

ADVENT 1  
ZION EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH  
LOGANVILLE, GA  
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**THIS IS MY BELOVED SON:  
ISHMAEL, THE ILLEGITIMATE SON  
(Genesis 16:1-14)**

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen.

Years ago, a young wife and mother of three little ones was sitting in the office of her pastor. She was on the verge of tears because, no matter how hard she tried to make improvements, her marriage was on the brink of ruin. Her husband just didn't seem interested in being a husband. In fact, he spent most of his free time out with his friends at bars, coming home drunk on a nightly basis. The young woman with her pastor had been patiently trying for months to get the husband to see how damaging his behavior was, speaking God's Word as often as possible. On this particular occasion, though, the pastor had had enough. Then, he offered the crying wife some counsel that he, no doubt, thought was good advice. Except the words he spoke absolutely shocked the young woman. Here was his counsel: We've given God enough time. It's time for us to take matters into our own hands.

This completely shocked the young woman. Not only was her marriage on the brink of ruin, now the pastor who baptized her, confirmed her, and married her was speaking blasphemy. Who was he to decide how much time to give

God? Who was he to take things out of God's hands and to take them into his own?

As shocking as it is to hear those words specifically stated, the attitude behind it isn't actually all that unique. It's a kind of idolatry that is prevalent in everyone's heart. We see it demonstrated again and again in Holy Scripture. As we continue with our Advent series "This is My beloved Son," we will see that it's actually the attitude of Abraham and Sarah that led to some serious problems. Yet, God kept everything right where it belonged – in His own hands, and it's a good thing, too, because only in God's hands are salvation. So, we consider today the first born son of Abraham: Ishmael, the illegitimate son, who shows up in Genesis 16:1-14:

*(ESV) Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar. (2) And Sarai said to Abram, "Behold now, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children. Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her." And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. (3) So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her servant, and gave her to Abram her husband as a wife. (4) And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. (5) And Sarai said to Abram, "May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my servant to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the LORD judge between you and me!" (6) But Abram said to Sarai, "Behold, your servant is in your power; do to*

*her as you please." Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her. (7) The angel of the LORD found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. (8) And he said, "Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?" She said, "I am fleeing from my mistress Sarai." (9) The angel of the LORD said to her, "Return to your mistress and submit to her." (10) The angel of the LORD also said to her, "I will surely multiply your offspring so that they cannot be numbered for multitude." (11) And the angel of the LORD said to her, "Behold, you are pregnant and shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael, because the LORD has listened to your affliction. (12) He shall be a wild donkey of a man, his hand against everyone and everyone's hand against him, and he shall dwell over against all his kinsmen." (13) So she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, "You are a God of seeing," for she said, "Truly here I have seen him who looks after me." (14) Therefore the well was called Beer-lahai-roi; it lies between Kadesh and Bered.*

We all tend to want to take matters into our own hands when something is not going quite right or taking too long. That's the situation in which we find Abraham and Sarah in Genesis 16. Abraham had received the promise of God that he would be the father of many and that through his descendants God would bless the whole world. Abraham and Sarah both believed God's promise.

But that promise had been made years ago. Abraham and Sarah weren't young when God originally made it. They certainly weren't getting any younger. Plus, Sarah was still barren. Maybe they needed to take things into their own

hands and force the issue. So Sarah comes up with a plan. Maybe it was just Abraham that was needed for the promise to be fulfilled. She offers her servant, Hagar, to Abraham that he might obtain children from her. Abraham listens, and Hagar becomes pregnant. It worked! Abraham gets a son.

This situation only caused issues in the household of Abraham, which, in reality continue on to this day. Hagar, who conceived Abraham's child, began to look with contempt upon Sarah, who was unable to conceive. Hagar's behavior got so bad that Sarah treats her badly in return, which caused Hagar to flee. But after that all gets cleared up and God convinces Hagar to return to Sarah, and Hagar gives birth to Ishmael (as we heard in the rest of chapter 16), God makes it clear to Abraham in Genesis 17 that, despite Abraham attempts to take matters into his own hands, Ishmael is not the son that God promised.

