

# Confusing Voices – Confusing Choices

Genesis 21:8-21 / Matthew 10:24-39

June 25, 2017

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## INTRODUCTION – THE GOSPEL

How many of you understood the Gospel message? If you're like me when I first read it, you would probably say, "Yes, it makes sense, but I don't get it."

"Don't fear those who kill the body but not the soul – rather fear those who kill the soul and the body. ...

Don't be afraid – you are worth more than many sparrows. ...

If you acknowledge me before others, I'll acknowledge you before my Father. ...

Each part makes perfect sense, but as a whole – it's confusing. We're used to stories that have a beginning, development, some kind of climax, and denouement or winding down. We're used to getting a *message* but what we seem to have here is a whole lot of messages – which brings us back to the real question – what is Matthew and Jesus trying to tell us here?

Many scholars believe that what we have here is a collection of Jesus sayings – things that people or Matthew remembered and considered important enough to include the Gospel but the original context had been forgotten.

**I think there is a message though – that sometimes it's really hard to know what God wants.**

We may be people of faith. We may want to follow God ... but sometimes it's really hard for us to which direction God wants us to take.

## BIBLICAL EXPLORATION

### The Story of Abraham

Looking at our Old Testament passage, we see the same message. The story is a bit easier to understand because it is a story or rather, part of the story ... so let me give you some background /put it into its context, and then go on from there.

Abraham was 75 years old when God called him to leave home and head out into an unknown future. God promised him to make him the Father of a great nation – Abraham's descendants would be as numerous as the grains of sand.

Abraham trusted God and for the next 10 years or so, deepened his relationship with God. He went where God led him. But he had no children. He was in his 80s. His wife Sarah was in her 70s. How long was he to wait for God to act? Was he supposed to do something himself? Take another wife? Wait? Trust?

It's no surprise that after these 10-some years, Sarah finally told him, "**Take my handmaid, Hagar. Sleep with her. If she gets pregnant and has a child, at least you will have an heir.**" Abraham did, and fathered Ishmael.

More years passed. It seemed that Abraham must have done right when he acted on Sarah's advice. But then, 25 years after God's original promise, a 90-year old Sarah got pregnant and a 100-year-old Abraham became the father of Isaac – his wife's child.

All this is background to today's story.

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## Today's Story

Abraham had a problem. He had **two children** – Ishmael and Isaac – through two different mothers, and he was faced with a family crisis.

The two mothers were jealous of one another. Hagar had been a servant – a handmaid for Sarah. But she had given birth to Abraham's heir while his wife was barren. That gave Hagar a higher status in the eyes of everyone – even Abraham. He may not have placed her above Sarah because he loved his wife – but he could no longer treat Hagar like an ordinary servant. She deserved respect. She deserved consideration and a certain amount of wealth in her own right because she had given birth to Ishmael.

Everyone else, however, including Hagar, began seeing Hagar as better than, or more important than, Sarah because she had done something that Sarah had not.

Sarah couldn't help but be hurt by the comments she must have heard and the arrogance that Hagar displayed. But she couldn't do anything or even say anything because Hagar was right – Hagar had given birth while Sarah had not.

**But all that changed with Isaac's birth, and Sarah wanted her revenge.** Get rid of Hagar. Get rid of Ishmael. Make sure that **her** son – that Isaac – would inherit everything when Abraham died.

Imagine how Abraham must have felt when Sarah told him that. He couldn't help but be torn. He loved Sarah and wanted to keep her happy. He was responsible for Hagar and owed her. He loved Ishmael who was now a teenager. He loved Isaac, the child conceived in love and born out of love.

How could he turn his back on Hagar and Ishmael? How could he send them into the desert, knowing they would likely die?

It is at this point that God shows up in the story. God told Abraham to listen to his wife and to send Hagar and Ishmael out into the desert. Abraham might not be able to look after them anymore but God could and would. And God promised Abraham that both sons would live and both would become ancestors of great nations – whom we now know as the Jews through Isaac and the Arabs through Ishmael.

## The Meaning of the Dilemma

What we have in this story is the problem that all people of faith have – **How are we supposed to live as God's people on a day-to-day basis?**

This was the dilemma that Abraham faced. He was a man of deep faith, committed to God and to following God wherever God wanted him to go. Over the years he had come to know God and love him. But that didn't mean Abraham knew what to do at any given moment or in any given situation.

God gave him a promise. Abraham trusted God to keep that promise. **But for how long?** How long was he supposed to wait? God hadn't given him a timetable.

