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Daily Reflections



I WILL MAKE OF HIM A GREAT NATION

By David C. Robinson, SJ

Today's Gospel

Abraham got some bread and a skin of water and gave them to Hagar. Then, placing the child on her back, he sent her away. As she roamed aimlessly in the wilderness of Beer-sheba, the water in the skin was used up. So she put the child down under a shrub, and then went and sat down opposite him, about a bowshot away; for she said to herself, "Let me not watch to see the child die." As she sat opposite Ishmael, he began to cry. God heard the boy's cry, and God's messenger called to Hagar from heaven: "What is the matter, Hagar? Don't be afraid; God has heard the boy's cry in this plight of his. Arise, lift up the boy and hold him by the hand; for I will make of him a great nation." Then God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water. She went and filled the skin with water, and then let the boy drink. God was with the boy as he grew up.

GENESIS 21:14-20

Reflection

Throughout the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament, we are met with an encyclopedic history of the evolving people of Israel, from the first creation to the death of Moses. There are covenants, beginning with Adam and Eve. There are exodus and exiles, wars and conquests, the rise and fall of lineages. Throughout all these historical unfoldings, the presence and divine touch of God work in profound ways to shape the society, culture, and faith of the Chosen People. Sometimes the inevitable conflicts are domestic, trivial, and a temporary impediment to the realization of God's hopes for his people. Yet there is a continual current of grace, in which those who seem cast aside find their place in the emerging flow of history.

Hagar is a wonderful case in point. Domestic jealousies arise between Sarah (the wife of Abraham and the mother of Isaac, who is to begin the lauded history of the Israelites as a people) and Hagar, the servant woman, whose son by Abraham, Ishmael, is put out with his mother by Sarah. As Hagar laments their impending death in the wilderness, God intervenes—not simply saving them from a dismal fate, but promising instead that Ishmael will also become the father of a 'great nation.' The future of Israel is held in the heart of God, but that does not exclude other possible futures. Ishmael is claimed and heralded in Islamic tradition as the ancestor of Mohammed, who founded the religious family of Muslim faith. Thus, two powerful faith communities are birthed from the unique, if sometimes contentious, relationships in the family of Abraham.

In contemporary circles, we may be inclined to think of these two religions as coexisting or even in an inescapable conflict. However, in the very founding of the Abrahamic lineage, a second figure is born who comes to be the spiritual forefather claimed by millions of Muslims throughout the world. In the unfolding of spiritual and religious history through time, we can often discover seminal connections that have been obscured by ideology or cultural politics. If God's way among us can give birth to religious affinities throughout history, we might do well to adopt a more inquiring and respectful spirit, as we discover the many and mysterious ways we grow into God's life for us.



Image by Barbara

For Pondering

- Have you had an opportunity to engage in spiritual conversation with the traditions that share many commonalities of history and spirituality (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam)?
- Are there families within your family tree who combine different religious traditions? What have you learned from their differences from, and similarities to, your own faith walk?
- Does your current faith community invite dialogue with other traditions? If not, how might that be encouraged to promote mutual growth?

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