

Is Peace With God Easy?  
Genesis 21:8-21; Matthew 10:24-39  
June 22, 2008

<sup>NLT</sup> **Genesis 21:8** As time went by and Isaac grew and was weaned, Abraham gave a big party to celebrate the happy occasion. <sup>9</sup> But Sarah saw Ishmael-- the son of Abraham and her Egyptian servant Hagar-- making fun of Isaac. <sup>10</sup> So she turned to Abraham and demanded, "Get rid of that servant and her son. He is not going to share the family inheritance with my son, Isaac. I won't have it!" <sup>11</sup> This upset Abraham very much because Ishmael was his son. <sup>12</sup> But God told Abraham, "Do not be upset over the boy and your servant wife. Do just as Sarah says, for Isaac is the son through whom your descendants will be counted. <sup>13</sup> But I will make a nation of the descendants of Hagar's son because he also is your son." <sup>14</sup> So Abraham got up early the next morning, prepared food for the journey, and strapped a container of water to Hagar's shoulders. He sent her away with their son, and she walked out into the wilderness of Beersheba, wandering aimlessly. <sup>15</sup> When the water was gone, she left the boy in the shade of a bush. <sup>16</sup> Then she went and sat down by herself about a hundred yards away. "I don't want to watch the boy die," she said, as she burst into tears. <sup>17</sup> Then God heard the boy's cries, and the angel of God called to Hagar from the sky, "Hagar, what's wrong? Do not be afraid! God has heard the boy's cries from the place where you laid him. <sup>18</sup> Go to him and comfort him, for I will make a great nation from his descendants." <sup>19</sup> Then God opened Hagar's eyes, and she saw a well. She immediately filled her water container and gave the boy a drink. <sup>20</sup> And God was with the boy as he grew up in the wilderness of Paran. He became an expert archer, <sup>21</sup> and his mother arranged a marriage for him with a young woman from Egypt.

<sup>NLT</sup> **Matthew 10:24** "A student is not greater than the teacher. A servant is not greater than the master. <sup>25</sup> The student shares the teacher's fate. The servant shares the master's fate. And since I, the master of the household, have been called the prince of demons, how much more will it happen to you, the members of the household! <sup>26</sup> But don't be afraid of those who threaten you. For the time is coming when everything will be revealed; all that is secret will be made public. <sup>27</sup> What I tell you now in the darkness, shout abroad when daybreak comes. What I whisper in your ears, shout from the housetops for all to hear! <sup>28</sup> "Don't be afraid of those who want to kill you. They can only kill your body; they cannot touch your soul. Fear only God, who can destroy both soul and body in hell. <sup>29</sup> Not even a sparrow, worth only half a penny, can fall to the ground without your Father knowing it. <sup>30</sup> And the very hairs on your head are all numbered. <sup>31</sup> So don't be afraid; you are more valuable to him than a whole flock of sparrows. <sup>32</sup> "If anyone

acknowledges me publicly here on earth, I will openly acknowledge that person before my Father in heaven. <sup>33</sup> But if anyone denies me here on earth, I will deny that person before my Father in heaven. <sup>34</sup> "Don't imagine that I came to bring peace to the earth! No, I came to bring a sword. <sup>35</sup> I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. <sup>36</sup> Your enemies will be right in your own household! <sup>37</sup> If you love your father or mother more than you love me, you are not worthy of being mine; or if you love your son or daughter more than me, you are not worthy of being mine. <sup>38</sup> If you refuse to take up your cross and follow me, you are not worthy of being mine. <sup>39</sup> If you cling to your life, you will lose it; but if you give it up for me, you will find it.

Life can be down right **messy**! Most of us probably do not like living in a mess; but we often live in a messy world. We may like things clean and orderly and sensible, right? I am sure there are exceptions to this, but mostly not. I like orderliness. But, you would never know it from the way I put papers and books and other odds and ends on my desk at home. It drives my spouse absolutely bonkers! She likes order, not a mess, especially when it comes to my papers and books strewn about. I think the genes for clean and neat flowed directly down upon my two of my boys. One son is so orderly that I like to play a little game of moving something out of order to see if he notices it! Believe me, when I say this, he notices this. He just walks back behind me and straightens things up.