Did God mean for Abraham to take some initiative of his own? Was Abraham supposed to do something – beyond having sex with his wife – to help turn that promise into reality? Or was he to just wait? **How was he to know what God wanted?**

Abraham chose to act and that decision put Abraham in a quandary years later when Isaac was finally born. We can't say whether Abraham was right or wrong in taking matters into his own hands and fathering Ishmael. We do not know what God's plan was. We don't know what the big picture was. And we can't apply modern standards of morality to life about 4000 years ago.

In a way, whether Abraham did right or wrong didn't and doesn't matter. What the story tells us is that God was there – he stepped in at the right time, when Abraham was torn and had no idea how to deal with what he was facing. God stepped in, help Abraham decide, and took over when Abraham had to let go.

## BRIDGE

**That's the message we need to hear today.**

### A MESSAGE FOR INDIVIDUALS

In many ways, we **are** like Abraham. The details are different but the issues – the questions – are the same.

#### God's Promises

Like Abraham, we are a people of faith. God made promises to Abraham. God has made promises to us as well. He has promised a place for us in his kingdom. He has promised to return and to take us – his faithful people – into that kingdom. We have something to look forward to.

God has called us to act in the world – to be his body on earth, his representative, his witness.

#### Confusing Voices – Confusing Choices

But that's the problem. Like Abraham, we don't know exactly what we're supposed to do. We don't know exactly how long we are supposed to wait for God to return or what we're supposed to do until then – think of our fascination with movies and books talking about the end of the world!

**We are called to act – but doing what? And when?** We may be people of faith but how are we supposed to live on a day-to-day basis? What does God want us to do at any given time or in any given situation? Why doesn't God give us a master plan or a timetable to help?

We might be able to tell right from wrong but our choices are usually not that clear. Think of the last American election. One leader may have stood out over another but, if we're honest, we know that both leaders had flaws. Americans were not faced with a choice of which leader was right and which was wrong but rather which was the lesser of two wrongs. The same is often true in our elections as well.

It's true in our communities as well. Do we develop – bring in more businesses and more jobs but lose more farmland? Or do we protect our environment and our farms but at the cost of jobs that would keep people in the area?

It really is like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle that we're trying to put together. We sort of know what the final picture will look like but we're not sure where all the pieces go – we're not sure if we have all the pieces or are missing any – and we're not sure what kind of piece we are or where we're supposed to fit in.

There are so many choices – so many voices – and we're left with the question: **What does God want us to do today, in this situation?**

#### God's Presence

Like Abraham, we are left wondering whether we made right decisions or not.

But what we **do know** – and what God revealed to Abraham – is that God is still present. **Whatever God's plan is, our actions are woven into it.** God will us them to turn his promises into reality. God is still very much in the picture.

### A MESSAGE FOR \_\_\_\_

Today is Anniversary Sunday.

As a congregation, \_\_\_\_ is celebrating your 147 years of existence. Congratulations – your congregation has been around longer than Abraham.

#### God's Promises

God's promises are God's promises to \_\_\_\_\_. He called you into existence. You are alive because God wants you to be alive. You are called to be God's witness in the world. You are called to tell the story of God's love for the world to anyone who will listen. You are called to be God's body on earth – God's representative.

And you've been doing this for almost 150 years.

## Confusing Voices – Confusing Choices

But it's not been easy. And it's not always been clear. Where does \_\_\_ fit into God's plan – God's picture?

It's easy to identify the challenges that so many congregations have:

- Declining membership / declining involvement ...  
people may be moving away from the community; people may simply be too busy to be involved
- Declining finances / increasing expenses ...  
Fewer numbers generally mean less money but buildings require upkeep – especially as they age.
- Changing society / changing values ...  
Life doesn't stand still. Life is change. Society changes. Language changes. Music changes. Traditions change. Values change.  
How does \_\_\_ avoid becoming a fossil or a relic of a bygone era? How does \_\_\_ change so as to continue being God's witness in the world – a different world?
- Where does \_\_\_ go from here?

Many options – many voices – and no clear answers. Why doesn't God tell us what to do when?

## God's Presence

We're left with one inescapable fact: **God is present.** God is involved in \_\_\_'s life as he is involved in the lives of each one of us – as he was involved in Abraham's life.

Where we fail – or make mistakes – or find ourselves having to make tough choices – we can do so confident that we are still in God's hands and that God will continue to bless us and work through us to bring his plan to fruition.

## CONCLUSION

There's a gentle reminder in both lessons:

- God has made promises to us. God has called us to be his people on earth – his church.
- As people of faith, we are called to walk in faith. But we don't know what the future will bring or what we are supposed to do when the future does come. We aren't God! We don't have all the answers. We don't even know the big picture in detail. All we have is a little sketch – but it hasn't been filled in with all the details.
- Regardless of what we do – of the choices we make – we can be certain of one thing: God is present. God's plan's will unfold the way it is supposed to.

God is with us – and with \_\_\_ – now and forever.

AMEN.