

READ

Genesis 21

REFLECT

Good news and bad news, all rolled up into one. Isaac was finally born, which was fantastic news – Abraham and Sarah had been waiting for children for so long, God promised it would happen, and the day of the fulfillment was finally there. Sarah even turned her response to God’s promise – laughter – into a blessing as people would laugh with her. It’s a beautiful story of trust and hope and how God can make anything happen. But then it turns dark. As soon as Isaac stopped nursing –because Hagar presumably served as his wet nurse – Sarah commanded Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away so that Ishmael couldn’t be an heir and take part of what she believed was due to her son. Abraham was troubled by the command, as most people would be, but God promised him that he’d be taken care of, so he did it. He gave Hagar and Ishmael a flask of water and bread and sent them off. They wandered until they were out of food and water and Hagar felt absolutely hopeless. She didn’t know how they could possibly survive, and so she set him down near a bush and then walked several hundred yards away because she knew they were doomed and she couldn’t bear to watch her son die. She cried out, as did Ishmael – a scene that is unbelievably heartbreaking – but God heard their cries. God’s messenger led Hagar back to her son, they walked hand in hand until they found more water, and they survived. Ishmael grew to become an expert archer, he found a wife, and they lived happily ever after.

The second part of the chapter is a totally different encounter and doesn’t seem to connect to what has just come before it, except for a common place name. Abimelech confronted Abraham and sought to create a treaty with him. Abraham agreed, but also mentioned a well Abimelech’s servants had taken from him. They drew up the treaty and part of it was an exchange of animals, but Abraham included seven ewes, which represented his ownership of the well, so he had it returned to him. He named the well Beer-sheba, meaning well of seven, and it became a place of worship for Abraham to “El Olam,” which means “eternal God.”

REACT

- Isaac's birth is a bit of an emotional roller coaster – from happiness at his birth to horror as Hagar and Ishmael are left for dead, to joy that God didn't ignore the suffering of Hagar and Ishmael. Our own lives are often like this, too – we experience great joys which are then met by sadness and grief. We wish for things to always be great, but they aren't. Hagar's move from hopelessness to hope took deep trust – trust that God wouldn't let her go. She and her son lived in the desert, what must have been a very hard life, but they didn't just survive, they thrived. Their trust led them from their suffering back into joy. How can you allow yourself to trust in God's promises in the midst of your own sadness or suffering?
- Abraham's treaty with Abimelech offers us a glimpse into the character of Abraham. A well that belonged to him was taken from him unlawfully. He could have acted out, but he didn't. Wanting to create peace, rather than conflict, he paid for his well to get turned back over to him. Was it right that he had to pay for it back? No – but the best thing in that moment was creating peace through his treaty, so he did what was necessary for peace. We often want revenge or retribution when people do us wrong, but often it isn't the best road to peace. How can this be a learning moment not just for you, but for our world?

RESPOND

The Names of God: *Throughout Genesis there are many, many names given to God – El, Elohim, El Roi, El Shaddai, El Elyon, El Olam, et cetera. In reality these aren't different names, they are ways to name many of God's characteristics – almighty, eternal, seeing, most high, and so on. These names, used together, helped people understand just how big God is. How do you understand God? Create a list of the ways you understand God – Holy God? Loving God? Almighty God? How long does your list get? Whether you've got 10 or 100 different descriptors, we can know that God is bigger still. We'll never know the end of who God is, and that is good news!*