

June 21, 2026  
Proper 7A  
Trinity, St. Louis  
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

*Genesis 21:8-21*

*Psalms 86:1-10, 16-17*

*Romans 6:1b-11*

*Matthew 10:24-39*

In the Name of the Holy and Undivided Trinity. Amen.

This morning, I want to spend some time thinking about origin stories, and how certain stories, or parts of stories, or a weaving together of stories become touchstones of our identity. For each of us, our origin stories answer the question, “who are your people?”

Origin stories get passed on to the next generation. As school kids, we learned the stories of *some* of our founders, whom we considered to be heroes. Those stories have become part of our national, if partial, mythology.

There has always been a tussle about whose stories get told. Today, that tussle is turned all the way up to 11, with the enormous might of the federal government focused on erasing the stories and identities of those considered by some to be unchosen – often by so-called Christians seeking to use a narrow and simplistic reading of some of the Bible to justify their tribalism and hatred.

So, it might come as a shock to them (and perhaps to us, as well) that, in turning to the stories of our ancestors in faith, one finds tale after tale about some seriously messed up people. There are exceptions, of course, folks we would consider mostly upright before God – Noah, Moses, Lot, Ruth, Deborah, the prophets, to name a few.<sup>1</sup>

But the Old Testament is not a collection of stories about Hebrew heroes. The story of the Hebrew Scriptures is about how God saved the Children of Israel in Egypt, called them into covenant relationship, bestowing upon them the gifts of law and land.

God does all these things not because of who the Hebrew people are, but because of who God is. The Old Testament, then, is a set of anti-heroic books, showing the many ways God continues to save the people in spite of their, or our, flaws.

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Over the past couple of weeks, we have listened to a lot of stories about Abraham and his family. The lesson we just heard is from a part of the Book of Genesis that has been traditionally called the “patriarchal history” — a series of stories about

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<sup>1</sup> See also the list in Hebrews 11:32-33.

Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the founding fathers, so to speak. But, as I pointed out recently, no one can be a patriarch on his own, so this section could perhaps better be known as the “ancestral history.” The arc of these stories is the promise to Abraham and his partners, to make from them a great nation, and to lead them into the land of promise.

So, this deeply disturbing story of Hagar and her son Ishmael seems out of place in this narrative of Abraham’s descendants and all those promises. But there is something profound about the fact that it’s in the Bible at all. Because this is a tale of a mother and child who are expelled from Abraham’s family and fall outside of that narrative, which is also ours. At the same time, they never fall outside the scope of God’s love and providential concern.

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We have to turn back a few chapters to make sense of what happens in today’s reading between Abraham; his wife, Sarah; her maid, Hagar; and two boys, Ishmael and Isaac, both Abraham’s sons.<sup>2</sup>

Way back in chapter 16, Sarah was frustrated and impatient about being childless, and decided to give God a helping hand, proposing a solution that sounds like a modern-day soap opera, but which was, at the time, considered both morally and legally acceptable.

Sarah would surrender her personal maid, Hagar — an Egyptian— to Abraham’s bed. If Hagar conceived, the child would be considered Sarah’s. When Hagar ends up giving birth to a son, Ishmael, the problem of an heir seems to be solved. But in this biblical version of “All My Children,” the problems of this family are only just beginning.

When Sarah gives birth to her own son, Isaac, according to the promise God had made (in chapter 18), the plot thickened. She grows jealous of Hagar and Ishmael, and determines to send her rival packing. Abraham is brokenhearted – after all, Ishmael is his son, too. But in the end Abraham yields to Sarah’s jealous pique. In an odd note, God assures Abraham that he can take this step in good conscience because God has plans for both of the children.

Abraham rises early in the morning to provide bread and water for Hagar and Ishmael and sends them on their way. Hagar heads south, towards her home in Egypt, but she gets lost in the wilderness. Soon, all the water is gone; she and the child are both parched with thirst. Hagar knows they are doomed, and she knows that the child will

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<sup>2</sup> This telling of the Hagar & Ishmael story owes a great deal to the Rev. Julia Gatta’s 2023 sermon *God Saves Us Despite Our Rebellion*.

die first. She cannot bear to watch, but she cannot bear to leave him, either. So she places Ishmael under the shade of a bush, keeping watch from a distance.

God hears the cries of Ishmael and Hagar. An angel speaks to Hagar as a voice from heaven, with the same words of assurance that angels always use: "Do not be afraid."

The angelic voice insists that Ishmael (whose name means *God hears*) has a future, a remarkable future. As the story ends, Hagar finds a well nearby to slake their thirst. In the course of time, she finds a wife for Ishmael among her own people in Egypt. For the Hebrews, Ishmael's descendants were their neighbors to the south, the Bedouin people. For Muslims, Ishmael is their ancestor, not Isaac who is the ancestor of Jews and Christians.

