

It Just Isn't Fair
Genesis 21:8-20
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I love the Book of Genesis. It is a compilation of all the best and the worst of human nature and inclination that has, in my humble opinion, ever been written. Developed about three thousand years ago, there were a number of authors of Genesis representing different theologies. What we read in the book is a compilation of those theologies loosely strung together with echoes of ancient myths and teaching stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs of Israel that had been passed on through many generations. Embedded within those stories is the eternal quest of humanity to understand why we do the things we do; what the consequences of our actions are and where God is found in those actions.

There are numbers of stories in Genesis, beginning with Adam and Eve, that reflect that eternal question mark. One of the most poignant is found in the passage we just heard. If you are a fan of Game of Thrones, you may see the similarities. For the five or six people in western civilization who have not read the series or watched the HBO production, let me give you a thumbnail précis. Lord Eddard Stark has an illegitimate son who cannot inherit and because of his wife's antipathy is exiled to the far north. The next eldest son is the legitimate heir and is greatly influenced by his mother. Their story becomes bloody and bloodier and it is only one of several family sagas. And no character is entirely guilt free in the series just as there is no character in Genesis who is entirely guilt free. If you plan on a three month vacation, pack an extra suitcase with the Game of Thrones series and plan to pay an overweight price; or you could just read Genesis.

Chapter 21, is particularly challenging to a contemporary audience raised in the era of civil rights. Abraham and Sarah, though old, have been promised a son by God. The blessed event is slow in happening and Sarah takes matters into her own hands by giving her slave Hagar to Abraham to bear his child. Hagar has a son who is named Ishmael. Abraham is quite taken with his son but Sarah fumes until she miraculously becomes pregnant. She bears a son named Isaac but is jealous of Hagar and her son. One day when she sees the brothers playing together, she snaps and demands that Abraham send Hagar and Ishmael away. Abraham tries to argue with her but Sarah will not abide any competition to her son's inheritance. God tells Abraham that it is going to be fine and, reluctantly, Abraham gives some food and water to Hagar and placing Ishmael on her shoulders, sends them off into the desert, for all he knows, to die. And this is what is so challenging; Abraham does nothing to aid their journey, even giving them a donkey and supplies.

It just isn't fair, is it?

It isn't fair without God in the background. In the desert, Hagar reaches her last ounce of strength, puts Ishmael under some shade and goes apart so that she will not hear his cries as she pours out her grief at their certain death. God intervenes through an angel who shows Hagar a pool of saving water, promises that her son will be the founder of twelve tribes and sends them safely to Egypt and their destiny. Incidentally, in Islam, Ismael is the favored son.

How many 'just isn't fair' moments have you had throughout your life? How many on the spot decisions have you made that ended well? Ended poorly? How many situations beyond your control have meant a new direction for your life? How many opportunities have you taken; how many have you wished you took? I certainly have had my share of decisions made, opportunities rejected, situations that were imposed. None of us make it through life without those moments. And some of those just aren't fair.

My mother was a level headed and practical person. She had to be, having seven children, a constant load of diapers hanging on the line, this was in ancient times before pampers and clothes dryers, and a meal to prepare every night. We were one of the first families in the neighborhood to get a television. I think that was because we kids were told that it was almost time for the Howdy Doody Show. 'Go turn on the television,' she said. There was quiet as we sat down in front of the TV and patiently watched the test pattern for a half hour. As I said, she was practical.

When one of us wanted something like money for a movie or didn't want something like going to the dentist, my mother would declaim: "If wishes were horses than beggars would ride." And that would be that.

And that was that for her. Not until I became an adult did I begin to appreciate my mother's strength as well as her practicality. When she married my father and sent him off to World War II, it was not fair to either of them that he came home with PTSD. She was his rock and he was her burden for a number of years. And she had not planned to spend much of her late twenties to mid forties washing diapers and stretching budgets to feed us. She had wanted to be a nurse but was not encouraged by her mother and was told by the family doctor that her back was not strong enough for nursing. But, by the way, her back was strong enough to have seven kids, go figure. She listened and went to work for the telephone company after high school. And because her own hopes had been dashed, she wanted to protect her children from those same dashed hopes and, like her mother, tried to discourage us from big dreams. Life was being unfair to her and she tried to keep us safe from that unfairness. She did not succeed. All seven of us have had our share of good and not so good choices and we are all stronger for the experiences.

Where was God in my mother's life? I believe that God's fingerprint is everywhere. She was a person of great faith as was my father. Being good Catholics, faith acted out meant Mass every Sunday with no excuse short of pneumonia. It meant Saturday afternoon confession and it meant saying the rosary every night. It meant some financial sacrifice so that all of us could go to parochial schools. And, it meant opening our home to others. When a neighbor's house caught on fire, my mother gathered the children in the family and brought them home to our house. When school bussing to end segregated schools began in Boston, a number of children from Roxbury were bussed to our parochial school, that in those days of at-home mothers had a morning and afternoon session. And being a neighborhood school, children went home for lunch. My mother unhesitatingly opened her doors to several of those bussed in children who came home with my youngest brother for the usual peanut butter and jelly sandwich. No question. No deep thought. She just did it.

And it wasn't fair that she died at 67 and did not get to see the amazing, caring dedicated lives that her children are living as nurses, teachers, openhearted carers. She did not experience her grandchildren growing into good caring adults with children of their own who will grow up to be, themselves, loving, caring adults.

Certainly those moments of unfairness are difficult times in our lives. Job loss, illness, marriage break up, death of a loved one. We can all name those very personal experiences of pain or disappointment that we have experienced. Some things can be fixed. Some, we must simply live through. And we realize over and over again that there are times when life simply isn't fair.

Again, where is God? As much as I love the book, this is the problem that the various authors of Genesis confronted without resolution. God warned Cain not to kill his brother. Cain chose to do it and suffered the consequences. God became fed up with creation and caused a flood that destroyed all but an ark filled with one family and a lot of smelly wildlife. Was that family worthy? Noah got drunk and his son made fun of him. God chose Abraham to be the progenitor of a great nation. Abraham lied to the king of Egypt who had his eye on Sarah, saying that she was his sister. His nephew Lot, afraid of a crowd was ready to throw his daughters out to them in order to protect his guests. The sons of Jacob were jealous of their brother Joseph and sold him into slavery in Egypt. In all of those situations, God stepped in one way or another to keep this dysfunctional family moving toward God's ends.

Is God the cause of life's injustices or the companion who eases the pain and provides strength and courage? Genesis is unclear but I am totally clear. Life situations or those that result from our choices are not God's doing. God is the salve that comforts and heals our wounded souls. God is the light that shines through the fog of confusion or hurt. In her poem "Hope," Emily Dickinson describes for me this sense of God's presence in these words:

"Hope" is the thing with feathers -
That perches in the soul -
And sings the tune without the words -
And never stops - at all -

So, no, life is not always fair. But Ishmael grew into a strong leader whose name is honored today throughout Islam. Hagar, freed from slavery lived a comfortable life and watched her son grow into a strong leader. Sarah got her son and through him, a great nation. And Abraham is honored today in three religions.

The 'Butterfly Effect' of Chaos Theory suggests that the wings of a butterfly flapped at just the right time and in just the right place will cause a breeze that will develop into a hurricane a thousand miles away. This theory makes profound sense theologically for me as a way of confronting the times of chaos in our lives. We have no idea what influence those not fair or fair moments might have on us at a later time. But we always have God who walks us through each moment and into whatever that future holds.

We all know the words so well that we may even be able to quote them, but it is worth closing with the wisdom contained in Robert Frost's poem, *The Road Not Taken*:

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.