

“THE GREEN-EYED MONSTER”  
GENESIS 21: 8-21

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University Church of Chicago

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Many years ago I had the privilege of serving as pastor of a church of which the Smith sisters were members. Smith, of course, is the most common name in America, followed closely by Jones, then by Williams and Johnson. This Smith family, however, was anything but common. The three sisters, Miss Bertha, Miss Virginia and Miss Annie (we’re talking about the South here—thus “Miss” was part of their identity and you never, ever called them by their first name without the previous appellation) had all served as missionaries of The Methodist Church—Miss Bertha and Miss Virginia in Korea and Miss Annie in China and the Philippines. Now they were in retired status from what was then known as the Board of Missions of our denomination and quietly tilled a large farm.

Their brother Wesley and his wife would come to visit from time to time. Wesley was a both a physician and an ordained Methodist minister and he and his wife had served for over 30 years as missionaries to China before the Great Revolution had run them out. They had a son who at that time, almost 40 years ago, taught religion at Massachusetts Institute of Technology and had written a book, *The World’s Religions*. His name was Huston Smith and both he and the book have now become classics.

I spent a memorable Thanksgiving Day with the Smith clan years ago, and I still vividly remember the conversation while all the turkey, dressing, gravy, sweet potatoes, pumpkin pie and whipped cream tried to settle. Huston began talking about his book, and he casually walked us through the world’s major religions, citing one or two characteristics of each which made that faith unique.

Islam, he reminded us, penetrates every aspect of a Muslim’s life. Everything is lived under God’s scrutiny and Muslims pray every day. Of Hinduism, he admired the complexity of their faith, the way it gives reality new meaning. Buddhism draws an important distinction between goodness and badness and living a good life or a bad life. Judaism embraces the highest ethical and moral standards and holds a unique understanding of the relationship between God and humanity.

I waited for him to talk about his own faith, about our faith, about what is unique and noteworthy in Christianity. When I asked, he replied, “Christianity is unique in its focus upon, its demand for forgiveness.” Jesus is constantly depicted as saying to people you and I would either ignore or think past healing or redemption, “Your sins are forgiven.” He demanded that his followers practice forgiveness not for seven times but for 7 times 70. He died on the cross forgiving those who killed him.

When you look at what Jesus taught, it was not new. Hardly a word of his sayings is not grounded in the part of the Bible we call the Old Testament or the ancient teachings of the Jewish sages and rabbis and prophets. The God of the Bible is the same throughout: a God of judgment as well as grace, hiddenness as well as revelation. What makes Jesus unique is that he lived a life of humility, truth, obedience, love and hope in all their fullness.

At the heart of the story in Genesis 21 is divine forgiveness and the lack of it, the need for it and the forsaking of it by the people involved in the story. To understand the story, one must go back five chapters in the book, realizing, of course, that the earliest storytellers didn't divide their tales by chapter and verse. These are tales about people like you and me, people who know about jealousy and mistrust, denied hopes and deferred dreams, broken hearts and fractured lives.

When Sarah, Abraham's wife remains barren and God's promise of many heirs doesn't seem to come true, she recognizes that God does not act alone, that God acts through human choice, so she makes a deal with Hagar, the Egyptian woman who is her servant. "God has kept me from having children," she tells Abraham, "so you go in to my slave-girl; it may be that I shall obtain children by her." Sarah certainly knows that God has promised *Abraham* offspring, but not necessarily by *her*. At the same time, she wants children she can call her own. To accomplish this, she makes a self-sacrificing move. She not only encourages a sexual relationship between Abraham and the Egyptian woman but allows her to command equal status as Abraham's wife.

Sarah has often been depicted by male interpreters of the Bible as a conniving, jealous woman who interferes with God's plan and then has to pay for it. But the custom of sharing a husband is also given similar status in the story of Rachel and Leah, the wives of Jacob, the grandson of Abraham and Sarah, and in fact God approves of the arrangement (ch. 30: 6, 18). She believes that God works through human agents and she is working to do God's will.

Moreover, look at Abraham in the story. He's an oaf, a milk toast, a do-nothing who enjoys the privilege of loving two devoted women at the same time. The ultimate male fantasy! He does nothing in this story. He's a wimp. He doesn't even speak—until the green-eyed monster of jealousy raises its ugly head when Hagar begins to develop—the Hebrew word is *qalal*—haughtiness, contempt for Sarah. Whereupon Sarah says that Hagar must go; she, Sarah, after all is wife number one. Again Abraham acquiesces. He just says to Sarah, "Your servant is in your hands. Do with her whatever you think best."

Hagar leaves, goes into the same desert where Israel would wander several generations later, encounters an angel of God who persuades her to go back by promising her that God's will is yet to be revealed in all these circumstances. That leaves Hagar and Sarah with Abraham. The baby is conceived and delivered, Abraham and Hagar's son, Ishmael. If this sounds like "Days Of Our Lives," it has all the components. But there is yet one more surprise.

Sarah conceives and delivers a son. She's 98 and Abraham is 100! So they name the boy Isaac, "Son of Laughter," because she says, "God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me" (21: 6). Twenty-five years have passed between God's promise and divine deliverance, a quarter of a century of waiting for God to make the Covenant real. Is it any wonder that Abraham and Sarah and Hagar had conspired to force God's hand? "Everything depends on the power and loyalty of the promise-maker," declares the foremost Old Testament scholar of our time, Walter Brueggemann. "Surely it is in direct reference to this that Paul can say, 'It is not as though the word of God had failed' (Romans 9:6). That is the faith issue which [we must face]. The word of God is scandalous. It never comes to fruition as we expect it."

