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Bridge Street United Church  
November 3, 2024  
Readings: Genesis 25:7-18; Psalm 24; Luke 6:20-31

### A Sense of Community

This morning's reading from Genesis will not qualify as one of the Bible's most inspiring passage. It recounts two deaths and contains a lengthy list of names. One might legitimately wonder: "Why is this passage here at all?" What would have made the final editor of the book of Genesis decide to include this story? The stories we find in the book of Genesis, including this one, circulated orally for generations before finally being written down and compiled, probably during the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE. But why were these stories about the deaths of Abraham and Ishmael, and especially the list of Ishmael's sons, kept alive through being told orally before they were written down? And why were they even written down?

One could say, I suppose, because the whole story about these ancient figures of the faith tradition had to move on. Obviously, Abraham did not live for ever. Neither did Ishmael. But all the writer of Genesis had to say was "Abraham died," adding, if it was desired, Abraham's age when he died. There was no need to mention Ishmael's death at all, let alone provide a list of his twelve sons. After all, while Ishmael was definitely a son of Abraham, he was Abraham's son by Sarah's slave woman Hagar. Isaac, born to Sarah, Abraham's wife, was the child of promise, the one God had promised to Abraham, the child who would be one of the three patriarchs to whom the people of Israel, and Jews to this day, look back. It is Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who are the key players in the story of the people of Israel. And God, in later appearances to key personages in the history of the people of Israel, would sometimes say "I am the God of Abraham, Isaac, and

Jacob.” Ishmael comes into prominence only in Islam, where he is seen as an ancestor of Muhammad. You only learn a lot about him if you read the Koran. But here we have these two deaths recorded—that of Abraham and Ishmael—and then the list of Ishmael’s sons. Why? Why were these stories seen as sufficiently important that they were transmitted orally for such a long time and then written down in Genesis?

Well, I cannot be sure about the answers to that “why” question. But some reasonable explanations come to mind. One reason they were written down was probably the same reason they had been handed down orally for generations. One wanted to remember one’s heritage. Wanting to do that, you preserved stories like these. Another reason may have been to remind Isaac’s descendants of their connection to the descendants of Ishmael. A third reason may have been to remind the people of Israel at the time the book of Genesis was written, and that writing was almost certainly during the period of their exile in Babylon in the sixth century BCE, that they were a people. Exile in the ancient Mediterranean world almost always meant you were absorbed into the nation that had conquered your nation. That did not happen to the people of Israel. Stories like this were a reminder to a dispersed and exiled people that they were still a people, still had a national identity.

The more critical question for us, though, is what particular insights do these stories offer to us now? Three related points suggest themselves to me.

The first is markedly similar to one reason why I think the stories were originally so important. These stories remind us, as they reminded the people of Israel, that they were part of a group, part of a community. “Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people.” “Ishmael . . . breathed his last and died, and was gathered to his people.” The very phrasing used to describe the deaths of both Abraham and

Ishmael, “gathered to his people,” makes clear that both Abraham and Ishmael were part of a larger unit, namely, their people. The telling and retention of these stories suggests how valued was the link with these ancestral figures. The stories remind us that we, too, are tied to those who have gone before us. We think about that in terms of our families, and we know the importance of the family stories, and of our own memories and experiences, the things that connect us to those we have known and who have gone before us. Our ritual of remembrance later in this service is something we do because it, too, reminds us that we have a connection to those who were part of this community, both those we have known in our time here and those who died much longer ago but who helped to make and to shape this congregation. The Biblical stories remind us that we are tied to a group, or a people, a group or people that runs back through history, back even before the life of the one we call our Saviour.

A second insight from this story from Genesis about the deaths of Abraham and Ishmael is something closely related to the first. It is the counter, or the challenge, to the excessive individualism of our society. When I was doing my basic theology degree in the mid-1970s, we read several books by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross. She was a Swiss-American psychiatrist who wrote extensively on death and dying and on the stages of grief through which we go when someone close to us dies. In her book, *Death and Dying*, Ross recounts an incident from her childhood in the small European village in which she had grown up. A man in his mid-forties was near death. The extended family gathered. The dying man deliberately took time with each of them during the last days of his life. He did the same with members of the community. Kubler-Ross talked about the sense of connectedness she saw and experienced there, about how natural it had seemed. She talked about how important it had been for that man to say goodbye, not only to his immediate family but also to his extended family and to the community. She then drew a contrast

between what she had seen there as a child in that village and the pattern she saw when she wrote her book, *Death and Dying*, in the early to mid-1970s. In that book, she wrote about the isolation and aloneness of many of the dying persons with whom she worked. Now I think with the developments in palliative care over the period between then and now, that situation has somewhat changed.

