

PENTECOST 4

Proper 7 - Year A

This Bible study was written by Charles Lane Cowen of the Seminary of the Southwest in 2017.

Genesis 21:8-21

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. 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.

Commentary from Charles Lane Cowen

Outside of the book of Genesis, the word “Abraham” appears in the Bible 142 times. Compare that with Sarah, which appears 24 times, and Hagar who only appears 3 times—once in Baruch and twice in Galatians. Given that father Abraham is remembered for the covenant God makes with him to provide descendants as numerous as the stars (Gen 15:5), it seems strange on the part of the biblical authors to ignore Sarah and Hagar, without whom Abraham would have no descendants.

The author paints a picture in today’s story of a jealous Sarah who casts out a helpless Hagar into the wilderness with her young son. Hagar, a servant girl, was forced against her will to have sexual relations with her master, bear him a son, only to be cast by her master’s jealous wife into the wilderness — where she and her son will surely die of thirst. Human jealousy, pride, and ambition pit these women against one another. God, however, remains faithful to both Sarah and Hagar. Hagar calls out to God, and God provides water and makes of Ishmael a great nation. Through Sarah and Isaac, God makes another great nation. In today’s world, we see over and over nation pitted against nation as we fall trap to the sins of jealousy, pride, and selfish ambition. Perhaps through remembering that God loves and cares for us even when we fall into sin, we can seek to create a world where we love all nations as family.

Discussion Questions

Look at Gustave Doré’s famous engraving of Hagar in the Wilderness. Does this image change the story for you in any way? How might you depict the story of Hagar and Ishmael?

Where in your life have you been jealous of the accomplishments of others? How might God transform that jealousy?

What does this story teach us about modern political diplomacy?

Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17

- 1 Bow down your ear, O Lord, and answer me, *
for I am poor and in misery.
- 2 Keep watch over my life, for I am faithful; *
save your servant who puts his trust in you.
- 3 Be merciful to me, O Lord, for you are my God; *
I call upon you all the day long.
- 4 Gladden the soul of your servant, *
for to you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.
- 5 For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving, *
and great is your love toward all who call
upon you.
- 6 Give ear, O Lord, to my prayer, *
and attend to the voice of my supplications.
- 7 In the time of my trouble I will call upon you, *
for you will answer me.
- 8 Among the gods there is none like you, O Lord, *
nor anything like your works.
- 9 All nations you have made will come and worship
you, O Lord, *
and glorify your Name.
- 10 For you are great;
you do wondrous things; *
and you alone are God.
- 16 Turn to me and have mercy upon me; *
give your strength to your servant;
and save the child of your handmaid.
- 17 Show me a sign of your favor,
so that those who hate me may see it and be
ashamed; *
because you, O Lord, have helped me and
comforted me.

Commentary from Charles Lane Cowen

In Psalm 86, the psalmist calls out to God for help against enemies (this becomes far more apparent when we include verses 11–15 which the lectionary leaves out). The psalmist follows a familiar pattern of petitions for God’s help, followed by words praising God before asking for deliverance from enemies and moving into thanksgiving even before God provides help (Ps 86:12–13, BCP). The psalmist believes so surely in God’s goodness that he thanks God even before the prayer has been answered.

The most important verse of this psalm has been removed from today’s reading: “But you, O LORD, are gracious and full of compassion, slow to anger, and full of kindness and truth” (Ps. 86:15).

This is a direct quote taken from Exodus 34:6 where God, speaking to Moses, reveals that I AM is a God who loves mercy over anger. The hope of favor the psalmist holds is not a blind hope like I hold when I say, “I hope I win the lottery.” This hope comes from God’s own mouth. The psalmist teaches us that when we pray and call upon God for help, we should reach deeply into our scriptural tradition to see how God has worked and is working in the world. Then we can call out with faith and hope to the God who has “helped me and comforted me” (Ps. 86:17).

Discussion Questions

What “enemies” persecute you or your community?

What insights do you gain from the scriptural witness?

Romans 6:1b-11

6 What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may increase? ²By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? ³Do you not know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? ⁴Therefore we were buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life.

⁵For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. ⁶We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be destroyed, so we might no longer be enslaved to sin. ⁷For whoever has died is freed from sin. ⁸But if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. ⁹We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. ¹⁰The death he died, he died to sin once for all, but the life he lives, he lives to God. ¹¹So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.

Commentary from Charles Lane Cowen

This poetic passage from Paul's letter to the Romans beautifully summarizes for us the mystery of Holy Baptism. Baptism, especially as it has been made part of public Sunday worship in the 1979 Prayer Book, is a time for the whole church to rejoice in the addition of new members into our community, which is the Body of Christ. Given that in our tradition we practice infant baptism, most of our baptisms carry the double joy of also celebrating new life and growing families.

I certainly do not mean to suggest that the church should not celebrate the births of babies within our churches, but Holy Baptism has nothing to do with earthly birth, and everything to do with death to self and birth into a new way of being. Just as Paul reminds us so beautifully in this biblical song or canticle, through our baptism we, like Jesus, die. In the practice of full-immersion baptism, a person literally goes under water where they are incapable of breathing—death. Rising up out of the water under the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, the person takes a new breath as they emerge from Jesus' death into Jesus' resurrection. This is good news! We are no more slaves to sin, but we have a new life in Jesus. We are no longer slaves to death, but we have eternal life in Jesus. Alleluia!

Discussion Questions

What aspects of death are in our baptismal liturgy?

What aspects of birth are in our baptismal liturgy?

What does full participation in the Body of Christ look like? How might we order our lives if we remain conscious of the fact that we are part of the Body of Christ?

Matthew 10:24-39

²⁴ “A disciple is not above the teacher nor a slave above the master; ²⁵ it is enough for the disciple to be like the teacher and the slave like the master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household!

²⁶ “So have no fear of them, for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered and nothing secret that will not become known. ²⁷ What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light, and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops. ²⁸ Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather, fear the one who can destroy both soul and body in hell. ²⁹ Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. ³⁰ And even the hairs of your head are all counted. ³¹ So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.

³² “Everyone, therefore, who acknowledges me before others, I also will acknowledge before my Father in heaven, ³³ but whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven.

³⁴ “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace but a sword.

³⁵ For 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,

³⁶ and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household.

³⁷ “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me, and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me, ³⁸ and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. ³⁹ Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

Commentary from Charles Lane Cowen

One common complaint against Christianity brought up by atheists is the problem of theodicy—why does an all-powerful, loving God allow terrible things to happen in the world? This criticism only holds up, however, if one buys into the common misunderstanding, professed by many Christians, that Christianity is a religion of sunshine, rainbows, unicorns, and puppy dogs, completely devoid of suffering and pain. Readers of Matthew’s gospel know that the in-breaking of God’s kingdom comes with much pain and suffering.

Today’s reading begins with Jesus reminding us not to fear the oppressors of this world, but to fear God. Written against the backdrop of the oppressive Roman Empire, Matthew offers words of comfort to worshippers of God that the reign of God is being uncovered. Jesus empowers us to stand in opposition to our oppressors, proclaiming the peace and love of God, yet Jesus is not naïve enough to think that our oppressors will simply give up. Proclaiming the Good News will always make those in power uncomfortable, and sometimes that even means people in our own families.

Discussion Questions

When have you disagreed with someone in your family about politics or religion? Were you able to resolve it? If so, how?

What issues in your local community might be informed by your being a follower of Jesus? How might you proclaim God’s justice in places of oppression?