

**The Two Sons**  
**Genesis 21:8-21**  
***November 18, 2018***

Any visitor from another planet might wonder why there is such hatred and strife in the Middle East. Why are Arabs and Jews locked in such deadly conflict that has defied all attempts at peace negotiations? Where was this hatred born?

Even at an ancient burial site near the city of Hebron, perhaps the second most sacred spot on earth for Jews, murder and hatred spill over. At the Cave of Machpelah we step into the resting place of Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Rebecca and Leah. We are told in Genesis 23 that when Sarah died Abraham bought this cave from the Hittites. Hebron is the oldest Jewish community in the world. It is mentioned as far back as Joshua; it is where David resided for seven years and where he was anointed king of all Israel. This is a very special Jewish city. But around 700 years ago the Muslims conquered Hebron, declared the structure a mosque and forbade entry to Jews. They were not allowed past the seventh step on a staircase outside the building. Hebron was liberated in 1967 but the site remains very restrictive for Jews as it is still controlled by the Muslims. There have been many deadly attacks and killings at this site over the past decades.

There is a tender moment in the Genesis narrative when Abraham dies. His two sons, Isaac and Ishmael, come together finally to bury their father. This may have been their first family reunion in many years. Abraham was 86 when Ishmael was born and was 175 when he died, according to the Genesis story. That means that Ishmael was now 89 and Isaac a young chicken of 75. These two old men gather the body of their father and bury him in the cave he bought so many years before for his wife. I wonder how their conversation went that day. Both had by that time married and had children. Ishmael had 12 children; Isaac had the famous twins, Jacob and Esau who in turn became fathers of many children. But apart from a common father in Abraham these two old men had lived different lives.

Let us hear the story of Genesis 21

There is the sound of rejoicing and happiness in the Abraham camp. A son has finally been born. His name is Ishmael. He is born to Hagar the Egyptian slave woman. Abraham and Sarah had given up on the promise that God would give them a son through Sarah. They were now getting too old and common sense said that such a promise was simply too outrageous for down to earth Bedouin to believe. So naturally they took matters into their own hands, much like we do sometimes. They would carve out their own future; they rejected the promise. Ishmael, in a sense, is the son of desperation and unbelief. He was not to be the son of promise. He is not the future.

God is not to be denied. About fourteen years later Isaac emerges from the womb of Sarah. No wonder she is overwhelmed with joy and surprise. But conflict, which has percolated under the surface these past dozen or so years, will not go away. The presence of Hagar and Ishmael has been like a knife in Sarah's soul from the beginning. The sight of the teenager Ishmael playing with her only son Isaac at Isaac's weaning celebration is the final indignity for Sarah. She demands that mother and son be sent into exile. But this is Abraham's oldest boy; you can feel his pain at this request. God's answer for Abraham is to comply with Sarah's request. One imagines Abraham standing at the edge of the tent village watching his first born and mother disappearing into the haze of the desert sun and sand. It is a poignant moment, the old man and the young son parting for the last time.

Wandering in the desert with only the water and bread you can carry has only one fateful conclusion. Anyone who has watched films like **Ice Cold in Alex** or **Lawrence of Arabia** remembers the fires of the desert sun. Without water life ebbs away quickly, so Hagar and Ishmael are soon at death's door. Hagar lays the near dead Ishmael under a bush to die while she weeps before God. Suddenly an angel's voice tells her that God has heard the boy's cry. God opened her eyes to see a well that mysteriously she hadn't seen before. Perhaps the delirium of heat stroke had prevented her from seeing. God makes an amazing promise to Hagar. Notice what it is.

*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...God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness and became an expert with the bow. (Gen. 21:17ff)*

Most of us have brothers or sisters. I lived with three brothers. We grew up in different decades but there was not much difference between us. We were all exposed to the same Sunday school, the same Sabbath regiment, the same world view of our parents and working class society. When my father died while he was still a young man, I was drawn to join my brother in Canada. The two of us in Canada were strangely moved and shaped by a Gospel we found compelling and irresistible.

Jesus promised that if anyone is thirsty let him or her come and drink from the water of life. Both Ernest and I drank deeply from that water. Both of us found that a relationship with Christ was life changing and deeply satisfying.

From somewhere deep inside my memory I remembered these lyrics from a Frankie Laine song:

*All day I've faced a barren waste  
Without the taste of water, cool water  
Old Dan and I with throats burned dry  
And souls that cry for water  
Cool, clear, water...  
Dan, can ya see that big, green tree?  
Where the water's runnin' free  
And it's waitin' there for me and you?*

Our two brothers who stayed put in Scotland remained distant from church and from God. I often ask myself why? It certainly wasn't because my brother and I in Canada had tapped into some special religious gene pool that my other brothers had missed. Why had God laid his hand on my heart and opened me up to a personal relationship with Jesus and God? Don't you sometimes wonder why life moves in its mysterious patterns? But that water does quench our thirst like no other liquid will. So nearly every Sunday during the silent prayers I remember my brother. I pray that they might get thirsty. Have you discovered your thirst yet? What about your brothers and sisters, your kids, your friends?

One would like to say that God blessed Isaac because he would prove to be a more obedient, more reliable son than Ishmael. Genesis will have none of this. Isaac's is recipient of the blessing

because of God's choice. He is the son of promise not Ishmael. The bible will record the Isaac story, not Ishmael's. God says this clearly to Abraham: *As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring.* The same promise is made to Hagar in the desert. And finally we are told that God was with the boy.

Certainly the isolation from Abraham's tents and the desert wilderness shaped Ishmael decisively. God says to Hagar: *He shall be a wild ass of a man, his hand against every man and every man's hand against him; and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen.*" (Genesis 16:12)

Ishmael grew up to be a man of the desert wilderness, with a wild and hostile attitude toward people, exactly as God described him to his mother before he was born. No doubt being isolated and left to carve out his own destiny within the hostility of warring tribes of the desert influenced his development. It was to stamp the character of the desert tribes to this day.

What hope do we glean from this story? Surely among other things that God's compassion and grace excludes no one. We are also taught that often God's timetable for our prayers is out of sync with ours. We pray and pray for people and nothing ever seems to happen. Yet the Hagar story reminds us that God always hears us. The Gospel promises that if we seek we will find, if we knock it will be opened, if we ask it will be given. Although Ishmael is not to inherit the promise of the covenant, even though he appears to be rejected and cast out, still he is recipient of God's care and blessing. It's true that the remaining biblical plot follows the family of Abraham through Isaac. And yet, Ishmael receives life giving water from God and the promise of God's favour.

Often the church is guilty of imposing its own standards of virtue and respectability as requirements for acceptance. Once we meet these standards, the church implies by its actions and attitudes, perhaps God will then offer grace and forgiveness. But the Ishmael story will have none of this self righteousness. God's grace has a breadth and a depth that far exceeds our limited human standards. There is great promise and encouragement for us here by this well in the desert.

The exile and his mother receive life giving water. May God grant that we too, regardless of how alienated from God we may feel, will discover the kindness and graciousness of God.

**Amen**