

Advent 3
December 11, 2022

The Lessons:

Isaiah 35:1-10

Psalm 146

James 5:7-11

Matthew 11:2-15

The Hymns:

348 *The King Shall Come*

349 *Hark the Glad Sound*

849 *Praise the One...*

The Collect:

Lord Jesus Christ, we implore You to hear our prayers and to lighten the darkness of our hearts by Your gracious visitation, for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The Sermon:

This is My Son, Ishmael

Genesis 16:1-16

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar. And Sarai said to Abram, "Behold now, the Lord has prevented me from bearing children. Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her." And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her servant, and gave her to Abram her husband as a wife. And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. And Sarai said to Abram, "May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my servant to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the Lord judge between you and me!" But Abram said to Sarai, "Behold, your servant is in your power; do to her as you please." Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her.

The angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. And he said, "Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?" She said, "I am fleeing from my mistress Sarai." The angel of the Lord said to her, "Return to your mistress and submit to her." The angel of the Lord also said to her, "I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude." And the angel of the Lord said to her,

"Behold, you are pregnant
and shall bear a son.
You shall call his name Ishmael,
because the Lord has listened to your affliction.
He shall be a wild donkey of a man,

his hand against everyone
and everyone's hand against him,
and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen."

So she called the name of the Lord who spoke to her, "You are a God of seeing," for she said, "Truly here I have seen him who looks after me." Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; it lies between Kadesh and Bered.

And Hagar bore Abram a son, and Abram called the name of his son, whom Hagar bore, Ishmael. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram.

Dear Friends in Christ,

You may have heard of "Tiger Moms" who push their children to attain high levels of academic achievement, and of "Helicopter Parents" who are constantly hovering over their kids to make sure they do well in school. Well, apparently, their time is over. There is a new type of parent pushing their way through the schoolyard—and they will stop at nothing to ensure their child's success. Yes, the new style of parenting is called "Snowplow" parenting. These parents are intent on removing any obstacles in the way of their child, in order that their child does not have to face pain or difficulty on their way to success.

If their child struggles, "Snowplow" parents will take matters into their own hands and accomplish those challenges for their kids, thinking that they are helping their child without realizing the long-term consequences of their approach. I can understand this to some degree. For example, I remember getting impatient with my child when I have helped with homework. It would be much easier to give them the answer rather than have them struggle to get to the solution on their own.

We all tend to want to take matters into our own hands when something is not going quite right or taking too long. That's the situation in which we find Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 16.

Abraham had received the promise of God that he would be the father of many and that through his descendants God would bless the whole world. Abraham and Sarah both believed God's promise.

But that promise had been made years ago. Abraham and Sarah weren't young when God originally made it. They certainly weren't getting any younger. Plus, Sarah was still barren. Maybe they needed to take things into their own hands and force the issue.

So Sarah comes up with a plan. Maybe it was just Abraham that was needed for the promise to be fulfilled. She offers her servant, Hagar, to Abraham that he might obtain children from her. Abraham listens, and Hagar becomes pregnant. Their plan worked!

Or so it seemed. This situation only caused issues in the household of Abraham. Hagar, who was blessed with child, began to look with contempt upon Sarah, who was unable to conceive. Hagar's behavior got so bad that Sarah treats her badly in return, which caused Hagar to flee. But after that all gets cleared up and God convinces Hagar to return to Sarah, and Hagar gives birth to Ishmael, God makes it clear to Abraham in the next chapter that, despite Abraham's efforts, Ishmael is not the son that God promised.

“You will have a son by *Sarah*,” God tells Abraham, who is now one hundred years old, while Sarah is ninety. So Abraham replies, “Oh, that Ishmael might live before you!” Abraham is trying to demonstrate to God that he has already taken care of having a son. “No,” God says, “Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac.”

Abraham and Sarah did not have to take matters into their own hands to have a son and kick start God’s plan of blessing. God was going to take care of fulfilling *His* promise in His own way and in His own time.

When it comes to the blessings and promises of God, we also often think that we have to take matters into our own hands.

We imagine that we have to activate God’s promises by cleaning up our lives or showing Him how sincerely and earnestly we believe. We think we can manipulate God by our good works and force His hand to pour out blessings upon us. We become impatient with God as we wait for His promises to come to fruition, and so we try to take our relationship with God into our own hands and trust in ourselves to get the job done. In order to maintain our status as God’s children, we imagine that we’ve got to prove ourselves to Him over and over again.

We all tend to exchange the freedom of the Gospel for the slavery of the Law. Rather than living under the freedom of Jesus’ words “It is finished!” and trusting that it truly is, we live under the slavery of the Law, which says “Do more! Try harder!”

In the Book of Galatians, Paul repeatedly demonstrated the foolishness of this thinking. In Galatians 3, he writes, “For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse. . . . Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for ‘The righteous shall live by faith’ ” (Galatians 3:10a, 11).

In chapter 4, Paul supplements his argument with an illustration: the story of Hagar and Sarah. “Now this story may be interpreted allegorically,” Paul says. “These women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. . . . She corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother” (Galatians 4:24–26).

In other words, Hagar represents the Law given at Mount Sinai. All those who submit to the slavery of the Law are children of Hagar. They are Ishmaels. And what eventually happened to Hagar and Ishmael? “What does the Scripture say?” Paul asks. “ ‘Cast out the slave woman and her son’ ” (Galatians 4:30). Ishmael was not the son of the promise. He was the son produced by Abraham’s efforts, a work of the law. And he was rejected, as ultimately all will be who rely on the Law.

But God called Abraham and Sarah to trust in His promise and live by faith. God would take care of it. And though it seemed impossible, Sarah gave birth to a son, the son of the promise, Isaac.

“Now you, brothers,” Paul explains, “like Isaac, are children of promise . . . we are not children of the slave but of the free woman” (Galatians 4:28, 31). Those who live by faith, not by works, are also sons of the promise, sons of Abraham, and receivers of God’s blessings.

But it is not faith in Isaac that brings the blessings of God's salvation. **It is faith in the true Son of Abraham, the Son through whom the whole world is blessed, the Son whose work sets us free from slavery to the Law.**

As our loving heavenly Father, God removed any obstacle between us and our salvation because He knew we could *never* do it on our own, no matter how hard we tried. He sent His only-begotten Son into this world and called Him *Jesus*, for "He will save His people from their sins (Matthew 1:21).

This Son would also be born through miraculous circumstances, not through an old, barren woman, but through a young virgin. This Son would also walk up a mountain to be a sacrifice, but unlike Isaac, God did not stop the hands that placed a crown of thorns on the head of Jesus, His own Son, and plunged nails into His hands and feet. Jesus completed the work of the Law, suffered the consequences for our sins and lack of faith, and won our freedom as He declared, "It is finished!"

Jesus is the true Son of Abraham whose eternal blessings are received only by faith. "For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith," Paul writes to the Galatians and to you. "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. . . . And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to *promise*" (Galatians 3:26–27, 29).

You and I are sons of the promise, sons of Abraham, children of God, through the true Son of Abraham and Sarah—Jesus, the Son of God. In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.