

Sunday 14th August 2011

10 a.m.

Laurieston Parish Church
Morning Worship

Welcome/Notices

Introit: Let all the world in every corner sing (Hy. 122)

Call to Worship

HYMN 160: Praise, my soul, the King of heaven

Story Time

HYMN 190: Art thou afraid his power shall fail?

O.T. Reading: Genesis 21: 9-21 *Hagar & Ishmael* p. 20

Prayer of approach and confession

The Lord's Prayer

N.T. Readings: 1 Corinthians 1: 26-31 *Power & Wisdom* p. 206

Luke 13: 22-30 *The Narrow Door* p. 97

HYMN 286: Tell our, my soul

Sermon: *Tales of Terror: Hagar & Ishmael*

HYMN 724: Christ's is the world in which we move

Offering

Choir Voluntary: I will sing the wondrous story (MP 315)

Prayer of dedication, thanksgiving & intercession

HYMN 470: Jesus shall reign where'er the sun

Benediction & Sung Amen

Welcome/Notices

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Introit: Let us with a gladsome mind (Hy. 93)
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Call to Worship:

*I prayed to the Lord and he answered me;
he freed me from all my fears.*

*The oppressed look to him and are glad;
they will never be disappointed.*

*The helpless call to him and he answers;
he saves them from all their troubles.*

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HYMN 160: Praise, my soul, the King of heaven
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Story Time

- ◆ Mal was a big lad for his age. He was only about 15 or 16, but he was broad and strong; swarthy, with a deep, husky voice
- ◆ he could be quite scary if you didn't know him; because underneath he was as soft-hearted as they come
- ◆ he was great with his wee brother; who was thirteen years younger than he was; and wee Zac just doted on him; it was hero-worship big time.
- ◆ He followed Mal around everywhere he went - his girlfriends weren't too pleased, but Mal didn't seem to mind
- ◆ He played games with Zac; told him stories; took him fishing and hunting; they kicked a ball around together; Mal would be a horse and let Zac ride on his back; they both loved the rough and tumble games.
- ◆ the only problem - well, not so much a problem as a complication - was that they weren't full brothers, they were half brothers. They had the same father, but different mothers

- ◆ the boys weren't worried about that; the father wasn't particularly bothered, but the two women couldn't stand each other.
- ◆ It all went back to how the boys had been born. And boy, was it complicated.

- ◆ Abraham was married to Sarah; they'd been married for years, had been trying for a baby all that time and nothing happened. They were desperate; they'd wanted a big family, Sarah's biological clock was ticking, and it looked as though the family line was going to end with them.
- ◆ They had arranged with a servant to look after them in their old age, so that was OK - they had plenty money - but no-one to leave it to. It was heart-breaking, and shameful somehow
- ◆ Then Sarah had what seemed like a brilliant idea. It wasn't new - other people had done it - but it was a still a bit controversial and, as she found out later, very risky. But at the time it seemed like the answer to all their problems.
- ◆ She'd get one of her servants to be a SURROGATE for her. Hagar the Egyptian would do fine: she was young and strong. She could have a child with Abraham; he would adopt the baby and it would be just as if it - sorry, he - was Sarah's own. Hagar wouldn't mind - she wasn't paid to mind. She was paid to do what she was told.
- ◆ So she told Abraham her plan; sent him off to Hagar's tent (no artificial insemination in those days) and he did what had to be done.
- ◆ Hagar got pregnant right away, and that was the first problem. Sarah hadn't reckoned on just how hurt and angry and jealous she would feel when this foreigner - her servant - a nobody - managed to do what she had been trying to do for twenty years without success - give Abraham a son.

