

Genesis 21:8-21

Preached for Stone Church of Willow Glen via Zoom by Rev. Samantha Evans

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God Has Heard

Well good morning, again, my friends. I am coming to you this day feeling pretty weary. The last few weeks have been especially hard in my household, as we try to sort everything that is happening in the world. The endless shelter-in-place is getting old. We've had so many canceled trips, for vacation, to visit family, to marching in D.C. with the Poor People's Campaign.

And on top of all of that, we've had to grapple with what it looks like being in an interracial relationship in America. We've had to process how people who look like me could constantly and brutally beat and murder, without consequence, people who like my partner. We've had to process how we support and care for another, when it feels like white supremacy is winning.

And we are doing our best to work through it. But y'all, it is not easy. It is not okay. And it is not fair.

And, I share this today, because I need y'all to understand that this isn't a drill. People are marching in our streets every single day for a reason. We are crying out, "Enough is enough!" Oppressed peoples are done being called thugs. Parents are done burying their children. And now more than ever, people of all races, religions, and countries of origins, are coming together to say that the time for debate is up. The time for compromise has passed. And we have a choice: to repent or perish.

We have a choice to grapple with our racist past and present, or this American experiment is going to crumble before our very eyes.

Is 10:1-4: Woe to you who make unjust laws, says the Prophet Isaiah to the nation of Israel: Woe to you who write oppressive statutes,
to turn aside the needy from justice
and to rob the poor of my people of their right,
that widows may be your spoil,
and that you may make the orphans your prey!
What will you do on the day of punishment,
in the calamity that will come from far away?
To whom will you flee for help,
and where will you leave your wealth...

Woe to you, but know that God's hand is still outstretched. God is still willing to set aside God's wrath, should God's people repent of their ways and turn back to God. God is still speaking through the mouths of God's prophets, because God has heard the cries of God's people. God has heard the cries of the oppressed.

I want to turn to this Scripture I read from Genesis, because this is one of the founding stories for both Judaism and Islam. Hagar's son is the father of the Arab nation and thus the father of Islam. This is why Christianity, Judaism, and Islam are called the Abrahamic Faiths, because Abraham is the father of all.

And in this account, we see the unjust power dynamics at play as Abraham and Sarah cast out Hagar and her son.

Abraham feels kind of bad, here, and maybe God really did show up and tell him it was all okay. Or maybe that was added to make him look like he's the good guy in the story. Because Sarah obviously is not.

She says: tell this slave woman and her son to get out. She doesn't even say her name, only the less than status she has given this woman. And she does not care what happens to this woman. She does not care one bit, and you know, I don't know what becomes of Sarah. Does she turn from her jealous and cruel ways? I don't know, and honestly, today, I don't care.

Because it's not about her. And it's not about Abraham. It is about this slave woman, who is finally named in this text, but not by any of the people of God. No, it is God who names this woman: "What troubles you, Hagar? Hagar, do not be afraid."

For God has heard. God has heard the boy. Her beloved son. God has heard.

Ishmael, or *ishma'el*, literally means: God hears. God hears. God hears the cries of a boy cast out from his father's house because of the heritage of his mother. God hears the cries of a boy, who if you remember, was begotten by Hagar, because Sarah demanded of her slave Abraham go into her so that Hagar might bear a son on behalf of Sarah. And when Sarah got jealous, she cast her out, because to Sarah, Hagar's life did not matter.

God hears the cry of a boy cast out. A boy discarded. A boy sent away to die in the wilderness. God hears the cry of this boy. And every boy, girl, child; man, woman, person; mother, father, parent, who has ever been cast out, discarded, and left to die, because those in power have decided that it was good and right for them and theirs to do so.

And God has to call God's people Israel time and time again, like God has to call us back time and time again. Because the systems of domination, the lust for power, and the brutality of empire derail us from what is good and right and just time and time again.

Y'all, our great nation is founded on the pillars of White Supremacy. Our story begins with ruthless European colonizers stealing this land from indigenous peoples. Terrorizing them, murdering them, displacing them, and "re-educating" them, because they were "savages" and to the colonizers, their lives did not matter.

Our story continues with our founding fathers. We remember the great Thomas Jefferson, who famously wrote the words: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

Well, Jefferson probably didn't actually pen these words, because it would have been more convenient to command one of his hundred slaves to write it instead. As Jefferson and his brethren built this great nation on the backs of African slaves, they argued and legislated that people of African descent were somehow genetically inferior, thus their lives did not matter.

