

# God's Grace and our Mistakes

Hespeler, June 25, 2023 © Scott McAndless – Baptism

[Genesis 21:8-21](#), Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17, Romans 6:1b-11, Matthew 10:24-39

**A**s I think most of you have realized by now, there are two things that I am committed to doing in my preaching that may sometimes clash with one another. First of all, I have committed myself to preach every week from the lectionary, a 3-year-long cycle of readings that are used in many churches.

But I am also committed to our practice of when we celebrate an infant or child baptism here at St. Andrews, we focus all of our worship on that day on that very important and blessed event. That means that I want to preach, in this case, about Oliver and his family and the important spiritual step that they have taken here among us today. This is actually my favourite thing about baptism Sundays, and I always look forward to it when the occasion arises.

But I am sure that you can see where the problem might come from. The people who choose the lectionary passages don't know and don't much care about when we celebrate a baptism. So, there's really no way of making sure that the passage we read on a given Sunday is going to have anything to do with what we are doing during the service.

## A Promising Start

So, it was with much trepidation that I opened up the readings for this Sunday, wondering how they might help us to talk about what we have done here this morning. And I read the first few opening words and I breathed a big sigh of relief. **"The child grew and was weaned, and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned."**

I mean, isn't that just perfect? The passage opens with almost the exact situation we are celebrating today. A child has reached a certain age – and it is probably about exactly the age the Oliver is today because they would have weaned their children at a somewhat later age than is common today. And obviously, in that culture, that was considered to be the perfect moment to gather friends and relations and the whole community and just celebrate the birth and the early life of this young child.

That is so much like what it is that we have come together to do today. We are celebrating Oliver, this wonderful symbol of new life and hope for the future. We are celebrating all of his potential and lifting up our prayers for his future. I am quite sure that was almost exactly what Abraham and Sarah were doing for Isaac on that wonderful occasion that they had organized.

## It All Falls Apart

But, if I was thrilled with the first sentence of our passage this morning, my enthusiasm soon waned. Because, after just one sentence of the best intentions and the most wonderful of celebrations, it all falls apart, doesn't it? That's all



we get, just one sentence. After that, almost everything about this seemingly perfect family that could possibly go wrong does.

Isaac has an older half sibling named Ishmael. And Isaac's mother sees the two boys playing together and she kind of freaks out. Now, whether her concerns are valid and Ishmael had been playing inappropriately with the boy, we are not told. I don't know whether Ishmael has done anything wrong, but we certainly do know that things sometimes happen between siblings – maybe especially half siblings – that create great stress within families.

But, as is often the case, it is not what the kids do, it is how the parents overreact that creates the real crisis and problem. Sarah is so upset that she demands that Ishmael and his mother be thrown out of the family altogether! Now, I know very well that mothers are protective of their children. Her knee-jerk reaction of kicking Ishmael out is just wrong, but in her anger she could just not be thinking straight. She is just human, after all.

Parents are just human – that is a radical thought and just hold onto it for a moment.

## Can Abraham Save the Day?

So, Sarah has a bad reaction. This would obviously be a wonderful opportunity for her husband, Abraham, to step in and maybe calm her down and help her direct her anger in a more helpful direction for everyone. But, of course, it is at this point that Abraham fails, in my mind, even more tragically than his wife.

We are told this about Abraham's reaction: **“The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son.”** So, Abraham knew it was the wrong response. He was distressed about it. And I want to say, first of all, poor Abraham, right? Poor, poor Abraham! Don't you feel bad for him? He started out this day ready to celebrate and now it has turned out like the worst day ever and he is all distressed!

But wait a minute, who cares about Abraham's feelings? What are they compared to a mother and son who are just about to be turned out into the desert with nothing more than a loaf of bread and a skin of water? But, of course, Abraham is the hero of the whole story. I guess we just have to focus on his feelings.

So, while Abraham absolutely has the power to do something about the tragedy that is about to unfold, he doesn't do it. I guess you might say that he just sends his thoughts and prayers without actually doing anything other than gathering the skin of water and loaf of bread.

## Parental Failure

In case you haven't picked this up from my comments so far, I am trying to say that I'm not overly impressed with the actions of the parents in this story. Sarah fails. Abraham fails. The only one who stands up and does the best she can for her child is the most powerless among them, Hagar. But such are the limitations of her power to do anything at all, that she gives in to despair and practically gives up hope. I can't really blame her for that either.

