

Genesis 21:8-21 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

⁸The child grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. ⁹But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac.^[a] ¹⁰So she said to Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac." ¹¹The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. ¹²But God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you. ¹³As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring." ¹⁴So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba.

¹⁵When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. ¹⁶Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, "Do not let me look on the death of the child." And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. ¹⁷And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. ¹⁸Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him." ¹⁹Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink.

²⁰God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. ²¹He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.

"IN THE WILDERNESS – A WELL OF WATER"

Genesis 21:6

On Father's Day I begin with this story. A man named Bob Stamps is a professor of theology. He is bald. Don't forget that he is bald. And he can also

tell a good story on himself. One evening Bob and his wife went out and hired a babysitter for their small children. But the babysitter watched television and not the children. Their son Peter found his father's electric shaver and shaved a big strip right down the middle of his head. When Bob came home, he was furious. "Peter! I told you never to play with my shaver. Now you are going to get a spanking that you will never forget!" He was just about to give the spanking when Peter looked up and said, -- "Wait until you see sister!" So they went into the next room and there was their four-year-old daughter, looking like a skinned rabbit with all the hair shaved off her head. Now Bob was really furious. He grabbed Peter and said, "Now you are really going to get it." Just as he lifted his hand, Peter looked up at him with tears in his eyes and said, "But Daddy! We were just trying to look like you!" Peter didn't get a spanking that night. Instead he got an explanation and a hug. It's a tribute to good fathers when their children want to look just like them.

On Father's Day we lift up fathers who faithfully love and provide for their families. I was blessed to have a good father. It still pleases me when people who knew my father say to me, "You look like your dad." They're referring to my outward appearance, but I hope I resemble him in character, too. One of my fondest hopes is to see my father again in heaven.

I wish I had a positive Biblical story about human fatherhood today. But I'm afraid I don't. Last's week's passage from Genesis 18 and 21 had much joy as Isaac was born to elderly Abraham and Sarah. But as we continue in Genesis 21 Abraham proves, here at least, to be an inadequate father. Thankfully, when Abraham failed, the Heavenly Father intervened and provided what was needed. Chapter 21, verse 19 is key. "Then God opened (Hagar's) eyes and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink." There is an eternal Biblical truth in this verse. In the wilderness, God provides us with a well of living water.

Let's go back a bit. God had promised Abraham that he would make of him a great nation. But years went by. No child was born to Abraham and Sarah. So Sarah told Abraham to take her slave-girl, Hagar, and have a child with her. Abraham probably didn't argue too much. And a son, Ishmael was born. Hagar couldn't resist taunting Sarah, "I've given him the son you couldn't." But then, wonder of wonders, the child of promise, Isaac, was born to Abraham and Sarah. Of course, with both women in Abraham's tent, each with her own son, tensions were bound to boil over.

Sure enough, it happened on the day that Isaac was weaned. Sarah saw Ishmael playing with her son Isaac. Resentment and envy reared up in Sarah. The son of the slave woman would not be equal to her son. She ordered Abraham to cast them out. Abraham was distressed by the prospect. But

God told him, "Do what Sarah tells you; for through Isaac offspring will be named for you. But I will make a great nation of Ishmael also."

Abraham rose early in the morning, took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar. He sent mother and son out to wander in the wilderness. When the water was gone, Hagar cast Ishmael under a bush and went a good distance off, weeping and raising her voice, saying, "Do not let me look upon the death of the child."

Let's pause here. Surely Abraham, a wealthy man, could have done much better than send them out with such meagre provisions. Heavens, he could have built a tent for them on the other side of his estate and provided for all their needs. Maybe that was what God wanted him to do. But Abraham just washed his hands of the whole mess and essentially gave Hagar and Ishmael a death sentence.

The whole episode reveals how humans can wander in the wilderness of sin. If Abraham and Sarah had really trusted God's promise Ishmael wouldn't have been born. That birth caused a problem for God, too. Now the promise-keeping God had to make a great nation through each son, the Jewish people through Isaac and the Arabic peoples through Ishmael. The relationship between the two nations has often been troubled, sometimes violent. And imagine what it was like in Abraham's tent with the two women and their sons. The boys were getting along fine, but not the adults. There was Hagar's taunting, Sarah's jealousy, Abraham's stinginess. The whole episode speaks of the wilderness of sin which leads to death.

