finally we put our finger on it: “All these people are squinting. Why?”

“Well, God did make Sarah, the mother of nations and we trace our faith genes, if not our physical ones back to her. It seems we’ve all inherited her vision problem.”

“Is there anything we can do about it—special glasses or something?”

He turns to the last page in the album: There are two pictures: one of the old-time preacher being baptized in a river; the other, another big family picture, with everyone smiling—a gurgling baby and a font at their center.

“So baptism changes the lenses?”

“Not quite, but in those moments when we can share blessings with someone new, when we can remember our own blessings and celebrate together; in those instants we are given the gift of God-sightedness. In those moments we stop feeling threatened or anxious, we feel blessed and grateful for the opportunity to bless others.

God-sightedness isn’t permanent for humans, of course, but we get it back every time we participate in a sacramental moment—a shared meal, a baby’s birth, a wedding, a word of consolation, a welcome or an affirmation. In those moments our lens defect is transformed into God-sightedness that reminds us we are the beloved of God—each and every one.

Prayer for Others and Ourselves

Compassionate God:

We offer our spirits to you in prayer, that your Spirit might flow us, through our lives and thought, hearts and minds

healing our hurts

consoling us in disappointment

sustaining us in loss

and

encouraging us in challenge

May it be that in the moments of our healing, we might reach out to heal those around us

To bring hope to the hungry and poor

To offer comfort to the grieving and ill

And in all ways

To follow the model of your son

Bringing reconciliation in brokenness

Forgiveness in offense

And relationships that are larger and stronger than personal agendas

The Lord's Prayer

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
thy will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day, our daily bread.
Forgive us our debts
as we forgive our debtors
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil,
for thine is the kingdom and the power
and the glory forever. Amen.**