

“Do Not Be Afraid”  
Morgan Park Presbyterian Church  
Pastor Ben Heimach-Snipes

Goodmorning! My name is Ben and I am the pastor of Morgan Park Presbyterian Church.

This week we continue the narrative of Abraham in the book of Genesis and Jesus in the book of Matthew. As we continue reading, consider, who do you connect with in the story this week? Who are we called to be in this narrative? It is just as complicated as our own lives.

Genesis 21:8-21

Matthew 10:24-31

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Have you ever been cast out? Have you ever been turned away - judged to be unworthy or unclean? Have you ever been betrayed by someone you thought you could trust?

In our story from Genesis today, our biblical heroes, Abraham and Sarah, celebrate that their son Isaac, promised to them by God, successfully survived infancy. At around one hundred years old, Sarah - who had laughed at the idea of getting pregnant when God first proposed it - delivered a baby boy and nursed him until he was old enough to eat solid food.

It is at this celebration of all that God had promised that Abraham and Sarah perpetrate their most criminal act. They cast out Abraham's only other child, Ishmael, and his mother Hagar, members of their family, into the wilderness. Cast out into the desert without proper supplies of food and water nor care for where they might go. Sentencing these beloved family members to a painful and demoralizing death alone in the desert heat.

In the midst of this terrible crime, God was with them. God spoke to Abraham to assure him he did not need to be distressed by his own abusive actions. God was going to bless Ishmael and protect him after being cast out by his family.

God was with Hagar, the slave, as she prepared for her child's death and her own in the wilderness. Just like so many prophets and kings called by God in scripture, Hagar receives this greeting from the angel of the Lord, “Do not be afraid.”

Do not be afraid of losing your life. Do not be afraid of your God. Do not be afraid for the safety of your child. You have been called by God for a specific purpose.

One moment Hagar is filled with anxiety, anger and tears - breathing heavy with a clouded mind that had given in to the reality of death in the wilderness. In the next moment “God opened her eyes” and she was able to see clearly: There was a well and an abundance of life. This

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wilderness of scarcity was transformed into a shelter of abundance where Hagar and Ishmael could call home. Ishmael could grow up to fulfill God’s call of having descendants that could become a great nation.

Millennia later, the Prophet Mohammed would connect his lineage back to Ishmael and follow his own calling, establishing Islam as a new world religion. This week marked the end of the sacred month-long fast in Islam called Ramadan. As Imam Islam Hassan of the Islamic Society of Vermont reflects, “Ramadan is a month that is based on the concept of the community. Muslims have the habit of inviting friends and families and community members (Muslims and non-Muslims) to share their evening meal together. It’s similar to that of thanksgiving dinners, but it goes on for 30 Nights.” This period is marked by acts of charity and a reinforcement of community bonds.

In our national context, millions of Muslims participated in the fast of Ramadan, an act that celebrates the abundance of life in community, and yet they experience being cast out into the wilderness every day. Hate crimes and travel bans make the prospect of living as a Muslim in the United States very uncertain. These new anxieties overlap with the old anxieties to blur any clear vision of life - and in this context the discipline of fasting allows for a connection with God - a connection with community.

“Do not be afraid.” The angel of the Lord said to Hagar. “God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water” in the wilderness.

Jesus, too, was cast out. Our beloved baby Jesus was hunted down by King Harod, perhaps for reasons not so different from Abraham and Sarah’s need to control who would inherit God’s blessing. Having grown up in exile, Jesus speaks to his disciples about how to survive as an outcast in the wilderness of the Roman Empire. Jesus speaks to them about how to follow God’s call even after being cast out of community.

As Jesus sends the disciples out into the villages of Palestine, he says to them, “Do not be afraid.” He knows the real dangers awaiting them - the behaviors of the reactionary ruling class who might be threatened by their spiritual and moral renewal; family members turning against each other, feeling as though tradition was being abandoned.