Now we all wander in the wilderness. And there are different kinds of wilderness experiences. Covid-19 has driven us out into a very strange kind of wilderness in which so much has been turned upside down. We feel quite disoriented and look forward to when we finally get through it.

But then there is the universal wilderness of sin. We are not only affected by it; we add to it. If you have ever been mean and stingy when you could have been generous; if you have ever taunted someone; or rejected someone because of race, colour or creed, if envy or selfish anger has ever directed your actions, then you have wandered in the wilderness of sin. And human sin leads to death. Hagar and Ishmael were going to die in the wilderness. Even more, human sin leads to spiritual death, separation from God in time and eternity. Paul says bluntly, "The wages of sin is death."

But there is good news here. Here are two simple Biblical words, comforting and hopeful. "But God." Remember those two words, "But God." The Gospel message hinges on them. Verses 17-21 from the New English Bible. "But God heard the boy's voice. The angel of God called to Hagar from

heaven, 'Hagar, don't be afraid, for God has heard the boy. Get up! Help the boy up and hold him by the hand, for I will make him into a great nation.' God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went and filled the skin, and gave the boy a drink. God was with the boy and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow." Human ways were leading to death; but God's provision gave life. In the wilderness God provided a well of living water. The human father had failed his son; but God became the boy's father. No matter what our family situation may be, we all have a loving Father, "Abba", God, our Heavenly Father.

In the wilderness God provides us with a well of living water. It's true in many ways. Water is essential for life. That's why scientists get excited when they detect evidence of water on other planets. It means that life in some form may exist there. And here on earth the Creator God has provided water for our need. He opens our eyes to see where water is located and gives us the ability to access it. Christians are involved with projects which help people find clean water. We support such projects through our own outreach Committee. A hand pump or a simple filtration system can bring new life and hope to a whole community.

We also need living water for our souls, otherwise we will perish in the wilderness. Thankfully God provides us with a well of living water. That well of living water is his own Son Jesus Christ. One day Jesus met a woman at a well in Samaria. She was lost in the wilderness of broken relationships and false worship. Jesus pointed to Jacob's well and said to her, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give will never be thirsty. The water I give will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life." Jesus Christ, God's own precious Son, is the well of living water we all need. In the wilderness of sin, he brings us God's refreshing grace. In the wilderness of death, he brings us eternal life. "The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."

Now in order to become the well of living water Jesus himself had to enter the wilderness of temptation and emerge sinless. He had to undergo the wilderness of death on the cross as he paid the penalty for our sin. There he cried out, "I thirst." After he died, blood and water poured from his pierced side. But on the third day the Father raised him from the grave to live forevermore. And now we drink of his living water by acceptance and faith. Receive Christ and believe. His living presence washes away our sin. He gives us new life now and eternal life beyond this world. He refreshes us and fills us with the power of the Holy Spirit. He puts new love within us, the very love of God. In the wilderness, God provides a well of living water for us. That well is Jesus Christ. That well is deep enough for all people. In the wilderness of this COVID-19 pandemic we can stop at this well for refreshment. In these on-line services just as in our regular services, you and I can drink of Christ

by faith and be strengthened for the journey, assured that God is leading us to better and brighter days.

In Christ all our sins, past, present and future are forgiven right now; yet we will not be perfect this side of heaven. But Christ dwelling in us helps squeeze out those actions and attitudes that plague ourselves and others. Rather than taunting and envy we choose kindness and gratitude. In Christ we learn to be generous rather than tight-fisted. Rather than division we seek reconciliation. In Christ we learn to be better parents, mothers and fathers.

A famous psychiatrist says that boys often long for a closer contact with their fathers. He spoke of his own experience. "Caring is one thing," he says. "I mean, my father cared more about us than anything in the world, but he cared from afar...I believe the most important thing about a father is his love - expressed in a real sense... The most important thing in our relationship were those talks we had...after we had shed a few tears and dropped all our defenses and could look eye to eye, man to man, and say, 'I love you.'"

Today God is looking at you and me and saying, "I love you. I have provided you with a well of living water - my own Son, Jesus Christ. I am opening the eyes of your heart to see him. Drink of him by faith, for he alone can quench your spiritual thirst this day and forevermore."