- ◆ Who knows if Hagar really was laughing at her; but it seemed to Sarah as though she was. Everywhere she went, she saw this girl, and her bump, getting more obvious every day. Abraham was as pleased as punch; she knew she should have been, but all she could feel was a burning anger and shame.
- ◆ It all blew up one day, and she went to Abraham and told him what she thought - how Hagar was mocking her; looking down on her; how it was all his fault (poor soul, he'd only done what she told him to, but that was long forgotten), and what was he going to do about it
- ◆ Well, Abraham was an old man. He'd long since worked out that the way to have a peaceful life was to let Sarah do what she wanted - she'd do that anyway. So he said, "You deal with it, darling - do whatever you like." (He was a bit of a wimp!)
- ◆ And Sarah, by this time, was beyond all reason. She was probably depressed. And she took out all her bitterness and resentment on the young girl, Hagar, who had no-one to look out for her - no-one to fight her corner, since Abraham had opted out.
- ◆ And eventually she couldn't stand it any longer. She packed up what she had - not very much - and set off for home in Egypt.
- ◆ But Egypt was a long way off; there was no way she could make it across the desert on her own, even if she hadn't been pregnant. She would have died of thirst, if she wasn't attacked by animals or bandits.
- ◆ She was resting beside a spring of water when a stranger came over to her. She was scared at first, but he clearly wasn't going to do her any harm. He seemed to know who she was, and asked her where she was going (which he must have known already).
- ◆ He told her to go back to her mistress, but not in a nasty way. He managed to convince her that it would be OK. She would have a son, and lots of grandchildren and great-grandchildren. It wouldn't all be plain sailing, but it would be OK

- ◆ So she went back to Abraham and Sarah; and Mal was born. Then 13 years later, incredibly, along came Zac - Sarah's own child, born long after she was past having children. It was a miracle - quite literally - but also a bit of a worry for Hagar. What would happen to her and Mal now that Sarah had a son of her own? It all depended on Abraham, who was now very old, and hadn't been much use in the past.

- ◆ It was fine for the first couple of years, and the two brothers got on so well together. Mal had endless patience with Zac, and Zac hero-worshipped his big brother Mal.
- ◆ Then one day, when they were playing together, and Sarah was watching them, all her old anger and jealousy came back.
- ◆ Off she marched to where old Abraham was having a snooze. She launched straight in before he'd even properly woken up, "That woman has got to go - her and her son - send them away. They're not getting a penny of your inheritance."
- ◆ Well, Abraham couldn't see the problem. He loved both his sons. They'd all been living happily enough together for 16 years, after the early incident when Hagar ran away and came back. He had plenty land, plenty money - there was more than enough for two sons to share.
- ◆ But he'd never been any good at standing up to Sarah, and at the age of 103, it wasn't the time to start learning. So, with a heavy heart, he got up the next morning and told Hagar she had to go. He gave her some bread, and a leather water-skin, and sent her out, away from the camp, back into the desert.
- ◆ Poor Hagar. It was like history repeating itself. Her big lad Mal was still her baby, and she could do nothing to protect him. The water was finished; they had nothing to eat; the sun was beating down on them; they had nowhere to go; no-one to help them. He was crying like a baby, and it was more than she could bear.

- ◆ She went and sat where she couldn't see him, and he couldn't see her, and she started crying - softly at first, then loud, bitter sobs. This was worse than before, because she had thought the worst was over, that it was actually going to be OK, then her hopes were dashed a second time. Last time, her baby hadn't been born yet; now she knew him; she loved him; she couldn't bear to lose him.
- ◆ And when she was at her very lowest ebb, suddenly the stranger appeared again - the same one as before. It had to be an angel. This was God speaking to her, saying almost the same as before....
- ◆ almost, but not quite. This time there was no instruction to go back to Abraham and Sarah. That door was closed. But again, the reassurance. 'It will be OK'. Your son will grow up and have children of his own - he'll be the first of a great nation.
- ◆ And again, there was water in the desert. A well that hadn't been there before - or at least, she hadn't seen it.
- ◆ She filled up the water-bag. Gave the boy a drink.
- ◆ Mal never saw wee Zac again, and he was sorry about that. But he grew up fit and strong. He became a great hunter. He married a girl from Egypt, his mother's country, and had lots of children, as did Zac, back in Canaan.
- ◆ Tradition has it that Zac - or Isaac's descendants became the Jewish nation; and Mal - or Ishmael's children were the founders of the Arab nations. And both are revered among their peoples to this day.

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HYMN 190: Art thou afraid his power shall fail?