So, here I am with this Bible passage that starts out wonderfully reminding us of what we are celebrating today, but then quickly devolves into a tale about a deeply, and I mean deeply,

dysfunctional family. How on earth can this offer me anything constructive to say to Oliver and his family today?

Well, I am very aware of all of the stresses and strains that are on families these days. You all have these amazing expectations being piled on you. You have to be these perfect parents. If you are like most parents – if you are like I was as a parent of young children – you put that expectation on yourself as well.

## Failed Expectations

Every time that you don't react like you think you should, every time you discipline too harshly or not firmly enough, every time something bad happens to your child and you can dream up some obscure way that you could have stopped it from happening, you just won't forgive yourself. And of course, it is even worse when you have people all around you telling you what they think you are doing wrong, which is often the case these days.

So, if you ever feel bad about your parenting or other choices in life, this story in Genesis stands as a wonderful reminder that parents are just human, and they all make mistakes. And, in fact, no matter what you get wrong as a parent, chances are that its effects will be nowhere near as bad as the mess that Abraham and Sarah, those great biblical examples of parents, made of their family.

## There is Grace

But there is more than that going on in this story – something that should give encouragement to us all. There is grace. Hagar and her son Ishmael are treated terribly in this story. But despite that, Ishmael does alright. **“God was with the boy,”** it says, **“and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness and became an expert with the bow. He lived in the wilderness of Paran, and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.”**

So, despite all that was done to him, Ishmael is able to find his way in the world. Now, should Abraham and Sarah be given credit for Ishmael's success in life? I don't think so. If he succeeded, he obviously succeeded in spite of them. And I hardly think that, later in life, he looked back fondly at that skin of water and loaf of bread that he received from his father thinking that it gave him a good start. But he came through despite a lack of his father's support and despite the fact that his mother Hagar had so little to work with.

But that is the nature of God's grace. Whenever we fall short or fail to live up to our best intentions, God has a way of bringing about good results in spite of us. That is the good news that every single one of us needs to hold onto whenever we feel as if we fail or fall short. God does have a way of taking even our worst mistakes and bringing something good out of them. I can't tell you how often that has given me comfort when I look back at the mistakes I made as a parent, in my work and in the advice I have given.

## A Caution

But there is one caution that I would put on that truth. While it is always good to trust in God's grace, we must never use it as an excuse to walk away from our commitments and responsibilities. And that is exactly what I see Abraham doing in this story.

We are told that God actually spoke to Abraham saying, **“Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you. As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring.”**

I don't know about you, but I am always suspicious when I hear somebody claim that God told them to do something that really only benefited themselves or was just the easiest and most trouble-free course for them. In my experience, people who do that have always misunderstood or taken the promises of God out of context.

Sure, Abraham knew that his God was committed to his family and his offspring and that that included Ishmael. Of course God would take care of the boy. Of course God would make a great nation of him. That was the fundamental truth that Abraham heard from God.

I don't necessarily mean, by the way, that Abraham actually heard the voice of God reverberating from heaven. The Bible is quite clear that God speaks in various ways, and it doesn't necessarily have to be audible. But however he received the message, Abraham heard correctly; God's commitment to the boy was unshakable.

But I don't believe that Abraham correctly heard the implications of that truth. It was just easier for him to believe that it let him off the hook and that he didn't need to resist the evil thing that Sarah wanted him to do.

## Getting Advice

Lisa and Steve, we are so thrilled to be able to celebrate you and your family today. We honour your choice to raise children at a time when lots of young couples are finding that it is too expensive or too challenging. We know that the path that lies before you will not always be easy, but it will always be worthwhile because your family is an expression of your love.

I know from personal experience that in the years to come you will be surrounded by people who are going to want to tell you how to raise your children. Some of that advice will no doubt be wise and helpful. Some of it will, frankly, just be somebody trying to make themselves feel good by trying to convince you that you're doing everything wrong.

I understand that most people mean well when they try and give advice to parents, but the honest truth is that they often only manage to make parents feel as if they're wrong no matter what they do.

So, I'm not going to try and give you any advice today. Just follow your instincts. Follow the love that I know you carry in your hearts. Will you always get it right? Of course not. Nobody does. But love will take you so far. And above all, take comfort in the truth that we have affirmed here today. God is committed to your child. God has some amazing plans for him, plans that you can't even dream of yet. So, trust in that. God's grace will meet you and your family where you need it most.