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So, why this story? The patriarchal (or, the ancestral) history in the Old Testament does not glorify the ancestors; it glorifies God. The story of the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael is not a tale of people at their best. Abraham is weak-willed – and no one's idea of model for a Fathers' Day card; Sarah, doubtful of God's promise, is conniving and spiteful. The story of the chosen people is interrupted by this story of those who were not "chosen," yet loved all the same.

Ishmael and his descendants were not the people of the covenant as we have inherited the story, but they were a people beloved of God, a people with a future and a divine destiny. God sends an angel to Hagar to save her and her son, Ishmael, just as later [next week], God would send his angel to Abraham to save his other son, Isaac. God rescues people in the middle of the hot mess of their lives: in dysfunctional families where children are caught in the crossfire, in communities where shrill voices preach rejection and spew hatred at other children of God.

One of the lessons of this disturbing story for us is that God *sees* and *hears* those of God's children who are cast aside by the cruelty of injustice. It is a central theme that runs through the entire biblical record. Today, the Psalmist sings, "In the time of my trouble I will call upon you, for you will answer me" (Ps.86:7).

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So then, do we leave it to God, confident that God will do all the answering? Are "thoughts and prayers" ever a sufficient, faithful response to injustice, and those scarred by it?

A few years ago, the Bishop of Minnesota, Craig Loya, wrote this to his clergy: "Human families and communities, even (maybe especially) those called into covenant with God like us, can be profoundly dysfunctional and cruel. God stands, cries out

with, and extends God's promise to those who are pushed aside without abandoning the covenant family in all of our fumbling sinfulness. But the story's promise also comes with the command that we, too, see and hear, stand with and act for, those who have been cast aside and discarded in the wilderness."<sup>3</sup>

This sounds like an enormous task, doesn't it? This command to repair the world? To achieve what is in Hebrew called *tikkun olam*? What if it gets screwed up? What if it doesn't go the way you think it should? What if you realize you've been mistaken about something or someone for a long time? What if you fail?

It is now the preacher's task to remind you, in the words of a first century Rabbi, that "It is not your responsibility to finish the task [of repairing the world], but neither are you free to desist from it."<sup>4</sup>

One of the ways to participate in the repair of the world is to listen to and learn the stories of others. When you do so, you help weave a fuller story for all of us. Where to start? Anywhere. I have been on a particular journey of stitching together pieces of my childhood in St. Louis after living elsewhere for forty-five years.

Here at Trinity, there is Kate Worland's marvelous contribution to the pre-history of this building that started life in 1891 as St. James Memorial Church, honoring the life of 16-year-old Lulie Simmons, and its migration from the Greater Ville (Cote Brillante and Goode [now Annie Malone Dr.])<sup>5</sup> to this spot in 1910. Trinitarians came to this spot in 1935, after our own migration from points east.

The movements of both building and parish were in response to what our history decorously calls "population shifts." An even deeper dive into local history is Walter Johnson's *The Broken Heart: St. Louis and the violent history of the United States*.

If these stories are well known to you, the month of June is busting out all over with stories of those whose lives have been lived outside of the narrow boundaries of the story of our perceived chosen-ness. It's Pride Month; Juneteenth celebrations surround us; in two weeks, we will mark the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Declaration of Independence.

Hearing the stories of others can be difficult; reactions of shame and defensiveness are common. As we walk together as a people of faith into these summer days of national and family celebrations, with all their stories, heard and unheard, I leave you with Bishop Loya's compassionate and wise charge:

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<sup>3</sup> The Rt. Rev. Craig Loya, June 23: Weekly Message to ECMN Clergy.

<sup>4</sup> A saying by Rabbi Tarfon in the *Pirke Avot* (Ethics of the Fathers) 2:21.

<sup>5</sup> Providentially, this location is just two blocks from Jaden's Diner, my go-to soul food place.

“Like our matriarchs and patriarchs in Genesis 12-50, our covenant family in the church can be deep with dysfunction, rent by conflict, with countless casualties of our known and unknown sins. I know all of you see it in our larger story as a church, and you feel it in your own ministries and congregations. Just as God does not abandon those who are pushed to the margins, God does not abandon us in our broken, sinful, and inadequate efforts. I hope you’ll see your own known or imagined failures [through] the compassionate and loving gaze of God, and I hope you’ll remember ... that our core work as disciples is always to see, hear, and act for those who have been cast into the desert wilderness of our communities and our world.”

As the Psalmist reminds us, “For you, O LORD, are good and forgiving, and great is your love toward all who call upon you” (Ps 86:5).

In the Name of the God of all of our stories. Amen.