Abraham and Sarah did not have to take matters into their own hands to bring about an illegitimate son in order to kick start God's plan of sending the promised Savior. God was going to take care of fulfilling His promise in His own way and in His own time. Any attempt to break free from God's will and ways will always be illegitimate, not only because God sees more and knows more than we do, but because He is the only one not afflicted by and not affected by the sin that has corrupted our nature.

Nowhere is this truth more plain than when it comes to God's will and God's way of saving us from our sin, along with the death and hell that we have deserved by it. It is

the corruption of sin at work in us that leads us to imagine that we have to take steps to initiate God's love and acceptance. We try to take matters into our own hands by our supposed good works to force His hand, so to speak. I mean, if I put more in the offering plate than I did before, or more than the other person, then surely God must recognize that great sacrifice on my part. If I say more prayers this coming year than I did last year, then God will have to take notice of how much more godly I have become.

Such thoughts and attempts to take matters into our own hands are literally illegitimate. If something is illegitimate, it is literally not according to the Law. Nothing could be further from God's Law than thinking we can do something to make Him love and accept us when, according to the Law, everything we do is sin, as the Bible says repeatedly, "There is none who does good, not even one."

In our first Scripture Lesson this morning, the Holy Spirit uses this very situation to explain how futile it is to attempt to take our salvation into our own hands. Allegorically speaking, Hagar is like Mt. Sinai, the place where God gave the Ten Commandments. As Hagar was a slave, so was her illegitimate son. Therefore, everyone who attempts to obtain salvation by their own efforts is a slave to the Law, and thus also to sin and death. But what happened to that illegitimate son? He was cast out, rejected as an illegitimate son as far as God's promise to bless all the nations of the earth with salvation.

God called Abraham and Sarah to trust in His promise and live by faith. God would take care of it. And though it seemed impossible, Sarah gave birth to a son, the son of the promise, Isaac. “Now you, brothers,” Paul explains, “like Isaac, are children of promise . . . we are not children of the slave but of the free woman” (Galatians 4:28, 31). Those who live by faith, not trying to take everything into their own hands, are also sons of the promise, sons of Abraham, and receivers of God’s blessings.

See, it never was about the son Abraham would have. God promised a son to Abraham and Sarah in order to extend Abraham’s genealogy until the Messiah, through whom would come the blessings of God’s salvation. It is faith in that true Son of Abraham, the Son through whom the whole world is blessed, the Son whose work sets us free from slavery to the Law.

As our loving heavenly Father, God removed any obstacle between us and our salvation because He knew we could never do it on our own, no matter how hard we tried. He sent His only-begotten Son into this world and called Him Jesus, for “He will save His people from their sins (Matthew 1:21).

This Son would also be born through miraculous circumstances, not through an old, barren woman, but through a young virgin. This Son would also walk up a mountain to be a sacrifice, but unlike Isaac, God did not stop the hands that placed a crown of thorns on the head of Jesus, His own Son, and plunged nails into His hands and feet. Jesus completed the work of the Law, suffered the

consequences for our sins and lack of faith, and won our freedom as He declared, “It is finished!”

Jesus is the true Son of Abraham whose eternal blessings are received only by faith. “For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith,” Paul writes to the Galatians and to you. “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. . . . And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise” (Galatians 3:26–27, 29).

You and I are not illegitimate sons, born by others taking into their sinful hands our salvation. We are not illegitimate sons who have to figure out for ourselves by our works to be acceptable to our God. No, we are sons of the promise, sons of Abraham, children of God, through faith in the true Son of Abraham and Sarah—Jesus, the Son of God.

I want to go back to that woman I mentioned in the introduction. Who would have blamed her, though, if she had listened to her pastor’s counsel and given up on God’s way of doing things? Well, that’s not what she chose to do. Instead, she was certain that no matter how bad things might get, it was better to follow God’s plans and God’s will. It meant many years of having to put up with her husband coming home drunk, sometimes not coming home at all, and often having to put up with all kinds of dissipation that comes through drunkenness. But forty years later, her husband, after all those years of tormenting her with his alcohol, became a Christian, his life was turned around. All because she left things where they

belong – in God’s good and gracious hands, where there is forgiveness, acceptance, and salvation for sinners.

God grant us all such humility and faith in Him and His true Son. AMEN!