

I have to admit that I was mightily tempted to recycle a sermon for tonight. I'm off this Sunday, and so don't have to write anything for this weekend, and none of you – well, few of you – were here two days ago, so I could safely have given you a condensed version of Sunday's message about shaking the dust off your feet.

But then I read the lectionary selections for the coming Sunday and knew I didn't have any choice but to write something new. And the reason for that is that I didn't like the lectionary reading – at least I certainly didn't like the Genesis scripture.

The Genesis reading about Ishmael being sent away is disturbing. We're all familiar with the backstory – God had promised Abraham and Sarah a son. Their initial response was laughter, and after the laughter had dried up with still no son, they took matters into their own hands, and Ishmael was born to Hagar. A slave child born to a slave.

Of course, this inevitably led to anger and bitterness – at one point Hagar ran away, but was convinced to return.

Tonight's scripture picks up the story after Sarah has delivered Isaac – the child of the covenant – and this story isn't a pretty one at all.

Sarah was jealous and resentful. She saw the older Ishmael playing with her baby Isaac and was overcome with bitterness, thinking that Ishmael stood to inherit the family's name and goods, and perhaps even the blessing that God had promised. So Sarah petitioned Abraham to send away Ishmael and his mother to wander in the wastelands of Beer-sheba.

At one point, Hagar lay Ishmael under a bush, thinking they were about to die out there. At this point, God intervened; he not only kept the two of them alive, but blessed Ishmael, saying that he would make a great nation out of him.

Really, it is a bit of a mixed blessing – that same angel of the Lord also said that Ishmael would be
a wild ass of a man,
with his hand against everyone,
and everyone's hand against him;

and he shall live at odds with all his kin.

So, while things kind of work out for Ishmael, it's still a very tough reading. While it's easy to focus on and preach about unification, reconciliation – all things coming together under the banner of Christ – there are plenty of stories in the bible that seem to be about division, separation and abandonment. This is one of them.

In fact, there seem to be a number of splits that happen within this family: between Abraham and his nephew Lot, Abraham and Ishmael, Abraham's grandsons Jacob and Esau. It's like this family is being whittled down; continually cut back – almost like pruning.

This pruning image quite helped me to begin to get a handle on this otherwise disturbing story of a father casting his son out into the wilderness.

God was differentiating a people. Frequently, we are not defined by our centers, but by our borders. Often the easiest way to say what we are is by declaring what we are not. In the case of Abraham's family, it is clear that God was quite actively defining and differentiating a people. He was setting a few of them apart.

God set aside a bloodline – a very particular and very specific bloodline. He marked them, or rather required them to mark themselves, through circumcision. In succeeding generations he continued to set them apart by giving them a law; dress, diet and purity rules, and eventually by giving them a land in which to settle.

By this time the Israelites were pretty well defined in terms of being monotheistic, with their own geography, dress, habits, and political structure. Centuries of paring and pruning had cultivated a distinct people - a kingdom of priests and a holy nation, set apart and sanctified.

Now, it would seem that while things in many ways were going well for those chosen by God – the ones rejected were not taking things very well at all.

Psalms 83 describes their feeling toward the nation Israel:
“Come,” they say, “let us destroy them as a nation,

so that Israel's name is remembered no more."

5 With one mind they plot together;

they form an alliance against you—

6 the tents of Edom and the Ishmaelites,

of Moab and the Hagrites,

7 Byblos, Ammon and Amalek,

Philistia, with the people of Tyre.

8 Even Assyria has joined them

to reinforce Lot's descendants.

I won't go into all the fun history that I went through this week, but I looked up each of those groups that were united against Israel and all of them were descendants of Lot, Ishmael, and Esau, accompanied by some of the descendants of Ham – Noah's youngest son who was also rejected.

All these folks who didn't make the cut seemed to hold a bit of a grudge, and perhaps rightly so, against Israel, the blessed and favoured people of God, who despite their frequent backsliding and bellyaching, are special.

Which raises the question – why would God privilege these people, while rejecting the others? Were God's people more deserving, or Ishmael, Lot and Esau so terrible? Why bless one group and curse all the others?

Is God a God of division, or of reconciliation?

When I look at how God's people were blessed – it makes me think twice about blessing. They were blessed with slavery, beginning with Joseph. They were blessed with wandering, for an entire generation. They were blessed with a land, but a land that was constantly under attack; they were blessed with exile; they were blessed with occupation.

They were blessed with a law that condemned them, but had no power to save them. It would seem that God's people were formed in the crucible of hardship and oppression; their blessing was that they were tough with God on their side – because they needed to be tough. Even with God's blessing their life was not easy.

The blessing of God's people doesn't seem to come in the form of prosperity, power or respect, though they did enjoy those at times in their history. God's blessing to his people was the knowledge of him.

God's chosen ones learned the hard way that they could not rely on themselves for salvation; they learned that they couldn't be saved through the law, through the power of other nations, through wealth, through false gods or through anything of this world.

The lesson beaten into them over centuries is that God alone can save. That knowledge is their blessing. And the ultimate irony is that through all the pain and suffering they had to go through to receive this knowledge, their blessing was not theirs to keep.

When we go back to God's original conversation with Abraham we read 'I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'

God's blessing to Abraham is that Abraham and his descendants will be a blessing to all the families of the earth. The hard-earned blessing is not for them to keep – only for them to give away.

To wrap this up, and return to the beginning – I was troubled by this story of Abraham sending away his son. I was bothered by the seemingly heartless division, by the abandonment – by what seemed to be a going against everything that I thought a loving God would prescribe.

But, in this case, it seems that the ones who were cut off were not cursed as I had imagined. They are not abandoned. God does in fact have a reconciling plan, and that plan was to take a people, separate them and sanctify them, and then to refine them in fire, to put them under great pressure so that they would later be able to testify that God alone can save – that they would learn that truth that could later set the whole world free.

Without pruning, and without pressure, the Israelites could never have learned to rely on God as they did. Without the Israelites relationship with God, the Messiah could not have been revealed as he was.

Ishmael, that wild ass of a man with his hand against everyone, and his descendants served their part in revealing salvation to all of humanity. Without division, unification could not have happened. Sometimes, when you love your children, it is necessary to separate them.

Because of this troubling story from the past, it is now possible to declare that we are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, whose purpose is to declare the praises of him who called all of us out of darkness, and into his wonderful light.