

Genesis 21: 8-21: Call Me Ishmael
June 22
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[This homily gave me an opportunity to put a Yemeni ghurta over my shoulders and take on the role of Patriarch Ishmael...]

- ✘ Call me Ishmael
 - ✓ I am the patriarch of the Arabic peoples
 - I am also the innocent victim of abuse and rejection
 - I am the child of Abraham and Hagar, a slave woman, a single mother
 - The mother who was abandoned and disowned by my father
 - I am the eldest son of a great patriarch
 - Who was led by his bitter and suspicious wife, Sarah, to have my mother and myself cast out into the desert
- ✘ Sarah, bless her heart.
 - ✓ She did as good as she could, having to live with the man she was married to,
 - ✓ Abraham: what coward.
 - He actually gave Sarah to Pharaoh as a gift
 - Sure, Abraham and Sarah were powerless immigrants in a powerful land, where the strong did what they will and the weak did what they must to stay alive.
 - ...and Sure, Sarah hadn't borne Abraham any children, but that was no excuse to demean her in such a way
 - Sarah was scared; maybe she thought of herself as less than a woman because she couldn't have children.
 - SHE tried to have a surrogate child by the common practice of sending her husband to my mother.
 - ◆ Maybe Sarah thought that I would count as her son.
 - ◆ But life is never as simple as that.
- ✘ After Sarah gave birth to Isaac, she still wasn't happy.
 - ✓ When Isaac was three years old and was weaned, Abraham gave a great feast in honor of his son

- And during the festivities Isaac and I were playing together, and when Sarah saw that, something just snapped.
 - Maybe she thought that I, the son of a slave girl, should not be playing as an equal with her son
 - Maybe she thought that, since I was older, Abraham would favor me over Isaac. I don't know
- She demanded that my mother and I be banished immediately.
 - And Abraham, my weak-willed Father gave in...and the next morning, he put me and a small amount of bread and water all on my mother's shoulders and sent us all off into the wilderness of Beersheba.
- ✓ Soon the bread was gone, and the water was gone. And my mother knew that her life and my life were over.
 - So she put me under a bush to shield me from the sun, and she went away as far as she could so she could still see the bush I was under, but didn't have to go through the pain of having to watch me die.
- ✗ Psalm 88, which we said today, could have been her prayer in the desert:

1-9 (fr. *The Message*) GOD, you're my last chance of the day. ...
 I've had my fill of trouble; I'm camped on the edge of hell...
 I'm battered senseless by your rage, relentlessly pounded by your waves of anger.
 I'm caught in a maze and can't find my way out, blinded by tears of pain and frustration....
 You made lover and neighbor alike dump me; the only friend I have left is Darkness.
- ✗ But God didn't turn his back on us.
 - ✓ God heard me crying in the desert. God brought my mother back to me, placed my hand in hers and led her to a spring of water in the desert.
 - ✓ And we lived. And God made me an expert in living in the desert. He made me handy with a bow and arrow.
 - And eventually my mother found a wife for me among the Egyptians.
 - ✓ I became the patriarch of the Arabic peoples
 - Nomads who wandered in the deserts south of Israel and Judah
 - ✓ I lived for 137 years
 - My sons were twelve princes according to their tribes

- ✘ But I often wondered about my mother's prayer out there in the desert.
 - ✓ Even though God has rescued us from the desert and death, why did we have to go through all that?
 - Why did God (as the psalm said) "batter us senseless by his rage?"

- ✘ But over time, I came to realize that it wasn't God who had abandoned us and it wasn't God who drove us out into the desert.
 - ✓ It was Sarah and Abraham: the mother and father of the Covenant; the heroes of the faith

- ✘ And I also realized that this was not—by definition—the way God wanted it.
 - ✓ Just because the Good Book says that this is the way it happened does not mean that this is the way that God wanted it to happen.
 - ✓ My mother Hagar and Isaac's mother Sarah could have been like sisters.
 - Isaac and I could have lived and grown old like brothers.
 - ✓ Abraham could have stood up to Sarah.
 - He could have told her to trust God, to trust God's covenant. To trust God's promise that she and Abraham would have a son who would become a mighty people.
 - ✓ And had Sarah trusted in God, there could have been two great peoples established
 - Peoples who could have lived in harmony, even today.

- ✘ My suffering was not caused by God's anger, but because of Sarah's jealousy, Sarah's anger, Sarah's fears,
 - ✓ And my own father's passivity, to just let things drift in the hope that all would be well, sooner or later.
 - ✓ Their fear was the root of their sin,
 - And I was wounded for their sins; I was crushed for their iniquity.

- ✘ What happened to me happened because the people who had a covenant with God didn't trust God to keep up his part of the covenant.
 - ✓ Sarah was so worried about her own place and her own posterity that she could no longer believe that God had more than enough love for all of us, that God had enough abundance that could be shared with Abraham, Sarah and Isaac and much as it could have been shared with Abraham, Hagar and Ishmael.
 - ✓ And there would have been abundance for all.

- ✘ In every community, there are women and children who have been cast out:
 - ✓ There are the ones we can readily put out of mind: the homeless, the husbandless, the jobless, the powerless, the faceless.
 - ✓ We have living near us a large group of new outcasts: the migrant farmworkers and their families right here in the Skagit Valley.
 - Where the Sakuma Brothers have determined this year that they can no longer allow whole families to live in housing that was really meant to house two or three people.
 - Some people see this as retaliation for the strikes called for by the migrant farmworkers last year
 - Some see it as government over-regulation of occupancy rules.
 - This has gone to the Skagit County Court and Judge Cook's expected to give a ruling in the next couple of weeks.
- ✘ But there is small city just across the Swinomish Channel from where the farmworkers do their labor.
 - ✓ And this city does have 59 acres donated to it by Fred and Mary Willette (right next to Sharp's Corners), fully plumbed, fully electrified, totally empty; and the city fathers and mothers haven't even decided whether to lease or sell or whatever for whomever wants to locate a business on that property.
 - ✓ While we wait for a prospective buyer, could we set up a tent-city for the summer?
 - My, oh, my! Think about the fear that would cause.
 - But do we have an obligation, as people of the covenant, as people with a baptismal covenant, to offer the way out of this mess?
 - As people of the covenant, we have been challenged by God to overcome our suspicions and fears and willingness to let things drift along.
 - Because if people of the covenant do not show gentleness and compassion and if they do not demand justice, who will?
- ✘ Call me Ishmael.
 - ✓ You know my story.
 - My story is one of fear and abandonment by good people of faith.
 - My story is a reminder of our obligation to live out our lives as people of God's covenant.

- We must be faithful to what that covenant means and courageous in living that out.
- And trusting in God's love to sustain us all.