Congregational Church of Pinehurst

United Church of Christ

March 1, 2015

Lent2B

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-17a

Romans 4:13-25

***No Laughing Matter***

I’m grateful for all the people who keep circulating

those lists of church bulletin bloopers around by email.

I’ve read some of them a dozen times,

but they still make me laugh.

I’m sure you’ve heard them as well.

The sermon this morning: ‘Jesus Walks on Water’.

The sermon this evening: ‘Searching for Jesus’.

Ladies, don’t forget the rummage sale.

It’s a chance to get rid of those things

not worth keeping around the house.

Bring your husbands.

Irving Benson and Jessie Carter were married on October 24th.

So ends a friendship that began in their school days.

These bulletin bloopers make us chuckle

because they play on the double meaning of words.

Words can and do have multiple meanings,

and the meaning we hear

often depends on the context in which we hear it.

The same is true of stories.

Stories can and do have more than one meaning,

depending on the context in which we hear them.

And stories get reinterpreted continually

as they are retold in different contexts.

That is their beauty and their power.

A power that can be used to heal and encourage,

or to hurt and abuse.

And using stories in ***that*** way,

is no laughing matter.

The ancient story of Abraham and Sarah

is one that has been told and retold throughout history,

and reinterpreted in many different contexts.

We find that story retold in our own Bible itself---

retold in ways that shift its meaning.

As we heard together this morning,

the Genesis storyteller shares this story

as a very human one.

Abraham is portrayed as an imperfect guy

who struggles to trust the promises of God for his life,

even to the point of laughing at God,

when God promises to bring he and Sarah

children in their very old age---

ancestors that will become the heart of God’s people.

But centuries later,

when the Apostle Paul retells this story,

he portrays Abraham as a paragon of virtue.

Abraham, he says, never doubted God for a minute.

And as a reward for that,

God fulfilled God’s promise to Abraham and Sarah, and they produced a lineage that gave us Jesus.

So which interpretation of Abraham is correct?

Was he certain of God’s guidance from the start,

or was he a doubter and a struggler,

who nevertheless kept journeying with God

to see how it would all turn out.

Well, maybe that is the wrong question

to bring to a story to begin with.

Because a story can have more than one meaning.

A story can help us see what we need to see,

and speak to us in ways that we need to be spoken to,

in different ways at different times.

Personally, I like the Genesis portrait of Abraham

because I am constantly asking questions

and struggling with my faith,

and certainly hope that God is patient with me

on that journey.

The Genesis story reminds me that God is indeed patient,

and understanding of my human limitations,

as I make my way with God.

So how we tell and retell the story

can make a great deal of difference

in how we go forward with our lives.

And which parts we embellish

and which parts we leave out altogether

can shape the way we see the world.

For instance, in Christian lectionaries

which proscribe which passages we read

each Sunday of the Church year,

we do not read the part of the story that tells us that

Abraham already had a son before Isaac was born.

You see, according to the Genesis storyteller,

Abraham’s wife Sarah was unable to have children.

So, as was often the custom of the time,

Sarah offered Hagar, her Egyptian slave, as a concubine.

Hagar becomes pregnant.

And thus begins a painful rivalry between

Hagar and the now jealous Sarah.

To make a long story a bit shorter,

Sarah makes Hagar’s life miserable,

so that she runs to the desert to escape.

While in the desert God sends an angel to comfort her,

and to tell her that God will bring from her child

a great nation,

through whom God’s blessings will come to the world.

Hagar returns to Abraham and has a son

and names him Ishmael,

meaning “God hears.”

And soon after this, according to the Genesis storyteller,

God promises an heir to Abraham through Sarah—

an heir who will become a great nation,

through whom God’s blessings will come to the world.

And Sarah bears a son

and names him Isaac,

meaning “laughter”---

Because she and Abraham had laughed in disbelief

when God promised them a son,

and perhaps,

because this child’s birth made them laugh with joy.

The story is a fascinating one---

with even more twists and turns

that would make this sermon far too long.