But I think her comments still carry weight. Most of us live as isolated individuals, at least to a much greater degree than did our ancestors of several generations ago. We also live and work in a society and a culture that fosters a sense of individualism. We are taught, and now taught increasingly early in life, that we must not be too dependent on others. “Don’t trust strangers,” we teach our children. With Hallowe’en on Thursday, I found myself thinking about walking through my rural village when I was a child, dressed in a costume for the occasion. One thing I was remembering was that at about a half dozen homes we got home-made fudge, rather than the Hallowe’en kisses that were much more common. No one in Moira, the community of 100 or so north of here where Caroline and I live, would now think of making fudge to hand out on Hallowe’en. And no parent would probably let their child eat such homemade candy even if one prepared it. So there is a kind of cautiousness and of independence we teach our children, and there are good reasons for that.

But I am thinking here about a different kind of individualism that is also part of our world, an individualism so very different from what our ancestors only a few generations back would have known. It is the sense of individualism that says “I can do it on my own, and I do not need anyone else.” It is a sense of “I need to prepare for my own future, and if I can do that, why should I care for those who are less successful in such preparation.” Of course, we rarely take into consideration persons who do not start with our advantages. We live in a society and a

culture that reminds us that we can no longer count on governments to do things for us. Now some of us would agree with that perspective and others of us would think it a wrong-headed approach. Regardless of our viewpoint on that question, I worry about a subtle message that, intentionally or unintentionally, accompanies the theme “We must do more for ourselves.” The troubling sub-message is that we need to make it alone, on our own, and that we do not need to worry about anyone else. Equally, if things are going badly for us, we may well have the sense that no one else ought to have any concern for us.

For some of us, this sense of individualism, of being alone, may seem like blessedness; for others of us, it may cause despair. Either way, it is a vision very different from the vision behind today’s reading from Genesis. It is also a very different vision from the prevailing Christian one down through the years.

In making these comments, I do not want in any way to deny the reality of the individual, or the need for individual development, or the need for individual independence. But this passage from Genesis just exudes a strong sense of community. And a strong sense of community has been a key feature of Christian history from the earliest days of Christianity, when followers of Jesus opted to hold all things in common. “We are not alone, we live in God’s world,” as the line in the creed runs. We are not alone. God is with us, others are with us, and, like Abraham and Ishmael, we need also to be with others. The Christian doctrine of the “communion of saints” has functioned down through the centuries as a reminder that we Christians are part of a community that spans generations. The ritual by which we remember those who have died in the past year is, yes, a remembering. But it is a reminder that we live not just as individuals, but live also as part of a community. In the case of the community of this congregation, it is a community that stretches back for over 200 years.

The third lesson this passage offers is summed up in one aspect of the “communion of saints.” These stories were told because Abraham and Ishmael, despite their faults (and believe me, they had faults, just as each one of us has faults), were models for those who came after them. For example, Abraham is the great example of faith for the writer of the letter to the Hebrews.

We are remembering in our service today persons we have known, persons who have been models for us, sometimes knowingly, often unknowingly. And we also function as models for others, occasionally knowingly, usually unknowingly. Even though our names will not be recorded after the fashion of Abraham, or Sarah, or Ishmael, or Ruth, or any of the other figures about whom we read in Scripture, we, too, are models for others. We, too, will function as a part of the communion of saints.

Two deaths and a list of names—may we be guided on our journey, and may we be guides to others. And to the God who beckons, to Jesus, through whom we have come to see that God most clearly, and to the Holy Spirit, the presence of that beckoning God, with us now and with us always, be all honour, glory, and praise, Amen.

### **Resources**

Brueggemann, Walter. *Genesis*. John Knox Press: Atlanta, 1982.