

A Sermon for the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost 2014 Proper 14A
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We've been reading the saga of Abraham and his descendents all summer long, but I've only addressed it from the pulpit once, when we heard the story of the binding of Isaac. With Joseph's story we're now at the fourth generation of this most famous of dysfunctional families. Because some of you haven't been here every Sunday, and because we skipped an important part of the story when we celebrated our name day two weeks ago, here's a recap of the story so far:

God makes a promise to Abraham and Sarah that they will be parents to multitudes, "a great nation," and remember that "nation" in the Bible does not mean a state, but a clan; a large extended family with common ancestors. The years go by, and Sarah is still childless. Not even one child, let alone a multitude. So she decides to take the fulfillment of God's promise into her own hands, and gives her slave Hagar to Abraham as concubine, with the idea that Sarah would then adopt Hagar's child and thereby start a nation.

However, when Hagar becomes pregnant, she starts sneering at the childless Sarah, who, in a fit of jealousy, beats Hagar. Hagar runs away but is sent back by God with a promise that her son will also be the father of a great nation. God tells her to name her son Ishmael, which means "God hears" and Hagar calls God "*el-roi*,"

which means “the one who sees.” But God also predicts that Ishmael will live at odds with all his kin.

And you thought your family had problems.

Well, Ishmael does not start out at odds. Abraham loves him dearly, and Sarah embraces him too, until Sarah, at long last, becomes pregnant herself. You will remember the story about how Sarah laughs at the idea that God would send her a child at her age, and when God does, she names the child Isaac, which means “laughter.”

When Isaac is weaned, at about age three or four in those days (no wonder Abraham and especially Sarah have a feast to celebrate), Sarah sees Ishmael – our translation says “having fun with” Isaac, but it must have been “making fun of” him, because she decides that Ishmael has to go.

Abraham doesn’t want to send Ishmael away, but God tells him to do what Sarah asks, and Hagar and Ishmael are sent into the desert. They run out of water and almost die, but God intervenes once more, showing Hagar a well right next to where she has laid down to die, and they survive to populate the Arab world, who claim Ishmael (and Hagar and Abraham) as ancestor.

The two families of Ishmael (“God hears”) and Isaac (“laughter”) do not, in fact, live in conflict, but then the prophecy could have meant that Ishmael would live “apart,” instead of “at odds.” At any rate, scripture tells us that Isaac and Ishmael

worked together to bury their father and Sarah when the time came, in tombs near the place where God first visited Abraham. Arab tradition holds that before he died Abraham came to visit Ishmael, who had settled near where Hagar found the well, and Abraham undertook with Ishmael to rebuild the damaged *Kabah*, the cube-shaped shrine said to have been built by Adam, in the center of what is now Mecca.

Isaac survives childhood barely, narrowly escaping sacrifice at his father's hand, and grows up to marry Rebekah, and they have twin boys. At this point the kind of rivalry that we were expecting from Isaac and Ishmael actually begins to happen, and it starts, we are told, while the boys are still in the womb. After a difficult childbirth in which Esau wrestles his way to firstborn status, the two boys, who are as different as can be in appearance and temperament, continue their rivalry, assisted by their parents, who each pick a favorite.

Jacob, who is his mother's favorite, manages to extort the inheritance and rights of his brother Esau, Dad's favorite, by refusing to feed Esau when he is starving unless he gives up his inheritance to Jacob.

When Isaac dies, Jacob and Esau go their separate ways, parting on not the best of terms. Jacob seeks a wife, and falls in love with the beautiful Rachel, but her father, Laban, being just as unscrupulous and manipulative as Jacob himself, extracts seven years of hard labor from Jacob to earn his bride, and then pulls a

switcheroo at the altar to marry off his older, and presumably less attractive daughter, Leah.

Jacob, for some reason, agrees to another seven years of labor to marry Rachel too. Eventually, Jacob is freed from his bondage to Laban, and he and his family return to his ancestral lands, but he is so afraid of what Esau will do to him that he sends a huge gift of livestock ahead of him to placate his brother before he crosses the river into his homeland.

