

The Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, 25 June 2023
Saint Aidan's Episcopal Church, Portland OR
The Rev'd Canon Raggs Ragan, Interim Rector

We began today with a Collect full of assurance of God's loving-kindness. It was good to begin that way, because the readings have some very unsettling content reminding us of so many reasons not to feel safe and confident in the world. But if we look more deeply, I believe that we find grounds for confidence all the way through them.

I have always been disturbed by the story of Sarah being so protective of the rights of her son, the boy called 'laughter', that she ejected her Egyptian slave and Abraham's older, teenage son from their home camp. Just last week we saw the family living out the wonderful hospitality that enables people to survive in the desert. Now Sarah forces Abraham to join her in rejecting that mandate and to cast off his first-born son. That is disturbing – and certainly not something we want to think about as 'part of God's plan'.

But throughout the narrative Hagar, the slave who gave birth to Abraham's first son (at Sarah's urging) has extraordinary confidence in God. In fact, her son is named Ishmael, which means 'God hears'. From the beginning Hagar has talked with God and relied on God's listening despite her subjugated position. Abraham follows Sarah's insecure demand, against his own will, because God assures him that it will be alright and that indeed there will be a second great nation to grow from this firstborn son. Indeed this is the beginning of the Arab people, and eventually of Islam.

The theme 'God hears' runs through all of these readings. If the stories were all about a settled world in which everything is peaceful, this might not be a particularly compelling message. But the lessons are full of conflict and jealousy and violence and discord, both present and predicted. We find a realistic portrait of a world filled with troubles and division, such as we have all experienced. But if we listen closely, we find a throughline of God hearing those who call out, of God's reliable, consistent, eternal presence, whether we are abandoned in the desert (in a place that will eventually become the great city of Mecca) or overwhelmed by family conflicts and discord. Ishmael, God listens; God is always listening and hearing.

It is easy to imagine Hagar crying out the words of today's Psalm, as she is abandoned in the desert with her teenage son, voicing her desperation to God – crying out in a desperation that believes always that God hears, that God will answer, that she is not truly alone. And indeed she finds the well of Zamzam and they are saved – and later she finds her son a wife from among her Egyptian kindred and from them come a whole new people, not born in slavery but free and strong.

Then when Jesus speaks of his coming to sow division, even in the closest family ties (reminding us of Abraham's family), it is very disturbing. What I hear in these words is that we are meant to choose Jesus and his embodiment of divine love, to choose it and hold tight, regardless of other people's opinion, to remain unswayed by their rejection. People will and do disapprove. And that is very hard for us, but we are called to be faithful, to hold tight to God's hand – so that we can be strong enough to be God's hand at work in the world giving comfort and help and healing.

In the midst of all this portrayal of human division and persecution, of suffering and the need for rescue, I recalled an old saying: "And those who were seen dancing were thought to be insane by those who could not hear the music."

All those divisions spoken of in our readings come from misunderstanding, from not hearing the music to which Hagar and Abraham and the Psalmist and Paul and Jesus were dancing. They were considered crazy, deluded, heretical. Crazy people are frightening and so those who do not understand them tend to attack. We know this from our own world.

What came to my mind, though, was not resignation to misunderstanding and division as just how it has to be, but a sense that what we are called to do as part of our relationship with the One who loved us into being, who loved us enough to die and rise for us, who loves this whole magnificent creation into continued being and unfolding – is to help other people hear the music.

It is not about seeking protection from those who do not understand us. Our relationship with God is not about that. It is not about pulling into ourselves and hiding away, under some great shield. It is about living as God lives, in love, outward-directed, in blessing for the whole world, including any attackers.

There will always be people who think we are crazy for talking about God – for worship and prayer – for feeding hungry people and working to change a social reality which casts people out on the streets – for inviting scary people into our midst – for so many things. By people who don't hear the music. They don't hear the song of love God is singing.

We could despair. We could decide to be more secretive. We could get angry and retaliate against any attacks. We could shout μη γενοιτο, ‘Heaven forbid!’ along with Paul, who was so frustrated that even his fellow Christians seemed not to be hearing the music, not joining joyfully in God’s dance, that he burst out in exasperation. μη γενοιτο, ‘by no means! Heaven forbid! How could you think such ridiculous things?! Why don’t you understand?’

Or – we could help everyone to hear the music. It seems to me that this is an essential aspect of our calling as those baptized into Christ, those who have “died to sin and risen to the new life of grace” – to share the music.

Thinking about the situation this way turns us away from the combat of competing ideas and ideologies, away from attacks on our sanity or our character – and turns us toward becoming clearer about why we believe what we do, and why we do what we do.

Helping others to hear the music does not mean beating on the people who cannot keep time. It means inviting them into the dance, holding their hands and leading them gently in. It can mean showing them the steps or offering a quiet in which to listen, to see if they can hear what we hear and begin to respond. It can mean just saying, “Listen!” in the most inviting way possible. It is all about invitation, not self-defense.

Thinking about helping people to hear the music of the dance reminds me of Reggie McNeal’s advice to see where God is at work in the world and go out and join in – to join God in feeding hungry, in comforting the grieving, in welcoming the rejected – in real and practical ways. He says that we should not waste time trying to convince people of our theology, haranguing them into understanding, but should just join God’s dance, moving to the music of God’s love song. And then, when people ask, “Why are you doing that? Are you crazy?” – then is the time to explain, to share what we hear, and to invite them into the dance.

So let us try to let go of fear, of anger, of the very real frustration at a world filled with pain and division – let go of that din in our ears and focus on the music, what Pythagoras called the Music of the Spheres, the harmony of God’s all-embracing love – and dance to that love song, dance for joy, dance for healing, dance for hope, dance with all our might.

Because God always hears us – and is always inviting us in.

The most beautiful part of the Gospel reading echoes Genesis and the Psalm, echoes Ishmael’s name ‘God hears’. For me it always conjures the line from a wonderful Gospel hymn, ‘His eye is on the sparrow and I know he watches me.’ That is the heart of what Jesus is communicating in all these ‘hard sayings’: “follow me faithfully, even into the dark places of discord, because I am listening, I will always hear you, I will never leave you, no matter how hard it gets.”

Thinking about this dance God is inviting us into reminded me of a poem by Wendell Berry that I have read at funerals and at weddings.

Within the circles of our lives we dance the circles of the years,
the circles of the seasons within the circles of years,
the cycles of the moon within the circles of the seasons,
the circles of our reasons within the cycles of the moon.

Again, again we come and go, changed, changing.
Hands join, unjoin in love and fear, grief and joy.
The circles turn, each giving into each, into all.

Only music keeps us here, each by all the others held.
In the hold of hands and eyes we turn in pairs,
That, joining, join each to all again.

And then we turn aside, alone, out of the sunlight
gone into the darker circles of return.

Our circles are all connected, and as we dance to the music of God in our hearts we are all connected. Even when our paths diverge – as when I am no longer here with you every week – we will still be dancing the same dance, together joined with the God who always hears us. I take great comfort in that.

I have truly loved dancing with all of you over all these months and I am so grateful for your generous welcome. I will continue to pray for the thriving of this lovely, welcoming community, that you continue to be blessed and a blessing for all in need. To quote my very favorite Russian saying, “I will always hold you in my heart.” Amen.