

[Genesis 21:8-21](#)
[Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17](#)
[Romans 6:1b-11](#)
[Matthew 10:24-39](#)

A SERMON PREACHED BY THE REVEREND ALISTAIR SO ON THE SIXTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, JUNE 22, 2008 AT ALL HALLOWS CHURCH, SOUTH RIVER PARISH, IN DAVIDSONVILLE, MARYLAND

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

1950, during the waning days of the British Empire in the colony of Sarawak, my paternal grandmother gave birth to her fourth son. It was a difficult childbirth. He survived, but she died of miscarriage. So I never got to meet her in my life. After her death, my paternal grandfather remarried. My father, being the eldest son, had great trouble accepting the authority of a new mother. Through some complicated arrangement, he was sent to the city of Tianjin in northern China to study at the age of 14 in 1956. He never got to see any of his family again until we moved to Hong Kong in 1980. Thus, my father was deprived of close parental guidance and the warmth of a large family in his most formative years. Some say every family has a long story. Mine certainly is one of them. But amidst the human predicament that defines much of my family history, is the hope that comes from God alone. God has always been around as we make mistakes. God has always been watching over us. Humans may make many mistakes, but God's mercy never comes to an end. If my father had not been cast out of his family, he would have never met my mother and I would not have been born. Somehow, intricately woven enough, even my path to the priesthood would have probably never been engendered had my father been able to stay with his family. God has a plan all along. And God hears our cry.

With my father's story in mind, it is especially poignant for me to read the story of Hagar and Ishmael. Hagar, the Egyptian slave in Abraham and Sarah's household, becomes entangled in a struggle for posterity and heir. Because Sarah is barren, Abraham decides to take Hagar as a concubine to procure a son. So she gives birth to Ishmael, whom Abraham clearly loves. But interestingly enough, through a miracle of God, Sarah's curse of barrenness is lifted away in her old age. Then, she gives birth to Isaac, who is to become the heir apparent for Abraham since Sarah is the wife proper. However, with Hagar and Ishmael still in the picture, this is not going to be so simple. The occasion of the celebration of Isaac's weaning is high time for Sarah to get rid of Hagar and Ishmael, because in those days, infant mortality was high; young children were weaned usually at the age of three. Now, Isaac has passed through his most vulnerable years and is likely to succeed Abraham when he grows up.

The NRSV (New Revised Standard Version) translation has this: *But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac.* Some biblical commentators suggest that the word "playing" is more appropriately translated as "mocking" here. Whether Ishmael's behavior is questionable or not here, Sarah is determined to cast them out. *So she said to Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac."* This is deeply distressing for Abraham because he loves Ishmael. But God reassures Abraham that he will take care of Hagar and Ishmael as they are meant to be a great nation, but a separate nation from Abraham's. Can you imagine the pain and grief it must have cost Abraham, Hagar and Ishmael on this inevitable parting?

Hagar and Ishmael almost perish in the wilderness. But God intervenes and saves them. So what can we learn from this story? What is the Holy Spirit trying to tell us here? This very story of Isaac and Ishmael, like many parts of Genesis, illuminates the mixture of faith and doubt, joy and jealousy, love and hatred that characterizes the human predicament all too well.^[1] This story lays out the mess of human existence as is. But it also conspicuously delineates God's very active participation in our situation. God hears our cry.

So as we grow in our faith, we become evermore aware of the fact that we live in a world where problems abound and quick solutions are lacking. Churches that promise quick fixes are known to have a very high turnover as people quickly become disillusioned of the undelivered promises of God. The biggest challenge for our spiritual life, my friends, is not what the bishops of the Anglican Communion will discuss in the Lambeth Conference next month. Rather, the single most intimate challenge we have in our spiritual life is combating the problems of the world while trusting God and maintaining our faith.

Sometimes, life brings us melancholy by default. When we lose a loved one to illness or accident, when our marriage fails, when a family member becomes estranged, when we toil day in and day out and still can't make ends meet, when our children fail us, when our parents fail us, we are injected with a good dose of melancholy. As one popular song aptly describes the parody of life: An old man turned ninety-eight... He won the lottery and died the next day... A black fly in your Chardonnay... ☐☐A death row pardon two minutes too late... Rain on your wedding day... A free ride when you've already paid... The good advice that you just didn't take... Ten thousand spoons when all you need is a knife... (Alanis Morissette's *Ironic*)

But God is always present despite the irony of life. God is very present in every human predicament. The psalmist truly lives in the faith that God is present in whatever situation:

In the time of my trouble I will call upon you, * for you will answer me.

God hears our cry. God knows our pain.

Our challenge is to acknowledge God's presence and praise God even when we are in pain spiritually or physically.

We truly only see dimly right now as through a dim mirror. When we shall see fully in that realm where God's truth reigns, then things in life will make sense in the end. I remember when I visited San Francisco, also called Babylon by the Bay, I was enthralled by all the different neighborhoods and characteristics thereof. But I had trouble figuring out how they all fit together. So when I finally got up to Twin Peaks, I was afforded a panoramic view of the city. All of a sudden, things began to make sense.

Life is similar in a way. We see and experience bits and pieces, as our lives interact with each other. Sometimes, it's hard to understand why things befall on us the way they do. But with patience and forbearance, things will eventually make sense with God's help and by God's grace. Our faith will take us to the pinnacle of life, because through faith in Jesus Christ, we can attain the fullness of life.

Jesus himself gives us the best advice in terms of facing the complicity of issues in life: *Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell.* Jesus commends us not to fear our ultimate enemy: anything that can lead to our death. Rather, we ought to have a holy fear of God who is in control of our body and soul. To fear God also means to

remember God's presence even in our most vulnerable, miserable and melancholy moments. How may we do that when we are in so much pain? How may we even remember that when we are struggling so much? It's really easy. Cry out. Cry out to God. Yes, we should pray unceasingly at all times and in all places. And one of the treasures of the psalms is that we are shown that our supplications and spiritual complaints all form parts of our prayerful landscape. Cry out to God when you need to. That will be your prayer. And God will hear our cry as he heard the cry of Ishmael in the wilderness.

Sisters and brothers in Christ, it is important for us to recognize the pains in life, the pains in each other's lives as we grow in our faith, because only then can we live our God's compassion: the true "suffering together." God hears our cry. And God experiences the weight and pain of our cry. In Jesus Christ, our human predicament is felt high above the heavens. Remember, Jesus said, "Come unto me all ye that travail and are heavy laden, and I will refresh you, for my yoke is easy and my burden light."

Now, I invite you to lift up whatever pain or grief you may have to God who truly hears our cry.

Let us pray.

God, the creator and preserver of all, we humbly beseech you for all sorts and conditions of people; that you would be pleased to make your ways known unto them, your saving health unto all nations. More especially we pray for your holy Church universal; that it may be so guided and governed by your good Spirit, that all who profess and call themselves Christians may be led into the way of truth, and hold the faith in unity of spirit, in the bond of peace, and in righteousness of life. Finally, we commend to your fatherly goodness all those who are in any ways afflicted or distressed, in mind, body, or estate; that it may please you to comfort and relieve them according to their several necessities, giving them patience under their sufferings, and a happy issue out of all their afflictions. And this we beg for Jesus Christ's sake. Amen.

[1] Wenham, Gordon J., Genesis 16-50, 2 Word Biblical Commentary, p. 88, Thomas Nelson 1994