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O.T. Reading: Genesis 21: 9-21 *Hagar & Ishmael* p. 20

One day Ishmael, whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham, was playing with Sarah's son Isaac. Sarah saw them and said to Abraham, "Send this slave and her son away. The son of this woman must not get any part of your wealth, which my son Isaac should inherit." This troubled Abraham very much, because Ishmael also was his son. But God said to Abraham, "Don't be worried about the boy and your slave Hagar. Do whatever Sarah tells you, because it is through Isaac that you will have the descendants I have promised. I will also give many children to the son of the slave woman, so that they will become a nation. He too is your son." Early the next morning Abraham gave Hagar some food and a leather bag full of water. He put the child on her back and sent her away. She left and wandered about in the wilderness of Beersheba. When the water was all gone, she left the child under a bush and sat down about a hundred yards away. She said to herself, "I can't bear to see my child die." While she was sitting there, she began to cry. God heard the boy crying, and from heaven the angel of God spoke to Hagar, "What are you troubled about, Hagar? Don't be afraid. God has heard the boy crying. Get up, go and pick him up, and comfort him. I will make a great nation out of his descendants." Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well. She went and filled the leather bag with water and gave some to the boy. God was with the boy as he grew up; he lived in the wilderness of Paran and became a skilful hunter. His mother got an Egyptian wife for him.

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LET US PRAY:

Creator God, you made us in love and for love, but you set us to do our loving in a world full of hazards for the unwary - or rather for the immature and insecure, which means all of us at one time or another.

Our minds can be love's enemy, when they tell us of slights and insults that may or may not be real; when their delicate balance is upset, and we are pulled down into depression where we cannot love ourselves, far less believe that anyone else might care about us.

And sometimes it is our hearts that lead us astray; blinding us with passion; pulling us hither and thither from one emotion to another.

Love can be threatened sometimes by forces outwith our control: the norms of society; the rules of faith that tell us who and how to love. And poverty can get in love's way; and illness and death.

God, we celebrate love's power to endure through all these hazards and dangers. We rejoice that marriages can and do last for even the longest of lifetimes; that parents can and do go on loving their children no matter what; that politicians can and sometimes do act for the good of their people, out of love and not self-interest; that situations of violence and hatred can grow acts of selfless generosity and forgiveness.

God, we thank you for those special people who have shown us what love at its purest and finest can be; and we feel for those who have fallen short of love's ideal.

We feel for Sarah, in her desperate unhappiness, her unfulfilled longing, her irrational jealousy and her cruel rage.

We feel for Hagar, in her powerlessness; her love for her son and her fear for him; in her loneliness and her strength.

We feel for Ishmael, loved and pampered in his early years, then suddenly rejected in favour of another child.

And for Isaac, unwitting catalyst for a maelstrom of emotions that must have had an effect on him in later years.

We feel for poor, weak Abraham, wanting a quiet life and to keep everyone happy... loving both women and both his sons in his own way... forced to choose between them.

God, you have shown us in Jesus what pure love can achieve and how much it can cost. We cannot live up to that ideal, but with your help we can come closer to it, and so we pray that you will nurture the seed of love planted in us long ago and help it to grow.

Open our eyes to see the people that so easily go unnoticed; the extras in life's drama. Help us to love those who are difficult to like; those who may not love us in return.

May our love be impartial, unselfish, unwavering - as Christ's was. May it be a source of life and hope and healing for our troubled world - as Christ's was, and is and always will be.

And hear us as we pray together now, in the words Jesus taught:

Our Father, who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come.
Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread
And forgive us our trespasses (*debts*)
as we forgive those who trespass against us. (*our debtors*)
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,
For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory for ever. AMEN

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N.T. Readings: 1 Corinthians 1: 26-31 *Power & Wisdom* p. 206
Now remember what you were, my friends, when God called you. From the human point of view few of you were wise or powerful or of high social standing. God purposely chose what the world considers nonsense in order to shame the wise, and he chose what the world considers weak in order to shame the powerful. He chose what the world looks down on and despises and thinks is nothing, in order to destroy what the world thinks is important. This means that no one can boast in God's presence. But God has brought you into union with Christ Jesus, and God has made Christ to be our wisdom. By him we are put right with God; we become God's holy people and are set free. So then, as the scripture says, "Whoever wants to boast must boast of what the Lord has done."

