

The Domestic Disputes of Quarantine

Genesis 21

A sermon preached by Zac Koons at St. Mark's on June 21, 2020

This week's reading invites us to reflect not on a virus, not on racism, or issues of state-sanctioned brutality, but on yet another defining feature of our quarantine days—domestic tension. Of course we haven't had any of that in my household, but I have heard that many others have. And it makes sense. We are with the members of our family more than we have ever been with them before. And we love them. Of course we love them. They are what we hold most precious in all the world. But somehow at the same time so help me if you don't put that clean laundry that I folded for you into the closet by the end of today I will set it on fire. Again, that's just an example I am taking from my imagination and has no correlating reality in my household.

The domestic dispute we read about from Genesis is a fight about children. Remember the context. God had singled out Abraham of all the people in the ancient world, had called him to leave his home, and to start a new family somewhere else, promising that he would make him into a great nation. For whatever reason, Abraham obeyed. And then nothing happened. They couldn't even have one child. "A great nation" must have sounded like a cruel joke.

Sarah had so given up hope of ever bearing children herself that she suggests to Abraham alternative means of producing an heir—her servant Hagar. And that works. Ishmael is born. But then of course we know what happens: Even though she left laughed in the face of the idea, Sarah does become pregnant in her old age, and gives birth to Isaac.

That's the context. Here's the drama: What do you do when the child your husband had with your servant which was your idea now threatens to supplant your son that you never planned on having as rightful heir and progenitor of a new nation?—something not all, but I would imagine most of us, can relate to. Sarah pressures Abraham to banish Hagar and Ishmael to die in the wilderness. Which he does. And they almost do. Out of water, Hagar can't stand to watch her child die, so she casts him under a bush and walks away. But God heard the voice of the dying boy and saves them both. And not only that, God tells them that his promise to Abraham still includes Ishmael. A great nation will be made of him too.

I see two mistakes that we might learn from in this story. They're the obvious ones. The first is Sarah's decision to cast out Hagar and Ishmael. The other is Hagar's decision to cast the child under a bush. Even though the events themselves come out of a different world than ours, the emotions underneath their decisions translate to our own lives easily enough. How many of us have been in Sarah's shoes—after years of determinedly clinging to hope for something, finally decided to give up hoping, and then over time felt despair harden into bitterness. Who among us hasn't used sarcasm to guard ourselves against earnest hope, because we know hope means the possibility of getting hurt again? What parents among us haven't struggled daily to know how best to look out for and protect our own children? What parent among us hasn't occasionally gone too far, and instead of reversing

course and asking for forgiveness have doubled down? How many of us, like Hagar, have been confronted with something tragic, and recognizing we can't do anything to fix it, have walked away?

But there is a deeper explanation for the mistakes that Sarah and Hagar make. They are theological mistakes. They are based on misunderstandings of God—of who God is and how God acts.

Let's start with Sarah. Emotions to the side, Sarah's theological mistake is that she assumes the rich inheritance God promises to Abraham can only apply to the firstborn. One cannot really blame Sarah for making this assumption. This is just the way inheritance worked in their ancient world. There was only so much to pass down and the firstborn would always get the best portion.

First of all, she misunderstands the nature of God's promise. God's promise to Abraham and his lineage doesn't have so much to do with material well-being. It has to do with blessing. The destiny of Abraham's descendants were to be God's people, a holy nation, a royal priesthood, so that through them, the whole world might be blessed as well. The world would look at Israel and see what the God of the Universe was really like. And that the whole world would then come to worship and be transformed by this God who created everything.

Sarah's second misunderstanding is that the things that God gives exist in a zero-sum reality. Sarah assumes this story is playing out in the worldly economy of scarcity. Not the divine economy of abundance. God isn't offering Abraham money or material possessions. God isn't even promising Abraham happiness. Actually, the rest of the Old Testament while itself a witness to the fulfillment of God's promise, is not at all a witness to Israel's happiness. God's blessings are of a different kind. God's blessings can make you holy. God's blessings are faith, grace, forgiveness, love, mercy, and justice. And of those things, God has an infinite amount. The things God gives multiply when they are received and passed on. That's Sarah's theological mistake.

Hagar's theological mistake more simple: She runs away from suffering rather than to remain present to it, even if there's nothing she can do to fix it.

The proof that these are theological mistakes is made clear when we hold these decisions up to the life of Jesus. Jesus is the abundant economy of God in action. Multiplying five loaves into bread enough for thousands. Healing blind, lame, and leprous. Forgiving seventy-times-seven. Never hoarding, always sharing. And Jesus is God clearly and once for all showing the world that his approach to the world's suffering is not to run away from it, but to enter into it himself, to feel our pain from the inside out.

I know what you're thinking, we have ventured a long way from the domestic disputes of quarantine. How is any of this helpful? Honestly I don't really know. I'm sure there's something, but that's not really what I wanted to talk about anyway. This was a bit of a bait and switch sermon. These theological mistakes have everything to do with the conversations going on in our country about racism. And they have everything to do with how God is calling us to navigate this pandemic.

A fundamental assumption of our world, and particularly of this moment, is scarcity. There is not enough information available. Not enough science. Not enough wisdom. Not enough trust. Not enough money. Not enough jobs. Not enough resources. Not enough good leaders.

This can be a good moment to remember God's promise to Abraham is a destiny we have been granted into as the church. We are blessed to be a blessing. The things we need most in the world—the things that we need for our lives to ever more be shaped into the image of Christ—none of those things have been taken away. God's forgiveness, grace, love, mercy, kindness, and justice. God's Spirit present with us.

And these are things that we can and must share with the world. Especially right now. This is not a moment for us to batten down the hatches and to make sure only our nuclear families are taken care of over against everyone else. What we have been given, we shouldn't hold tightly. We cannot, like Sarah, operate out of fear. This is a moment for us to live into God's economy of abundance.

Last fall, when we were doing our annual stewardship campaign, I mentioned that one of our priorities was to increase our budget for mission and outreach. The vestry set forth the audacious goal of doubling that number. We didn't quite get there, but I was still proud of us. We were able to increase it 50%. But then everything changed with this pandemic we realized we needed to dig deep and adjust our budgets so we could give away even more. We invited you to give even more. And now, not only have we doubled the money we're giving away to local outreach organizations on the frontlines, we have tripled it. And we're not stopping anytime soon. That is just one example of what it looks like to be blessed to be a blessing.

But this is not a "just realize how lucky you are" pep talk. That's why Hagar is important. We cannot stop at just giving money, which is something easy to do from a distance. We must listen to the voices who are crying out in pain. This is as relevant to conversation about racism as it is to how to respond to the virus. These are both huge, massive problems, the solutions to which are massive and complex and overwhelming for us to face. They are things we can't fix on our own. Which is why it would be easy to cast them under a bush and look the other way. We as Christians have a responsibility to resist that temptation.

Even though we can't fix them, we can choose to be present to the pain and suffering of others. And simply being present can start to change things in our own heart. And changing things in our own hearts is the first step towards changing things in the world. Actually that's probably a pretty good place to start with your domestic disputes too.

Amen.