

Children of the Promise
Genesis 21:8-20; Galatians 4:21-31
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Last week we started a three week sermon series on the book of Galatians- the theme of this sermon series is “The Journey To Freedom” and last week Pastor Scott preached on chapter 3 of Galatians and next week will be concluding our series on Galatians Chapter 5... which means that this week I got the privilege of reflecting on Galatians chapter 4. To you this probably sounds completely innocuous- but as plans were coming into place for this particular sermon, I had to have a sort of prayerful discussion with God- my soul was a bit “you’ve Got to be kidding me!”. The reason for this soul filled discontent is that I had spent a considerable amount of time avoiding this very text of scripture. A slight background is that my former , which was a congregation on the inside of a prison in Washington State, was called Hagar’s Community Church- and so I spent three years of my life preaching in churches throughout Western Washington about Hagar. Now, Hagar is mentioned in three places in the Bible- Genesis 16 and 21 and Galatians chapter 4- and I never used the Galatians text to preach. I spent three years of my life avoiding Paul's interpretation of Hagar’s Story. You may have noticed that I generally love preaching a tough text, which I have chosen to do at Lewinsville several times- but this was one that I was generally happy to ignore.

So then in a Pastor’s meeting... I found myself in conversation with Scott and Jen, who both clearly felt called to explore the book of Galatians, I was a bit hesitant to say the least, but then when the cards fell in a way that I was clearly being led to preach from Galatians Chapter 4- I was like “okay God! ... I got it!” I will tell you that. This week part of my preparation for this sermon was to listen to different podcasts and sermons on this particular text while walking my dogs in the morning. And I did feel justified when one preacher stated “no one would ever voluntarily preach on Galatians chapter 4” which made me laugh out loud!! And not feel so bad about my hesitancy, but alas here we go:

The book of Galatians is a letter written by the Apostle Paul to a group of people he had converted to Christianity through his missionary efforts. What is noticeable in Paul's letter is that it is clearly written from a place of passion and frustration! Last week Pastor Scott referred to it as "Thunderous". In all of Paul's other letters he writes greetings and gracious introductions- which are noticeably absent in this letter. It almost feels that he sat down and feverishly wrote this letter... and didn't do a second read through before sending.... In my own life I have made the mistake of writing an email too quickly and hitting send, when it would have been more prudent to save it in my drafts and give it 24 hours and re-read before sending.

Paul is angry because he has learned that a different group of Christians in Galatia are teaching the congregation that belief in Jesus is not enough to be made right with God- that folks would also need to follow the Law- or the Torah. Specifically, males of the church would need to be circumcised. This issue was an active debate within the community of the first Christians. There was a council meeting recorded in Acts chapter 15 in which it was agreed upon that Gentile converts to Christianity would not be required to be circumcised. So when Paul finds out that the congregation in Galatia is being told otherwise he is broken hearted and angry.

Central to Paul's Theology and to the Book of Galatians is chapter 2 vs 16:

Yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law.

To be justified means to be declared righteous by God; to be righteous means to be declared in "right relationship to God"... before Jesus while under the law of the Torah... people had to do a lot of work to be able to approach God in the temple... there were many rituals that would make a person ritually pure... so that they could be in relationship to God. the Gospel of Christ... and central to Paul's message is that we have been freed of that... we are not made pure by our own works... rather we are justified and made right with God through our Faith in Jesus.... We learn the law of God not through trying to follow the law, but rather through the Holy Spirit who lives in us and guides us to love our neighbor and

ourselves.... And we know that the spirit lives within us when we produce the fruits of the spirit, not by close observation of the Law.

Which brings us to the particular verses from our text today in Galatians chapter 4 beginning with verse 21. In order to persuade his readers in Galatia that they do not need to be circumcised, Paul turns to a story in Genesis 21- The story of Hagar, Ishmael, Sarah, and Abraham.