Today's story is a continuation of the **Abraham and Isaac story** of God's covenant with Abraham; and it is a bit messy. Some might even say that it is embarrassing! However, it is a story of God and humanity interacting; and it does not hide the mess or scoot it under the rug. It is there in plain view. Likewise, in the Gospel of **Matthew** we encounter one of the more difficult and less attractive verses. You know that verse that is

so challenging and apparently contradictory to what we think about Jesus? <sup>34</sup> *"Don't imagine that I came to bring peace to the earth! No, I came to bring a sword."*

We **can't hide** that passage either, just because it seems messy! Deal with it, the Bible authors say, and let God deal with us in our mess!

One side of this mess is in the **relationships** between **Abraham**, the famous Old Testament patriarch, his wife, **Sarah**, his slave servant, **Hagar**, and mother of their child, **Ishmael**. The story goes that while Sarah was barren and without hope of a child, she **allowed** Abraham to birth a child through Hagar. Thus, Ishmael comes into the story as the first son of Isaac. Then, later, Sarah receives the promise of children, her womb being opened as a gift of grace, producing a child in her old age. His name would be "**Isaac**" which means "*laughter*." He is the son of laughter, because his mother laughed when the divine strangers promised Abraham that Sarah would have a child. Of course, Sarah **denied** that she laughed – "*I didn't laugh*," she says to the Lord. "*O yes you did*," the Lord replies. Who wins this little disagreement?

However, in the divine disordering of things, where the old order is thrown out and the tables are turned, the messy relationships come to light that scandalize us. Sarah in her **jealousy** demands that Abraham send Hagar and her son packing. So, in a kind of wimpish, measly mousey way, Abraham consents reluctantly, but consents nevertheless and **tosses** Hagar and Ismael out into the wilderness with just some bread and a skin of water to survive.

This is hardly an admirable continuation of this magnificent story of our patriarch Old Testament leader, Abraham. We know already from the past experiences that Abraham is a bit **cowardly and** as it turns out -- **deceitful**. He tells the Pharaoh at one point upon their flight to Egypt in the time of famine and desperation, that his beautiful wife was really his sister. It was a self-serving lie to save his skin. It was nothing more than a ploy to save themselves from a perceived threat. So, it worked **until**... the lie came to the surface, embarrassing and humiliating the Pharaoh. Thus, Abraham and Sarah, themselves, were sent packing! Ironic, isn't it?

Flashing forward to the Gospel lesson in Matthew, **Jesus** seems to **shock** his friends and family, when he describes the human family around Jesus as not being really as important to him as the Kingdom of God is. **How do you find peace**, some folks ask Jesus. We might have **expected** a soothing and inspiring word from his mouth. Instead, his **response is messy and scandalous**. Jesus stirs up the pot and shakes our sacred foundations. He is coming, Jesus declares, **not** to bring peace. Rather, Jesus says that he brings a **sword** that sets a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and so on. Unabashedly, Jesus says that “*Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me...and *whoever does not take up the cross and follow, is not worthy of me!*”*

If we all thought Jesus was the best family man ever, then we might just want to take a closer look and ask, “What in the world is Jesus thinking?” Jesus is breaking up the family! However, **Peace has its high cost**, according to a different standard of the Kingdom of Heaven. Peace is **sharper** than a two –edged sword that can divide the most

fervent family loyalties, something that is held nearly sacred in many cultures. This is a bit messy, isn't it? How is this all going to make sense in our world of orderliness and sacred traditions? That is the big question, isn't it?

**On one level** of the stories, God seems to accept and reject at the same time with little understanding of "Why?" Why is it that, for instance, God does accept Able's offering in the earlier Genesis story, and reject Cain's offering, and then allows Cain to kill Able? God also spares Cain's life. He does live on, though differently, but live nevertheless, but with a haunting question – "*Am I my brother's keeper?*"

And, of course, the OT story is that Isaac and Sarah toss out Hagar and Ishmael for no apparently clear reason. What is God doing here or allowing to be done? But, both Isaac and Ishamael survive and each becomes **fathers** of a great nation – one **Hebrew** and the other **Arabic** or **non-Hebrew**. It is only a story, yet a tragic one mixed with fear and lots of tension, jealousy and self-preservation, and covetousness - all thrown into this messy stew of biblical life. Actually, it is not that different from our messy lives either, is it?