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N.T. Reading: Luke 13: 22-30 *The Narrow Door* p. 97
Jesus went through towns and villages, teaching the people and making his way toward Jerusalem. Someone asked him, "Sir, will just a few people be saved?" Jesus answered them, "Do your best to go in through the narrow door; because many people will surely try to go in but will not be able. The master of the house will get up and close the door; then when you stand outside and begin to knock on the door and say, 'Open the door for us, sir!' he will answer you, 'I don't know where you come from!' Then you will answer, 'We ate and drank with you; you taught in our town!' But he will say again, 'I don't know where you come from. Get away from me, all you wicked people!' How you will cry and gnash your teeth when you see Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and all the prophets in the Kingdom of God, while you are thrown out! People will come from the east and the west, from the north and the south, and sit down at the feast in the Kingdom of God. Then those who are now last will be first, and those who are now first will be last."

HYMN 286: Tell out, my soul

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Sermon: *Tales of Terror: Hagar & Ishmael*

I had a fascinating taxi ride about ten days ago. It was longer than it should have been, because the driver thought he was taking me to Laurieston in Edinburgh, not Laurieston in Falkirk. I didn't realise until we were almost at Ingleston, because I was so busy concentrating on what the man was saying.

He was a Moslem - possibly of Pakistani origin - with quite a strong accent, and because he knew I was a minister, I was treated to a long discourse on religion, including comparisons of the Bible and the Qu'ran. I was pleased to be told that I am, in fact a Moslem, because the word means someone who is trying to obey God's commands.

He covered everything from Adam and Eve through original sin to substitutionary atonement (though he didn't those words). I was particularly interested to hear his take on the story of Abraham, with his two wives and two sons.

The Qu'ran includes the story of God testing Abraham by telling him to sacrifice his much-loved son. In the Hebrew Bible, the son is named as Isaac, and that is the story that we, as Christians have been told. In the Qu'ran, the son is not named, but my taxi driver, like many Moslems, is convinced that it must have been Ishmael. Abraham was being asked to give up that which was most precious to him: surely, the taxi driver argued, that would be his eldest son - not Isaac, but Ishmael.

Isaac is traditionally the founder of the Jewish race, and Ishmael of the Arab line. So this illustrates how the same story can be told

and heard very differently according to the perspective and interests of the hearer.

When I was studying history at school, we were just beginning to move away from learning long lists of dates and facts. That was why I became interested in it, and went on to study it at university. It was more to do with interpretation and understanding than rote learning of information. But there was still quite a lot about kings and queens, armies and commanders.

We were only just beginning to do what is much more common now, and which makes some fascinating books and TV documentaries, which is to look at history from the underside. Not just what was happening to kings and courtiers, but also what life was like in the palace kitchens or the dungeons; for soldiers in the trenches; for servants in the houses of the rich and famous.

There has been a parallel trend in Biblical interpretation: not just looking at the stories of the great heroes (Abraham; Isaac; Moses; David; Jesus; Paul), but also at the minor character; reading between the lines, and asking the crucial theological question, "How was God dealing with/ relating to/ caring for them?"

It's the sort of thing we do instinctively when we hear the story of the Prodigal Son and feel sympathy for the elder brother, who never did anything wrong, and gets told off for being childish when he complains about not getting a party.

There was an important movement in the Roman Catholic Church in Latin America in the 1970's, which turned the usual style of Biblical interpretation on its head. Instead of intellectuals and academics, priests and bishops telling the people what the Bible meant, poor people started reading it for themselves. No

commentaries, no Greek and Hebrew dictionaries, just listening to the stories and imagining themselves in the place of

- ◆ the Hebrew slaves in Egypt, longing for freedom;
- ◆ the wandering exiles in the wilderness, longing for a home;
- ◆ the crowds of sick and anxious people who came to Jesus for healing;
- ◆ the lepers, tax-collectors and ritually unclean who were welcome at his table.

Black and Asian Christians discovered that Jesus wasn't blond-haired and blue-eyed after all. Feminist theologians started reading stories from the woman's point of view, and not always the heroine. Phyllis Trible's book, "Texts of Terror" includes the stories of Hagar; Tamar (who was raped by her brother); an unnamed concubine (who was given to the mob in a similar incident to the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, was raped, killed and her body sent round the land in pieces); and Jephthah's daughter (killed because of a foolhardy vow made by her father).

It's a fascinating trend, and one for which there is a fair bit of justification in the Bible itself. As I said last week, there are many different visions of God within the Bible, which is, of course, not one book but many. These are not all consistent or compatible with each other, far less with what we would see as the definitive revelation of God in Jesus. But a consistent strand is God's care and concern for those who are weak, neglected or oppressed, and cannot look after themselves.