In Genesis 21 we encounter what in itself can be considered a troubling story. Hagar is the slave of Sarah and Abraham, and earlier in Genesis she has a child with Abraham. Sarah and Abraham had been given a promise by God that they would have a child and be the mother and father of a great nation; however, they got impatient... or anxious... and rather than waiting on God's timing for the promise to come true, Sarah encourages Abraham to have a child with Hagar, her slave. Hagar does have a child who is named, by God, Ishmael- which means God Hears. In our Old Testament text today Sarah has had a child- as God has promised- who is named Isaac- and Sarah becomes concerned with inheritance. She is concerned that Ishmael will be treated as the first born child, and so she instructs Abraham to send both Hagar and Ishmael away, which Abraham does. Hagar and Ishmael are sent out into the desert, and right when Hagar thinks that they will die, an angel appears to them, provides water, and a promise that Ishmael will be the father of a great nation. Genesis 21 is a troubling story, but as someone said in Bible study this week, it could have been way worse! Because God is committed and loving to each individual in this story, things work out in way, and God's faithfulness is clear. This is the sort of story that assures us that no matter how messy life is God is with us in it, and is somehow working out God's purposes through the messiness of human life.

But Paul takes a troubling Story and somehow manages to make it more troubling. As one biblical scholar states "Paul makes a story that is already problematic on account of its harshness exponentially more problematic."

In order to persuade his Gentile followers in Galatia that they should not allow themselves to be circumcised, Paul takes the Genesis story of Hagar and Ishmael and turns it upside down. He presents the Jewish Christians allegorically as descendants of Hagar, as children born —according to the flesh, and —born into slavery, while his Gentile followers

are presented as descendants of Sarah, like Isaac —born through the promise, born into freedom as children of the promise.

This allegory is problematic in a variety of ways:

1. It dismisses Hagar and her plight as a slave with no power or agency. It paints Hagar as a product of her own sin and not the harm done to her by Sarah and Abraham. It also praises Sarah's idea to "cast Hagar out into the wilderness" as a good thing that should be copied by the Galatians.
2. Paul's argument is an offensive argument to Jewish people to insinuate that they are not a descendant of Sarah and Abraham would have been hurtful in its day- and continues to be problematic.
3. It does not take into account the context or narrative logic of the Genesis passage. Rather, Paul is using allegory as a rhetorical device- which means he is not attempting to explain or preach about the original story; rather, Paul is using a familiar story that the Galatians would have known well to win an argument.

So you may be wondering what do we do with this? Is there anything to be gleaned from Paul's words here? One Commentator I came across this week stated:

equally important as Paul's handling of the Old Testament texts is his continuous probing and pushing to get the Galatians to see the radical character of God's grace

Which I agree is important. When I sit with Paul's words to the Galatians I see someone who felt so passionate about God's grace, freedom, and inclusion of all people that he did not see the way in which his thinking was exclusionary. (let's remember that Paul had recently experienced a radical conversion in which his life was drastically changed). I think Paul was so passionate about God's inclusion that he got a little clumsy with his words. I think Paul's intention with his argument was to argue that all people are Children of the Promise and that there is nothing that anyone can do to earn God's love and redemption, that it is a free Gift from God, and maybe Paul would be shocked to hear that his passionate argument for inclusion throughout history had the impact of hurting and excluding some people. Paul might say... "no I'm arguing that all people- including Hagar and Isahmael are now Considered Children of the Promise!"

There is a concept that is very useful when attempting to navigate conflict resolution, the idea of a person's intent vs. their impact? **intent is what you have in mind when you decide to perform an action. impact is the result of those actions.** One's impact is not always necessarily the same as what you intended.

I think Paul's intention was to broaden and welcome all people into the family of God... but his impact and use of a troubling story in an allegorical way has created harm throughout the centuries.

How is this good news:

1. Let us use this text as a mirror, that scripture can be used in ways that can hurt other folks. So we need to be careful when trying to make the Bible say what we want it to say.
2. Let us be free to learn when our intent does not align with our impact and be willing to apologize when/ if we hurt others with our words, even if we intend something for good, let us be open to hearing how we can continue to broaden our view of others and how our actions affect them.
3. We are all Children of the Promise- which frees us to love ourself and neighbor through the spirit of Jesus, which also means that We are Free to engage the Bible in all of its tension. Like Paul, we can learn and mature in our faith and in our use of scripture.
4. Let us hear Paul's overall message which is that we are all Freed from Sin by the Grace and Mercy and Love offered to us by Jesus, that we are not saved by works, we are saved by Grace. So even when our impact does harm that we were not intending- we do not lose our salvation. Rather we just continue being beloved children of God who are maturing in our faith and in the ways that we love ourself and neighbor.

Friends, please join me in prayer

Gracious God, Thank you for your word and the truth that we are all children of your promise! That we are saved by your work in the world and that we are justified by your love and mercy. God help us to share that good news with all whom we encounter- may we see the world through your eyes and be renewed by your love for all people. Amen.