



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Pentecost 3
Proper 7 (A)
June 21, 2020

RCL: Genesis 21:8-21; Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17; Romans 6:1b-11; Matthew 10:24-39

Genesis 21:8-21

Outside of the book of Genesis, the word “Abraham” appears in the Bible 142 times. Compare that with Sarah, which appears 24 times, and Hagar who only appears 3 times—once in Baruch and twice in Galatians. Given that father Abraham is remembered for the covenant God makes with him to provide descendants as numerous as the stars (Gen 15:5), it seems strange on the part of the biblical authors to ignore Sarah and Hagar, without whom Abraham would have no descendants.

The author paints a picture in today’s story of a jealous Sarah who casts out a helpless Hagar into the wilderness with her young son. Hagar, a servant girl, was forced against her will to have sexual relations with her master, bear him a son, only to be cast by her master’s jealous wife into the wilderness -- where she and her son will surely die of thirst. Human jealousy, pride, and ambition pit these women against one another. God, however, remains faithful to both Sarah and Hagar. Hagar calls out to God, and God provides water and makes of Ishmael a great nation. Through Sarah and Isaac, God makes another great nation. In today’s world, we see over and over nation pitted against nation as we fall trap to the sins of jealousy, pride, and selfish ambition. Perhaps through remembering that God loves and cares for us even when we fall into sin, we can seek to create a world where we love all nations as family.

- Look at Gustave Doré’s famous engraving of Hagar in the Wilderness. Does this image change the story for you in any way? How might you depict the story of Hagar and Ishmael?
- Where in your life have you been jealous of the accomplishments of others? How might God transform that jealousy?
- What does this story teach us about modern political diplomacy?

Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17

In Psalm 86, the psalmist calls out to God for help against enemies (this becomes far more apparent when we include verses 11–15 which the lectionary leaves out). The psalmist follows a familiar pattern of petitions for God’s help, followed by words praising God before asking for deliverance from enemies and moving into thanksgiving even before God provides help (Ps 86:12–13, BCP). The psalmist believes so surely in God’s goodness that he thanks God even before the prayer has been answered.

The most important verse of this psalm has been removed from today's reading: "But you, O LORD, are gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger, and full of kindness and truth" (Ps. 86:15). This is a direct quote taken from Exodus 34:6 where God, speaking to Moses, reveals that I AM is a God who loves mercy over anger. The hope of favor the psalmist holds is not a blind hope like I hold when I say, "I hope I win the lottery." This hope comes from God's own mouth. The psalmist teaches us that when we pray and call upon God for help, we should reach deeply into our scriptural tradition to see how God has worked and is working in the world. Then we can call out with faith and hope to the God who has "helped me and comforted me" (Ps. 86:17).

- What "enemies" persecute you or your community?
- What insights do you gain from the scriptural witness?

Romans 6:1b-11

This poetic passage from Paul's letter to the Romans beautifully summarizes for us the mystery of Holy Baptism. Baptism, especially as it has been made part of public Sunday worship in the 1979 Prayer Book, is a time for the whole church to rejoice in the addition of new members into our community, which is the Body of Christ. Given that in our tradition we practice infant baptism, most of our baptisms carry the double joy of also celebrating new life and growing families.

I certainly do not mean to suggest that the church should not celebrate the births of babies within our churches, but Holy Baptism has nothing to do with earthly birth, and everything to do with death to self and birth into a new way of being. Just as Paul reminds us so beautifully in this biblical song or canticle, through our baptism we, like Jesus, die. In the practice of full-immersion baptism, a person literally goes under water where they are incapable of breathing—death. Rising up out of the water under the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, the person takes a new breath as they emerge from Jesus' death into Jesus' resurrection.

This is good news! We are no more slaves to sin, but we have a new life in Jesus. We are no longer slaves to death, but we have eternal life in Jesus. Alleluia!

- What aspects of death are in our baptismal liturgy?
- What aspects of birth are in our baptismal liturgy?
- What does full participation in the Body of Christ look like? How might we order our lives if we remain conscious of the fact that we are part of the Body of Christ?

Matthew 10:24-39

One common complaint against Christianity brought up by atheists is the problem of theodicy—why does an all-powerful, loving God allow terrible things to happen in the world? This criticism only holds up, however, if one buys into the common misunderstanding, professed by many Christians, that Christianity is a religion of sunshine, rainbows, unicorns, and puppy dogs, completely devoid of suffering and pain.

Readers of Matthew's gospel know that the in-breaking of God's kingdom comes with much pain and suffering.

Today's reading begins with Jesus reminding us not to fear the oppressors of this world, but to fear God. Written against the backdrop of the oppressive Roman Empire, Matthew offers words of comfort to worshippers of God that the reign of God is being uncovered. Jesus empowers us to stand in opposition to our oppressors, proclaiming the peace and love of God, yet Jesus is not naïve enough to think that our oppressors will simply give up. Proclaiming the Good News will always make those in power uncomfortable, and sometimes that even means people in our own families.

- When have you disagreed with someone in your family about politics or religion? Were you able to resolve it? If so, how?
- What issues in your local community might be informed by your being a follower of Jesus? How might you proclaim God's justice in places of oppression?

This Bible study was written by Charles Lane Cowen in 2017.

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