

ENOUGH TO MOVE ON

In the 1936 Olympics, Jesse Owens was a shoe-in to win the long jump. The year before, Owens jumped 26' 8-1/4" – a record that would stand for twenty-five years. As Owens walked into the long-jump pit at the Olympics, he saw a blonde, blue-eyed German practicing in the 26' range. Owens was anxious, as he well knew the German desire to prove their superiority over other races.

The German walked over to Owens and introduced himself as Luz Long, saying, "You ought to be able to qualify with your eyes closed." Luz made a suggestion to Owens: since the qualifying distance was only 23' 5-1/2", Owens should make a chalk mark several inches back from the jumping spot and jump from the chalk mark. Owens did, and he qualified easily. In the finals, Owens set a new record and earned two of his four gold medals. The first person to congratulate Owens was Luz Long, in full view of Hitler. Luz was later killed in the war, but Owens reflected, "You could melt down all the medals and cups I have and they wouldn't be plating on the 24-carat friendship I felt for Luz Long." (Lectionary Homiletics, April-May 2003, p. 64)

Whereas I enjoy competitive contests, at the same time, I am moved more by acts of compassion. I thrill to see the all too often rare display of sportsmanship one athlete will extend to someone on the other team. The unusual gesture of kindness is just as much a highlight of the game for me as is the unbelievable pass, shot or score. We are quite naturally drawn to these stories where fairness and respect come into play. Instead of the typical "in-your-face" mentality, it's refreshing to see competitors who still exhibit old-school values, who are motivated by those things that are best and right and true. These are the stories that warm the human heart.

By contrast, the biblical story for today leaves me somewhat cold. It doesn't show our spiritual ancestors in their best light for they are scheming and conniving and looking out for number one. In fact, we see them as they are – "warts and all" – and it's not a pretty picture. The scripture lesson for today follows the text which Jody preached on last Sunday about the birth of Abraham and Sarah's son, Isaac; there was a great deal of joy and laughter at God's gift of a child in their old age. Today's text opens with more laughter. Isaac was old enough to be weaned. A party was planned to celebrate the occasion because, in ancient times, infant mortality rates were high; for a child to survive past the first couple of years was indeed cause for great rejoicing.

In the midst of all the festivities, Sarah observed her young son, Isaac, playing with Ishmael, who was about sixteen-years-old. Sarah painfully remembered all those years of waiting and wondering if Yahweh were ever going to make good on the divine promise to Abraham and Sarah of offspring. After years of barrenness, Sarah finally and impatiently said to Abraham: "Go in to my slave-girl (Hagar); it may be that I shall obtain children by her." Abraham willingly obliged and the result of his union with Hagar was the birth of their son, Ishmael. It didn't help matters any that Hagar looked with contempt on Sarah. As a result, Sarah treated Hagar harshly.

Here it was, sixteen years later, and Ishmael was romping and playing with his half-brother, Isaac. Because the boys shared the same father but had different mothers, Sarah watched with resentment tainted by jealousy. She was envious and fearful that Abraham would give both boys an equal share of the inheritance. Sarah considered Ishmael a threat to Isaac's place in the family and, perhaps, within the divine covenant. Therefore, Sarah told Abraham to get rid of Hagar and Ishmael.

Quite naturally, Abraham was distressed. But, here's where the story takes a weird turn. God convinced Abraham to do whatever Sarah said because "it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you." Despite Yahweh's proven record of caring for the oppressed, refugees, unprotected widows and children, the Lord gave Abraham the "go-ahead" because the divine blessing was intended to flow through Isaac - and not Ishmael. However, God promised that Ishmael would become a nation as well.

Abraham did as he was told. The next morning he handed Hagar some bread and a water skin and sent Hagar and Ishmael on their way, into the wilderness. Before long, the meager provisions were exhausted and hope was gone. Hagar lovingly laid the child in the shade of a bush, and then she moved off in the distance so that she wouldn't have to hear her son suffer or witness his death.

However, God heard the cries of the boy. The Lord came to Hagar there in the wilderness of Beer-sheba and assured her that both mother and son would be saved and that God would make of Ishmael a great nation. Immediately, the first part of the promise was fulfilled for God opened Hagar's eyes to see a well of water nearby. She filled the skin with water and gave the boy a drink. In time, the other part of the promise came true, as Ishmael's descendants became a new tribal group named the Ishmaelites.