But just like Hagar, the disciples’ eyes would be opened to God’s abundance. They would feed five thousand followers with five loaves of bread and two fish. They would trust strangers to house them and feed them and heal all who came to them without requiring merit of any kind. All would be welcome in the community of Jesus, and around Jesus a new community - a new family - would form. This family is what we would call the church.

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Last Monday was the celebration of Juneteenth, the oldest known celebration commemorating the ending of slavery in the United States. On June 19th, 1865, Union soldiers, led by Major General Gordon Granger, landed at Galveston, Texas with news that the war had ended and that all enslaved people were now free. This was two and a half years after President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation had become official.

Even with nowhere to go, many freed slaves felt that leaving their plantations would be their first grasp of freedom. North was a logical destination - as for many it represented true freedom, while the desire to reach family members in neighboring states drove some into Louisiana, Arkansas and Oklahoma. Settling into these new areas, including Chicago, brought on the challenges of establishing a new status for Black people in the United States. While slavery had ended, the system of racism that had socially enforced slavery for centuries remained intact.

Millions of African Americans were cast out into the wilderness without any provisions. Oh how brave were these ancestors who created community - created family - around them in order to survive and thrive in the wilderness of white supremacy. Local governments, banks, landlords and health care providers all functioned on racist policies that extracted wealth and power from the African American community.

God said, "Do not be afraid." God was with them. God opened their eyes.

This week, the US Senate Republican leadership came out with a new health care bill. According to Time Magazine, "The Congressional Budget Office estimated the House bill would reduce the federal Medicaid program to cover about 14 million fewer people by 2026, a 17 percent reduction. Governors of both parties have warned Congress that would mean a cost shift to states that undermines coverage for the vulnerable. Larry Levitt of the nonpartisan Kaiser Family Foundation said, "Low-income people will end up paying higher premiums for plans that have bigger deductibles."

We are Cast Out of our relationships, cast out of our places of employment, cast out of our families of origin, cast out of our houses of worship, and cast out of our social safety nets. For some, this sanctuary may be the only place where the fear of being cast out subsides long enough to take a non-anxious breath. And for some, even this place may cause a lingering concern that we may be cast out all over again.

God says to us today, "Do not be afraid." God is with us. But what does that mean to a community that sometimes straddles the line between Abraham and Hagar?

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To biblical scholar, Cain Hope Felder, "Jesus was not so much concerned with traditional family arrangements as he was with the in-breaking of the Kingdom of God and how this anticipation required a new kind of household."

What is this concept: The Kingdom of God? Martin Luther King Jr. called it "The Beloved Community." It is the central purpose of Jesus' ministry and teaching. It is God's love and justice lived out in human relationships and human systems. It is God's heaven - God's Kingdom - built on earth with human hands. It is a kingdom formed using the tools of love and grace instead of brick and mortar. It is a kingdom that is both already here and not yet complete. Already here in the message of Jesus and the glimmer of love that we find in our relationships. The kingdom is not yet complete as human brokenness still invades our lives through violence, hate and suffering which casts us out from community and removes us from right relationship with God.

Jesus creates the beloved community, a new divine family, from a collection of society's outcasts at the margins of ancient Jewish society; "women, children, slaves, tax collectors, prostitutes, paralytics, the blind, epileptics, the mentally ill, and even Gentiles." Each was invited into this new family with abundant grace. Jesus forgives each and finds compassion to love them as they are.

Have you ever felt loved like that? Love without limits? Love without preconditions?

As the church, we are called to be the new kind of household that Jesus created - the kingdom of God - the Beloved Community. We are called to be a collection of outcasts - both aware of our brokenness and yet not defined by it. We are called to care for each other's wounds, unfazed by the taboo nature of letting them out in the open. We are called to bring everything into the light. We are called to advocate for the poor. We are called to be a place for healing. What gifts do you bring to this sanctuary of healing?

The world continues to make outcasts, and yet we are loved and accepted. We are called to embody God's beloved community. God says to us, "Do not be afraid."