One of the trickiest aspects of the Bible is Israel's notion of itself as the chosen people, which is still causing acute problems and violence in the Middle East today. But in certain places it is made clear that Israel is chosen not for any special strength or worth, but because of what God can do through her for the entire world:

she is to be a light to lighten the Gentiles. When Israel is in trouble, God helps her (that is the pivotal story of the Exodus), but when her leaders are oppressing their own people, he steps in on behalf of those being exploited (that is the context of Ezekiel's description of God as the Good Shepherd). Jesus consistently takes a special interest in lepers, tax-collectors and the ritually unclean, and when he is challenged about this socially unacceptable behaviour he says, "Those who are well do not need a doctor, but those who are sick. The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

The story of Hagar and Ishmael is troubling in many ways, but it is nonetheless remarkable in a Jewish text to see God depicted as caring for Hagar, and making provision for her and her son just as for Sarah and Isaac. Ishmael's is a different story, to be followed through elsewhere, but it is not a less important one.

Everyone - including the minor characters in life's drama - is of equal importance to the God who made and loves every one of his children, and calls on us to do the same.

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HYMN 724: Christ's is the world in which we move

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Offering

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Choir Voluntary: I will sing the wondrous story (MP 315)

I will sing the wondrous story
Of the Christ who died for me,
How he left the realms of glory
For the cross on Calvary:
Yes, I'll sing the wondrous story
Of the Christ who died for me,

Sing it with his saints in glory,
Gathered by the crystal sea.

I was lost; but Jesus found me,
Found the sheep that went astray,
Raised me up, and gently led me
Back into the narrow way:
Days of darkness still may meet me;
Sorrow's paths I oft may tread;
But his presence still is with me,
By his guiding hand I'm led:

He will keep me till the river
Rolls its waters at my feet;
Then he'll bear me safely over,
Made by grace for glory meet
Yes, I'll sing the wondrous story
Of the Christ who died for me,
Sing it with his saints in glory,
Gathered by the crystal sea.

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LET US PRAY:

Our God, we bless you for the special care and compassion we believe that you have always shown for those whom we are most likely to ignore or disregard.... your watchful protection of your people when they were slaves in Egypt, and that same protection shown to Hagar, an Egyptian slave.

We are grateful for and fearful at the same time of your anger, directed at those in power who exploit the weak; the rich who ignore the poor; religious people who say all the right things

about you while failing to heal the sick, comfort the sad, visit the prisoner, welcome the stranger in your name.

As we pray for our world today, we think especially of those whom history is unlikely to remember by name:

- ◆ families on the long, desperate march from Somalia to... who knows where?
- ◆ young children caught up in violence because they have not been shown any other way to live;
- ◆ vulnerable people abused by those charged with caring for them: doctors; nurses; teachers; parents; religious professionals;
- ◆ people caught in the trap of poverty, with no hope of escape.

Loving God, we celebrate the hope that is ours in Christ; the assurance that every child born - each person who lives and dies, however long or short their life may be, however memorable to us - is known to you and loved by you.

We acknowledge love's power to bring hope to the bleakest of situations, and give thanks for those who have been lifted out of despair by a kind word or a loving action.

We pray for those who find it hard to believe that they are loved, or loveable:

- ◆ because they did not have the stability and security of loving that they needed and deserved in their earliest years;
- ◆ because they are different in some way, and feel the weight of other people's fear and judgement.

We pray for those for whom love has become a heavy burden to bear:

- ◆ because it is not returned, perhaps;
- ◆ or has been betrayed, or turned sour;

- ◆ or because they have lost the one in whose eyes their own loveliness was reflected.

Gracious God, we cannot read the stories of Jesus, or claim to be his people, without accepting love's cost as well as its reward. Help us to be faithful, as he was, to the way of costly, self-giving love. May we give generously, forgive readily, hope steadfastly, love unconditionally - and so be one with Christ and with all your faithful people in that fellowship of love which nothing can destroy, through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN

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HYMN 470: Jesus shall reign where'er the sun

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Benediction:

The blessing of the God of Sarah and Abraham,
the God of Ishmael and Hagar;
the God of older sons and invisible mothers;
The blessing of the vulnerable God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
rest upon you and remain with you all
this day and for evermore.

Sung Amen

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