God does strange things in Genesis, Exodus, Isaiah, and all through the history of human relationships. Just when we think we get it figured out, bam, it explodes with a new spiced up flavor of reality, shaking us up (just like Emeril Lagassi tossing in a whole lot more garlic to flavor the food). **God is God**, even of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who by the way is a scoundrel to his brother Esau, and to his father, Isaac, who acts a bit crazily. Go figure. Well, what does figure is that **God is God**. The covenant between Abraham

and God will not be thwarted due to any challenges of human **foibles** or core **moral depravities** – **this messy stuff of human sin**. God’s promise will be fulfilled. To all parties there comes a word that can sustain them in the middle of this messiness. It is this, “***Do not fear.***” (Remember those words angelic words spoken to the shepherds about the coming of Jesus.)

To the “cast out,” such as Hagar and Ishmael, who seem to be living on the edge of bad and with unjust treatment, they are **saved** and **told not to be afraid**. Hagar and Ishamael receive a promise. It is a **promise of God being with them** too. We should not take that lightly even today, for there are many who is non-Hebrew by birth.

The **word** to the disciples is given through a divine messenger, “***have no fear.***” We may be in the dark, but not forever, because God’s word is meant to come out into the light and become a source hope in a broken world. The **Apostle Paul** reminded us that *we see in a mirror dimly now, but we will in the future see clearly* all that God gives in love to us. God will provide and assure the disciples – ***don’t be afraid***, because this holy other God is **aware of the plight** of sparrows and knows you and me intimately even as the number of hairs (or not) upon our heads. “So ***do not be afraid***; you are more worthy than the sparrows.” Do not fear those who can take our physical life. Rather be more greatly concerned about our souls. God will **not deny** us, **if** we do **not deny God**.

**Life has been messy** from as far back as human vision allows us to see. The Bible suggests to us that our life has been a bit messy, even **from the origin of time**, when Adam and Eve first **messed up paradise** in **disobedience!** Now, we have the **second**

**Adam, Jesus Christ**, to make all things new. We have a new creation and new order of life. We are **invited** today to embrace and to believe in Jesus who shows us the way through our **daily mess** of immorality, deceit, self-focus, lack of love, compassion and mercy for those who are least among us. We are **invited** to follow Jesus with that demanding cross-way of life that turns everything upside down and thus brings about **order out of chaos**. In his vision, everyone is a **beloved child of God**. In his vision, we **value less the worldly riches than the heavenly riches of Christ**. Material things do not remove fear and bring us peace. Try as we may as hard as we do, peace is not to be found in that way.

But, even as a follower of Jesus, life will still have its degrees of messiness. Why? Well, for one thing certain, none of us that I am aware of can live perfectly without making a mess of things now and then. Yet, to the glory of God, we are made worthy in spite of and maybe because of our messes. How about that for a **word of grace**? I am encouraged to keep trying to live better in my mess, trusting that God will lead me through this human mess to a more joyous and hopeful life in God's peace.

I **invite you to receive this promise** that God is with us in the messiness of our lives. I **invite you to receive** this gift of grace that frees us from fear and releases us to live alive in faith. Do you want this grace today? Peace with God and with each other is not easy, but Jesus gave his life to make it more possible that we could ever imagine.

I can hear my Savior calling,  
I can hear my Savior calling,  
I can hear my Savior calling,

"Take thy cross and follow, follow me."

Refrain:

Where he leads me I will follow,  
where he leads me I will follow,  
where he leads me I will follow;  
**I'll go with him, with him all the way.**

2. I'll go with him through the garden,  
I'll go with him through the garden,  
I'll go with him through the garden,  
**I'll go with him, with him all the way.**  
(Refrain)

3. I'll go with him through the judgment,  
I'll go with him through the judgment,  
I'll go with him through the judgment,  
**I'll go with him, with him all the way.**  
(Refrain)

4. He will give me grace and glory,  
He will give me grace and glory,  
**He will give me grace and glory,**  
**and go with me, with me all the way.**  
(Refrain)(338, *UM Hymnal*)

2. "Let not your heart be troubled,"  
his tender word I hear,  
and resting on his goodness,  
I **lose my doubts and fears**;  
though by the path he leadeth  
but one step I may see:  
His eye is on the sparrow,  
**and I know he watches me.**

Refrain:

I sing because I'm happy,  
I sing because I'm free,  
for his eye is on the sparrow,  
**and I know he watches me.**

(2146, *The Faith We Sing*)