Now the three conspirators are thrust into a new, even more complex and perplexing situation. Sarah sees the son of Hagar playing with her son Isaac, on the very feast day that Isaac is weaned from his mother's milk. She demands that Abraham throw Hagar and Ishmael out because "the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac." Imagine Abraham's anguish: both of these boys are his sons. To cast his own son and the woman who also has enjoyed the status of his wife into the forbidding, desolate, unyielding desert is unbelievably cruel.

We spend a lot of time on the next chapter of Genesis, the one in which Abraham almost sacrifices Isaac. We reflect on the moral dilemma, the anguish of that moment when Abraham is confronted with the utmost paradox of obeying God's will. But this story is fraught with as much doubt and fear as the other. Yet, some such move must occur if the sons are to shape their separate futures consistent with God's choice (17: 19-20). God is at work in a larger picture than any of the characters in the drama can comprehend or understand. God chooses to work through complex situations and imperfect human beings in order to accomplish the divine purposes.

There's a kind of divine craftsmanship apparent in these Genesis stories. Like anybody who works in an imperfect office, factory, school or laboratory, God works with what is available, and the only material God has in this story are some troubled, angry, jealous people. It's evident that God does not perfect people before deciding to work with them. God allows Sarah's strategy in kicking out Hagar, the Egyptian slave and her son Ishmael. We are given the gift of choice, to be imperfect agents of God's will.

In most congregations there are a number of people who apparently think they are perfect and are good enough to stand in judgment on the rest of us, telling us how to act and think and behave. You don't find such folks in the Bible. The reality that the Bible affirms over and over again and the call of God is that we do not live as isolated individuals. We live in community. And of all the instruments of God's will in the world, don't you think the church should be one place where community and covenant are upheld, practiced, cherished?

Abraham, Sarah, Hagar, Ishmael and Isaac don't know how things are going to turn out, what will be the results of their actions. God knows but God doesn't tell. We are given clues, but all Abraham knows for sure is to do what God tells him to do. So in this

heartrending scene Abraham obeys God's command and trusts in the divine promise, leaving the future of his son Ishmael in God's hand. While Abraham is lamenting what he must do in casting out Hagar and Ishmael, he voices his confidence that God will provide.

The most poignant part of the story comes when Hagar goes into the wilderness of Beersheba and puts the boy under a bush, several hundred yards away (a bowshot's distance, the writer declares) because she says, "Do not let me look on the death of the child." God hears the voice of the boy and answers her prayers. Water is provided, promise is made.

This story should give us, the people of God, the opportunity to recognize and rejoice that God's saving acts are not confined to our community alone. God's acts of deliverance occur out and about in the seemingly godforsaken corners of the world, even among those who may be explicitly excluded from good, middle-class congregations. We Americans are primarily consumers, and I don't mean just what we buy and own. For one thing we are consumers of religion in all its various manifestations. From New Age spirituality to mega-churches like Willow Creek to "contemporary" worship with rock bands and drama groups, we try it, use it, discard it.

The story of Sarah and Hagar and their two sons is not about jealousy after all. It is about trust. There's a big difference between religion and faith. A lot of people in this church, like all churches are quite "religious," but they don't trust God. They worship, they serve on committees, they give some money, they lend their talents, they know what they think they believe. But assent to truth is not the same as faith. The Biblical understanding of one who has faith is that that person trusts God.

This is a story about people who take matters into their own hands because they don't trust God's promises. Like Abraham and Sarah, our task is not just to remember who we are but also to remember the One who has made promises. Also, it depends whether and to what extent we can bring forth from memory the stuff out of which hope is made. The authenticating test of the remembrance of things past is its capacity to help decipher the always-indistinct present and to point a way into the future. In every Eucharist we experience that remembrance.

Yesterday was the birthday of Jose Rizal, the doctor, prophet, statesman, poet who is the spiritual father of the Philippines. Dr. Rizal was executed by the Spanish on December 30, 1896, when he was just 35 years old. The Spanish in all their cruelty made it a public spectacle so that everybody would know that the revolution against their despotic rule was snuffed out. Rizal was dead. Now they, the Spanish, could control the islands, the sugar, the commerce, the people.

But what they thought was an end was really a beginning. By executing Jose Rizal, the Spanish unleashed an even greater revolution that drove them out of the Philippines. Unfortunately, they were replaced for more than half a century by the United States and it

took decades of misunderstanding and colonialism to give the Filipinos what they had always wanted: freedom and self-governance.

Our lives are like that. Many incidents that we think are a beginning are really an ending and many parts of our lives that we consider an ending are really a new beginning. God is in charge of the universe, and God's plans are providential beyond our understanding.

Isaac is a gift to be explained in no other way than as a wonder. Ishmael is a child gotten by skillful determination and planning. They are like the two sons in Our Lord's parable (Luke 15:11-32). One son, the older obeys the rules and deserves much. He is like Ishmael. But the younger son receives life as a gift. But God is free in both. God's freedom is not limited by barrenness, old age or laws of inheritance. God alone has power to make new.