

DO NOT BE AFRAID
Genesis 21: 8-21; Matthew 10: 24-39
Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time • June 21, 2020
by Pat Berger

I want to share with you the words of one of my favorite hymns. This one, by David Haas, is too new to be in the hymnal that we have at Plymouth, but it is in the *Glory to God* hymnal that is now in many Presbyterian churches. It goes very well with our readings for today, and I think with our lives right now. Hear these words of the first two verses: "I will come to you in the silence; I will lift you from all your fear. You will hear my voice, I claim you as my choice, be still and know I am here. I am hope for all who are hopeless, I am eyes for all who long to see. In the shadows of the night, I will be your light, come and rest in me. And the chorus: Do not be afraid, I am with you. I have called you each by name. Come and follow me, I will bring you home; I love you and you are mine."

"Do not be afraid." We need to hear that now as much as did Hagar in our reading from Genesis. Let's think back a bit to set ourselves in her story. Remember that Abraham and Sarah were childless into their 60s; still, God had promised to make a great nation of Abraham. At a point in time, then, Sarah gave her slave Hagar to Abraham to be his second wife, hopeful that Hagar might conceive and give birth to Abraham's heir, which eventually happened. Ishmael was born, and for many years he was, as far as we know, an only child. Which catches us up to last week, when God visited Abraham and Sarah, and at an extremely advanced age, Sarah conceived and gave birth to Isaac. Things with Hagar went south from there, which brings us to this week's verses; Sarah gave Abraham an ultimatum: Hagar and Ishmael needed to leave. Abraham was not happy, God told him not to be concerned; God would take care of Hagar and Ishmael too, and make a great nation of Ishmael as well as of Isaac.

So Abraham told Hagar and Ishmael that they had to leave, gave them a loaf of bread and a skin of water, and showed them the door. They wandered in the desert until the water ran out. Hagar cried -- she didn't want to see her son die. An angel came to her, and asked her what her problem was, and then: one of my favorite lines, always, in scripture: the angel said: do not be afraid.

Do not be afraid. God had heard the crying, God would make a great nation of the boy, all would be good -- and Hagar turned around and saw: a well. God was, indeed, with the boy, and with Hagar, too. She, after all, had seen God twice by this time, and had called God by name -- a privilege rarely granted. Ishmael had been included in the promise. There was and is no limiting God's mercy; God hears the cries of those who have been abandoned, of those who are outcasts, and God saves them. Do not be afraid. Those words could be

proclaimed in the light and shouted from the housetops, just like the ones that Jesus said to his disciples in what we read from Matthew this morning.

It's good to see the "do not fear" close to the beginning of this reading, too; Jesus was talking with his disciples about some things that were indeed scary. They were to go out and preach -- without Jesus with them? Jesus came not to bring peace -- but a sword? Family members would be set against one another? Remember how families operated at that time. For one example, whatever faith path the senior male member of the family walked, that would have been what the whole family did. So: if the Dad came home and announced that he had been listening to Jesus and had decided that Jesus was who the family would follow, the expectation would have been that they all turn their backs on their Jewish heritage, and go this new way. That, you can well imagine, might have caused some consternation within the household.

Sometimes, though, naming the fears gives them less power. Jesus was talking with his disciples here -- these things were not said while he was trying to convert new followers; it was not even said to just plain followers. And the way that Matthew wrote, it was more likely that he was trying to smooth over the fact that some families may have been having troubles because one or more members had decided to follow Jesus. Twice, here, the disciples are told not to be afraid, and even though we know that that is written in the imperative form, that it is a command -- still: what is the first thing that happens inside of you when someone says, do not be afraid? I will tell you that the first thing that happens to me is: I am afraid!

Jesus reminded the disciples here of the relationship that they had with him, and through him with God; they would not be abandoned. God cared even for the sparrows, and Jesus' followers were worth more than many sparrows. Just before these verses, Jesus had told the disciples not to take with them money or clothing or food; now, what they were to take with them as they proclaimed in the light and from the housetops was the Good News, the Gospel of Jesus the Christ -- that, lived and proclaimed, would be their most important tool. God would be with them, in mercy and compassion. The third verse of that hymn: "I am strength for all the despairing, healing for the ones who dwell in shame. All the blind will see, the lame will all run free, and all will know my name. Do not be afraid, I am with you. I have called you each by name. Come and follow me, I will bring you home; I love you and you are mine."

Some days more than others, it seems that we, too, live in scary circumstances -- like, maybe most of the days since the first part of March, anyway. The description of the virus and its impacts changes every few minutes or so. The economy does better and worse, seemingly at will. Demonstrations go from peaceful to not so

in short order, and what ought to be done as a result seems also not to be treading a straight path. Etcetera.

We aren't used to a life that seems quite this random. A recent article by Chris Currie, though, in *The Presbyterian Outlook* magazine, had this: "I wonder," he wrote, "if we can really understand who God is or who we are without first being confronted by a God who persistently, demandingly and unwaveringly refuses to be God without us. To paraphrase Karl Barth, we may choose to live without God . . . , but God never chooses to live without us. . . .at the heart of the divine identity of that God . . . is a divine will and a divine decision to never be separated from humanity." And, ". . . we may seem to be separated from God, but God never chooses to live or to be without us." Do not fear. I was privileged a few years ago to be at a set of lectures featuring Marcus Borg, Dominic Crossan and Joan Chittister, three very fine theologians. One of the questions asked of each of them was what challenge they would leave with us. Their responses: to be compassionate as Jesus was compassionate; to make your faith so compelling that those around you can't stand not to be believers; and to share the news that the Kingdom of God is as near as . . . you! Do not be afraid.

Do not be afraid: what can we do, who can we be to live into and spread that message? We can't all do or be major things for the Kingdom, and each of us can do and be something. I like the small things I have the privilege of doing. I can't imagine doing really big things; the medium things are fun; and there are the small things: the smile that shines a light, the actions that proclaim -- all make a difference for the Kingdom. And often what we do causes others to do something, which makes more of a difference for the Kingdom. Remembering that God refuses to live without you, what little thing -- or maybe larger -- will you have the privilege of doing or being this week for the Kingdom? I would love to hear about it!

The last verse of the hymn: "I am the Word that leads all to freedom, I am the peace the world cannot give. I will call your name, embracing all your pain, stand up, now walk, and live! Do not be afraid, I am with you. I have called you each by name. Come and follow me, I will bring you home, I love you and you are mine."

Let us pray.