

Ishmael

We don't like messy stories. We like ones that are orderly and where everyone lives happily ever after. Not necessarily fairy tales but we want everything to work out in the end. When we approach all stories in this way we begin to desire the same thing for our lives. We want everything to be just right. But that is not how our lives are. Our lives are messy and uncomfortable. In fact we find ourselves in an uncomfortable mess right now. Our hospitals are filling up, we're being asked to stay home and if we're out to wear a face covering and maintain at least 6 feet apart. We're ready for this to be done & gone and yet we do not have any sign that we're anywhere close. We are tired and just want things to go back to normal.

What we're feeling is important for us to remember as we hear the story of Hagar & Ishmael. It is an uncomfortable story. We hear of Sarah who turns to her slave Hagar to provide her husband, Abraham with a child. Hagar is uncomfortable and looks at Sarah with contempt. When Sarah deals harshly with Hagar, she runs away. If we changed the setting and names this could very well be a soap opera storyline. But it is in the Bible. We could spend a long time dissecting all the character's choices. We could villainize each of them depending on who is most sympathetic in our eyes. But none of that is helpful or important.

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A pregnant Hagar runs away in the middle of all of this. And God met her in the wilderness. As she speaks she can only focus on hopelessness. God sees and hears Hagar. God not just listens but gives her hope and promise. Her son will not have a life like that of his mothers. He will be free. This promise sends Hagar back to Abraham and Sarah. We know from our study on covenant that God refines the promises to Abraham & Sarah along with changing their name. The next time we hear from Hagar is after those promises, after Ishmael & Isaac are born.

Now Abraham is confronted with both of his sons and Sarah demands that he choose. Abraham, thankfully does not have to make this decision because God speaks and offers the promises that has already been shared with Hagar concerning Ishmael. This is the first time that Abraham is being asked to sacrifice his son. He has to give him up. How many of us think much about Ishmael? Many of us, however, think of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. So Hagar is again out in the wilderness. This time it is not just her life but the life of her son. God intercedes again and the message from heaven is not just of comfort but also of promise. God's promise is made tangible in the well with water. God hears and again provides.

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God hears and God provides. If the stories in Genesis are to tell us more about God than our ancestors, what do we learn. That God hears even those who no one else is listening to. God hears those who have no options. God provides when it seems to be hopeless. We know that God hears – we pray and open our hearts & minds, pouring out all that is within us. And that is important but in order to experience the fullness of what God has to offer, we must also listen. Ishmael's story would have been very different if Hagar had not listened to the promises that God offered to her. She might have stayed in the wilderness as a pregnant woman. We need to listen to what God is calling us to do. But we cannot be content just to listen, we must also act.

God provides. But we don't always recognize it, do we? There was a man who was in his house watching the news of an impending storm that would cause major flooding. While watching the news report there was a knock on the door. It was a law enforcement officer asking the man to evacuate before the storm. The man shook his head and said he believed in God and God would save him. The water began to rise in the streets so that there was a boat floating where the road once was. The man was sitting on the porch watching when a man from the boat called out, would you like a ride out? The man yelled back, no I believe

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in God and God will save me. The boat went on. House later, the water has risen into the house, the man taking shelter on the roof of his house. A helicopter is flying over rescuing people from their homes and tries to get the man off of his roof. He again refuses and says that he believes in God and that God will save him. Shortly after the last rescue the man drowns. Next thing he knows he is standing at the gates of Heaven demanding to see Jesus. Jesus comes and standing next to Peter begins listening to this man upset that he is dead. Jesus shakes his head and says, I tried to save you, I sent you the news report, the police officer, the boat & a helicopter, why are you here?

All too often we are like the man in that story. We don't listen to what God is offering us. We don't take the next steps that are being asked of us because we are sure that we know best. Thankfully Hagar listened to God. What is God calling us to do in this time? God has called and gifted doctors, scientists and public health officials. Are we listening? *I Where he leads me I will follow* in the name of the Father, the Son & the Holy Spirit. Amen.