But my point is that, as Christians,

who also depend on our Jewish roots for grounding,

we only hear one side of the story in our worship.

We rejoice with Sarah that she finally has a son

by the miraculous intervention of God,

a son whose lineage would bring us Jesus.

But ***we*** do not concern ourselves with Ishmael.

But there are others who do.

In the Islamic tradition,

the lineage of Ishmael brings them Mohammed

who received the Koran as a divine revelation.

So the two largest religions of the world,

in terms of the number of their followers,

trace their roots back to this story.

And, obviously, the Jewish tradition does as well.

That is why these 3 great monotheistic traditions

are called the “Abrahamic faiths”.

But though we share a common story,

we emphasized different parts of the story,

and we often interpret this story in different ways.

And the truth of the matter is

that ***within*** each of these 3 great religious traditions,

we interpret this story in vastly different ways.

And this has significant consequences.

Because how you interpret a story is no laughing matter.

The Rev. Mike Huckabee, a Southern Baptist pastor,

referred to this story this fall during an event called

“Star Spangled Sunday”

in which he focused on the rivalry between

the two children of Abraham.

He actually said, and I quote,

*I got news for all the dispirited and disquieted Christians*

*in America who are somehow afraid that the Sons of Ishmael*

*who are challenging us now in the Middle East*

*will overwhelm the Sons of Isaac.*

*Let me assure you, I have read the end of the Book!*

*My dear friends, we win!*

*And our flag still stands!*1

But it seems to me, that to use this story to perpetuate a rivalry

that pits one religion against another

is to put oneself dangerously close to using the very

same rhetoric that terrorist groups are using around the world—

rhetoric that *uses* religion as a tool to stir up fear and hatred,

and a desire to dominate others.

It seems to me that ISIL is a heinous terrorist group

that is ***perverting*** the Islamic faith

into a tool to be used to spew fear and hate and domination.

Just as it seems to me that the Ku Klux Klan

is a heinous terrorist group

that ***perverts*** the Christian faith

into a tool to be used to spew fear and hate and domination.

And when someone tells me a religious story

that justifies hate and ill will toward another human being,

I go looking for another interpretation.

And that is the grave danger of fundamentalism---

whether it is Islamic fundamentalism,

or Jewish fundamentalism,

or Christian fundamentalism.

The danger of all fundamentalism is that it tells stories

as if they have only one meaning.

And that is a dangerous misconception,

a misconception that is no laughing matter,

and a misconception that threatens humanity’s very future.

So here’s another interpretation of this story---

a hopeful and life-giving interpretation

that I ran across in a 2011 blog by Lucy Chumbley

who is editor of an Episcopal newspaper

called Washington Window.

She writes:

*When the patriarch [Abraham] died at a ripe old age*

*and was “gathered to his people,”*

*his sons Isaac and Ishmael*

*came together to bury him. (Genesis 25:7)*

*Death has a way of bringing families together;*

*exposing our shared and sometimes complicated roots.*

*Though their lives were set on an adversarial course,*

*Isaac and Ishmael were brothers.*

*On the tenth anniversary of 9/11,*

*we’d do well to remember that.2*

And I’d suggest that we’d do well to remember that ***always***.

Because how we tell and retell stories

is no laughing matter.

But ***if*** we tell our stories in ways

that are intended to bring healing and love to the world,

we may actually hear the faint sound of God laughing---

not laughing at us,

but with us.

Laughing like Abraham and Sarah and Hagar,

because we have finally gotten it.

We have ***finally, finally*** gotten it,

that Isaac and Ishmael were kin,

and that we are, too.

All of us.

Amen.

Rev. Brent A. Bissette

1The Rev. Mike Huckabee, former governor of Arkansas, at a

political rally called “Star Spangled Sunday”, Sept. 15, 2014.

2From Lucy Chumbley’s blog “Isaac and Ishmael Were Brothers”

at [www.episcopalcafe.com/isaac\_and\_ishmael\_were\_brothers/](http://www.episcopalcafe.com/isaac_and_ishmael_were_brothers/)