The night before Jacob crosses the river, he sees a stranger in his camp, and in a weird echo of his struggles with his brother, he wrestles with the stranger all night long, and will not let go until he has received the stranger's blessing, hanging on even when his hip is dislocated. He gets the blessing, which includes a new name, Israel, which means "Wrestle with God" and the man formerly known as Jacob believes that he has just contended with God face to face and prevailed.

Israel and his family prosper back in their homeland, but Israel, just like his mother before him, makes a favorite of his youngest child Joseph, which, not surprisingly considering the family history, makes his brothers insane with jealousy.

Well, the thing that really drives them over the edge is not their dad's favoritism, but Joseph's insufferable personality. Here's the part of the story that was left out of the middle of today's reading:

Once Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. He said to them, "Listen to this dream that I

dreamed. There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright; then your sheaves gathered around it, and bowed down to my sheaf.” His brothers said to him, “Are you indeed to reign over us? Are you indeed to have dominion over us?” So they hated him even more because of his dreams and his words. He had another dream, and told it to his brothers, saying, “Look, I have had another dream: the sun, the moon, and eleven stars were bowing down to me.” But when he told it to his father and to his brothers, his father rebuked him, and said to him, “What kind of dream is this that you have had? Shall we indeed come, I and your mother and your brothers, and bow to the ground before you?” So his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind.

So the brothers contrive to get rid of their insufferable little brother, at first planning to kill him, but settling for selling him into slavery and telling their parents that he was killed by a wild beast.

I’m sure that this last part has been a temptation to many children in Sunday school, for the Abraham family is not the only one with sibling rivalries and family secrets and plots and intrigues.

I’m sure there are patches of dysfunction in most of your family sagas as well. But imagine if the whole world were still retelling the tales of your alcoholic grandfather and your crazy aunt with all the cats and the things you did to your siblings in childhood that you are really embarrassed about now three thousand years later.

For some reason, this particular soap opera of a family drama has been passed on and on to become the essential family narrative of more than half of the world’s population. Christians, Muslims and Jews as well as Baha’Is, Samaritans, Druzes,

Mandeans, Rastafarians and Babís all look to the story of Abraham and his descendants as, in some way, defining who they are and what their relationship to God is meant to be.

And in one way, all of the Abrahamic faiths except perhaps Baha’I have been faithful to our family history in that we have continued, through the ages, to participate in violent family rivalries as if God were Jacob and we were Jacob’s sons. We see it most recently in the horrific slaughter of Christians that has been in the news, but the history of the children of Abraham mistreating one another is a long and bloody one, going back even before Christian times, to the ancient rivalry of Jews and Samaritans.

But if this is our family history, what are we to make of it? If it is not to be a road map for an eternity of violent rivalry between members of the same family, both in our own families and in our global families of faith, what does it have to teach us? There isn’t one easy answer to that – people have been looking to this story to justify atrocities for thousands of years, and I don’t presume to be able to put an end to that from this pulpit.

But I will point out one thing worth pondering.

The story of Abraham’s family is not just the story of a dysfunctional family that has resonated with people enough that it has been told and retold throughout the ages.

It is also a story of our walk with God, a story that reveals that God's love transcends all of our dysfunction and jealousy and skullduggery and violence. God didn't choose Abraham or his descendants, all the way down to and including us, because any of us were perfect, or always strong in our faith, or always kind and generous and loving.

God chose us simply because God loves us, and God loves us, the story shows, even when we are almost unlovable in our jealousy or superciliousness or violence or favoritism or any of the innumerable ways that we fall short of our best, most lovable selves. Over and over again, generation after generation, the children of Abraham and Sarah blow it, choose violence and greed and self-importance over kindness and generosity and love, and over and over again God loves us anyway, and calls us back from hate, and reminds us that we are a great nation – not in the modern political sense, but in the ancient biblical sense – a great clan, a great family, joined by a common story, but more importantly, by the love of one God. And every time fear and violence begin to overshadow commonality and love, we must listen to God calling us back to the path of peace.

Amen.