

June 25, 2017 – Hagar & Ishmael

Genesis 21:8-21

So how is everyone doing? Is that new pew starting to feel comfortable yet?

No... well it takes time to get used to a new home ... just ask the Etmeh family.

Being a refugee is not easy. According to the United Nations, a refugee is someone who has been forced to flee his or her country because of persecution, war, or violence. Just imagine making that decision. How hard would it be to decide to leave everything behind and head off with your family in search of a new life?

Of course, for many the decision is made for them. This was the case for Hagar and Ishmael in today's story from the book of Genesis. They were literally sent off into desert with only some bread and a skin of water. And why? Because of power and money. Sarah didn't want Ishmael to receive any of the inheritance that she believed belonged to her son, Isaac. Ishmael was also her husband Abraham's son, but his mother was Hagar. Hagar was Sarah's attendant, her slave.

In Syria, some refugees have fled their country because of political persecution and many have left because the ongoing fighting. In either case, they are fleeing for their very lives and the numbers continue to increase. In the first three months of this year more than 250,000 additional Syrians registered as refugees

bringing the total to 5.1 million <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/03/number-syrian-refugees-passes-million-170330132040023.html>

Being a refugee, leaving everything behind and moving to a new place is incredibly hard. It involves travelling dangerous roads, crossing guarded borders, living in overcrowded refugee camps or apartment buildings, waiting and waiting to receive official status from the United Nations, and eventually, hopefully arriving at your final destination.

In today's story Hagar and Ishmael wandered off into the desert of Beersheba. But soon the skin of water was empty and Hagar set her child under a bush. She sat a distance away – far enough that she couldn't hear him cry. Hagar began to wail and weep at the thought of watching her child die in the desert.

But God heard Ishmael's crying and Hagar heard the voice of an angel. She heard a still small voice within her that said, "Do not be afraid.... Get up, lift up the child and hold his hand; for I will make of him a great nation." And it was in that moment that her eyes were opened and she saw a well of water – a well of water in the desert. Hagar went to it and filled the skin with water and she gave Ishmael a drink.

Hagar and Ishmael did survive and the scripture tells us that "God was with the boy as he grew up." They became people of the desert and eventually Ishmael married an Egyptian wife. In later of chapter of Genesis we learn that Ishmael

had twelve sons and he did become the father of a great nation. In fact, people of the Muslim faith believe that their prophet Mohammed was a descendant of Ishmael. And the bible tells us that the Jewish nation descended from Isaac, Ishmael's brother. And of course Jesus of Nazareth was also Jewish and a descendant of Isaac. So Abraham, the father of Ishmael and Isaac, is the patriarch of the Muslim faith, the Jewish faith and the Christian faith. The same God is worshipped by all three; the same God has made promises to the people of all three faiths. We are all God's people. We are all children of God.

Hagar and Ishmael were refugees and they were able to survive and to thrive in their new country. We know that Hagar's eyes were opened to see the well of water, but we don't know the rest of their story. We don't know how far they had to travel, who they met on their way, or how many people were there to help them. We are told that God was with Ishmael as he grew up, and we know that usually God works through people, through people like us. So there must have been people who were there for Hagar and Ishmael as they learned to live in the desert.

Today the people of Syria are spread all over the world. Over five million have remained in neighbouring countries such as Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt. But close to a million have travelled to Europe and North America. We now have over 40,000 Syrian refugees living in Canada. And two of those families are living here in Swift Current.

<http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2015/07/syria-refugee-crisis-150709120935092.html>

Today we are celebrating our own sponsorship of the Etmeh family. We are celebrating the incredible strength and determination that they have shown over the last 17 months and we are also celebrating the incredible generosity shown by this congregation. Before the service started there was a PowerPoint shown with pictures of the journey and lists of all the ways that this congregation and this community have supported this amazing family. So thank you. Thank you for everything that you have done.

I'm now going to give you an opportunity to reflect on some of the ways that you have been impacted by this sponsorship. I'm going to put three questions up on the screen and invite you to spend a few moments thinking about them and then turn to someone beside you. Form groups of two or three people and talk about your answers. I'm going to give you about 5 minutes and then I will invite you to write down some of your thoughts on the papers provided in the pews. We will collect those papers with our offering and over the next few weeks we will display your answers on the bulletin board at the back of the sanctuary.

Here are the questions:

1. How has this sponsorship changed you?
2. What surprised you most about this sponsorship?
3. What have you learned about the Etmeh's, refugees, Islam, etc.?

I want to end with a prayer. You can find the prayer on the back of your bulletin or on the screens at the front of church:

A Refugee Prays for a Blessing

Bless to me my feet
that they may create a path
where no path yet exists.

Bless to me my shoulders
that they may carry riches
when all my riches have been removed.

Bless to me my tears
that they might wash the dead
though the dead lie untended in the dust.

Bless to me my hands
that they might make a home
in every stopping place away from home.

Bless to me my heart
that I may go on loving
when no loving is shown to me.

Bless to me my spirit
that it may rise in hope
even when reasonable hope is gone.

Bless to me my life
that I may defy the power of death
should death bend over me tonight.

From: Kate Compton, England,
600 Blessings and Prayers from around the world,
page118.