

In the reading from scripture today, we come to the fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham and Sarah by the triune God who visited them and had dinner, as we read last Sunday.

Sarah laughed when she heard she would have a child. The lectionary then glosses over a very unflattering, even evil episode in Scripture: Sarah tries to get Abraham an heir by Hagar, her young female slave, called a “hand maid.”

Her handmaid. How many of you have read the Handmaid’s Tale? Offred, the main character, is a Handmaid in the totalitarian and theocratic state in some dystopic future of the United States. I won’t spoil the plot for you. But it’s a plot as old as the stories of the Bible and of Abraham, the patriarch of faith. In Offred’s America low birth rates among the elites lead to the coercion of “handmaids” into having babies for them.

It’s in our Tradition to omit and gloss over stories that do not flatter the patriarchs. Basically it’s institutionalized and legitimized rape of women by men.

It is, in light of reason, not an acceptable to story to gloss over.

The Scripture must make God’s promise good, so we have Isaac born. He is close enough in age to Hagar’s son Ishmael, to be a playmate.

Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. 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.”

A friend of mine told of being raised in Mississippi with the children of his black “mamie”. They played together for years.

Then one day, the friendships forged in childhood were forced to end – by the white parents of my friend.

After all, puberty was coming, sex was evil, and miscegenation was abhorrent and against the law.

To my perception, turning the child and mother out into the desert too much resembles the displacement of refugees around the world, but especially in Syria, and the dangerous deserts of the southwestern US, where immigrants walk in peril to El Norte.

Issues of sexism, race and religious self-righteousness raise their ugly heads to interfere with my sense of well-being.

To fix this, the story has Abraham sanitized, having sex with Hagar was Sarah’s idea. Then he has compassion on Hagar’s son Ishmael and intercedes with God. The handmaid’s son is made into a nation: Abraham and Sarah’s sin is redeemed. Another covenant is established.

The hairy Ishmaelites are the ones who later buy Joseph from his brother and sell him into Egypt. Another story of great sin redeemed by God.

What does redemption mean here?

It means that those who trace their heritage of faith to Abraham, as we do, will always contend with other nations, other religions, whom God has made a covenant with. We must consider them sisters and brothers under God regardless of which covenant they adhere to, because the covenant is God given.

The Ishmaelites are considered by Arab Muslims as the line of inheritance of God's covenant for their religious identity.

We are, in spite of any prejudice, bigotry or racism, brothers and sisters of Arabs and other Muslims by the grace of God **through this story.**

What does it mean for us now?

The denial of the full humanity of any person, woman, immigrant, Muslim, is tantamount to pitting ourselves against God.

The denial of the full humanity of any person is the same as denying the full humanity of Jesus.

“So have no fear of them; for nothing is covered up that will not be uncovered, and nothing secret that will not become known. What I say to you in the dark, tell in the light; and what you hear whispered, proclaim from the housetops.”

Whisper that we are all intimately related to each other. Shout that we are all in some way in covenant with God and redeemed by God.

The dishonesty of Scripture, the secrecy that leads to rape, institutional taboos that conceal evil, war as assault on women, and religious oppression are not, and will never be, God's will.

Someday those who practice a spirituality of mutual love and respect, which values every person will prevail.

Do not fear this version of the Handmaid's Tale, or the aching, suffering world of hate that surrounds us.

Face up in the open the legacy of racism, violence against women, bigotry against religions, and ignorance of God's love.

Be prepared to lose our life for Jesus' sake and find in Christ your eternal and beloved being.

Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs of your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.