And y'all know it didn't stop there. Slavery was legal in this country for 246 years. We had to fight a whole Civil War in order to make it illegal to buy and sell slaves, but that didn't mean that subjugation of people of African descent stopped.

It was reinstated under with the passing of Jim Crow laws, which segregated black and white citizens in the south. These laws of course, were enforced by local law enforcement, but also by local vigilantes, and of course, the KKK.

Between 1881 and 1968 it is estimated that 3,446 black Americans were lynched. 3,446 people killed by lynch mobs, angry white men, deciding to take justice into their own hands and murder any black man, woman, or child, who they felt deserved it. And they committed this terrorism and brutality largely without consequence.

But you may say, "But Pastor, Pastor, that's why Dr. King marched. It's all good now." Friends, it is not all good now.

Despite passing the Civil Right Act in 1964, here we are 56 years later, and black and brown folx are still pleading for their lives and their basic human rights.

The typical white family has a net worth of \$171,000. This is nearly ten times greater than that of a Black family, whose average net worth is \$17,150.

Consider how when slavery was abolished, formerly enslaved peoples were given nothing, yet former slave masters were given reparations for their loss of property.

Consider how when World War II veterans returned home from the war to end all wars, many white folx were able to finance their education and buy homes with their GI Bills, building wealth that would last generations.

But black veterans were systematically and intentionally barred from receiving these benefits. Many of the schools they might have gone to were segregated. Many of the suburbs they may have wanted to settle down in were not open to them. Because the laws makers and law enforcers did not believe that their lives mattered.¹

Consider, the United States of America is home to 5% of the global population, yet we hold on this great soil 25% of the world's prison population. And the racial disparity of those imprisoned on our soil is sinister.

In 2017, black folx represented 12% of the U.S. adult population but 33% of the sentenced prison population. White folx accounted for 64% of adults but 30% of prisoners. There are a multitude of reasons for this, and it all boils down to racist laws and policies.

Consider how Stop and Frisk allowed police officers to pat down literally anyone with brown skin because "they fit the description." And now consider how many black and brown folx had small amounts of cannabis on them. And consider that Black and Latino folx make up about a third of the US population, but nearly half of the folx arrested for drug violations. Even though drug use is about the same for the Black, Latino, and White populations.

And because cannabis, at the federal level, is a schedule 1 drug, these folx now have a serious mark on their record and will spend time in prison for having a joint in their pocket. And also consider that on average Black folx receive 10% more time in prison than white folx who commit the same exact crime.

So consider, one young man, who happens to have brown skin, is Stopped and Frisked by the cops. And though that young man has no criminal history, but he does have half a joint in his pocket, he will now spend time in a federal prison, will likely

¹ For more information about the GI Bill, housing and education discrimination, listen to this podcast: <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/526655831>

lose his job, perhaps even his housing. And the most sinister consequence being that he might even lose his right to vote for the rest of his life.²

These are only a few of the laws and policies which have created such abhorrent racial inequality, which threatens the lives and livelihood of so many in our country. It only scratches the surface of the many laws and policies which have targeted black and brown folx.

I share this with y'all today, because it is important that we understand how our history has shaped our present. It is critical that we take the time to learn and unpack our laws and policies, because my friends, this isn't about being nice. This isn't even about checking our own privilege or unpacking our own racial biases. That work is important, but I need y'all to see that this isn't about individuals, it is about systems. Systems which have been created and propped up by white supremacy.

Black Lives Matter³ is not a racist movement. It is not a divisive movement. It is not an anti-police movement. It is gospel movement, calling us all to repentance. Calling us to hear the cries of the oppressed. To undo our unjust laws. To turn back to God.

We know that all lives matter. The problem is that for too long in America, we have behaved, we have legislated, and we have policed, as though black lives do not matter. And until we repent and begin acting like black lives truly do matter, then all lives don't matter.

We are all infected with the virus of white supremacy. It is in all of us. It's in our church, our denomination, our neighborhoods, our city. Our entire nation is infected with the virus of white supremacy. And if we do not acknowledge and treat this infection, we will perish.

God has heard. God has heard the cry of the oppressed. Will we?

In the name of the Triune God, who Creates, Sustains, and Redeems all. Amen.

² <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/14/opinion/stop-frisk-marijuana-nyc.html>
<https://www.sentencingproject.org/>

If you want to read more about this, I recommend *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander.

³ For a personal account from the founders of the Black Lives Matter movement, I recommend *When They Call You A Terrorist* by Asha Bandele and Patrisse Cullors