This is what I glean from today's story. We human beings have our fine points as well as our failings. We are a mixture of good and evil. With God's gift of free will, we make choices that sometimes benefit others and, at times, cause harm to others. No matter what choices we make or actions we take, God is there – through it all – to shape and mold our decisions, to work with or in spite of our deeds to bring about the holy purpose. We don't always understand why God allows certain things to happen but we trust that God is with us and for us, and that God will ultimately do what is best for each and everyone of us as well as the whole creation.

Because God sees the overall, big picture, God's actions don't always make sense to us; yet, still we trust that God is watching over us, guiding us, and protecting us in the process.

I am reminded of the Cherokee Indian's rite of passage. When a young boy reached a certain age, his father took him blindfolded into the forest and left him. The boy was required to sit on a stump the whole nightlong and not take off the blindfold until daybreak. He was all by himself. He could not cry out to anyone. Once he survived the night he was considered a MAN. He could not tell the other boys of his experience for each one had to come into his own manhood. The boy was terrified. He could hear all kinds of noises. Beasts were all around him. But he sat there never removing the blindfold. Finally, after a horrific night, he could feel the warmth of the sun and see that night had become day. So, he removed his blindfold. It was then that he saw his father, sitting quietly and alertly on a stump nearby, keeping watch over him.

Isn't that the message from this biblical text? Even when we feel alone in the world, we are never alone for our Heavenly Father is with us; God watches over us and keeps us safe. The Lord came to Hagar and Ishmael in the wilderness of Beer-sheba, and God is ever near to us – no matter what wilderness we are in or dilemma we face.

Then, while it is possible that God created a wellspring before Hagar's eyes, I think it's more likely that the source of water existed all along, and God, opened Hagar's eyes to see what was possible. Perhaps, due to her own tears, Hagar's eyes were unable to see clearly. Thus, God not only gave Hagar a gift of water but a gift of vision as well. Hagar's immediate needs were met, and she was able to save the life of her son. That drink of water may not have solved all of her problems, but it gave her enough strength to pick up and move on. She had at her disposal all that she needed to walk in faith. From there, God was able to fulfill a promise and

make a nation of Ishmael. Yet all they really got, at that moment, was a drink of water. (Erin Wathen, Biblical Preaching Journal, Spring 2005, p. 37)

Sometimes, when we too are in the wilderness of our own lives, all it takes to give us a nudge in the right direction is some word of encouragement, a smile, a listening ear, or an act of kindness. While I have never seen a vision of God or heard God speaking directly to me, at various times in my life, I have heard God's voice speaking to me through the words of someone else. Throughout the years, I have encountered the Holy through words of wisdom spoken to me by way of some friends, my wife, the seminary president, church members, colleagues, and a host of others. If we have ears with which to hear, and if we really listen beyond the noise of the world in which we live, we can and we will hear God speaking to us and directing our paths.

Sometime ago I was talking with my friend, Tom, who told me this story. Tom went to a funeral and heard the minister say that the deceased had wanted to do many other things during her life but was unable to do so because of her illness and subsequent death. Tom told me that he left that funeral thinking about those words and how they applied to his own life. On Monday of the next week, he walked in to the boss' office, gave notice that he was quitting, and, soon thereafter, began his own business. He doesn't regret that decision and is greatly fulfilled in his new life.

God was speaking to Tom and trying to get his attention. And, to Tom's credit, he was open and willing to listen to God and let God guide him. The same is true for us throughout our lives – whether we have it made in the shade or we find ourselves out in the wilderness. God is with us, and God is providing a way for us. The solution, at first, may not meet all of our needs; but, it is enough to move us on from that place, step by step, to the next place, and then the next, until we have climbed out of the pit and are standing on solid ground once again. In times of suffering, hopelessness, and need, we have seen that God will give us, at the very least, a drink of water – and, eventually, so much more.

Certainly, Hagar needed much more than what she actually found in the moment. All Hagar found that day was a drink of water for both herself and her son, Ishmael. But from the same well she also found hope for the future, and a firm conviction that the Lord's promise would be kept sometime out there in the future. She discovered empowerment, vision, and just enough strength to cope and move on to the next step. There, in the desert, she uncovered the truth of God's presence and abiding love. (Ibid) Sometimes, all we get is a drink of water, a tidbit of wisdom, a word uttered in passing or off the cuff, a listening ear, a smile, a note of gratitude or a holy hug. But, it is enough for the time being; it is enough to move on.

Let us strive to be open to the Presence and the Word of the Lord – to the glory of God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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