

“Lighting Up a Particular Gloom”
Genesis 21:8-21
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There are some famous flames burning around the world. Of course, you know about the Olympic torch, making its way through parts of China and Tibet right now, but did you know about the perpetual flame of St. Brigid of Kildare in Ireland, or the Shrine of Remembrance in Melbourne, Australia, or the Monument to the Unknown Soldier, in Sofia, Bulgaria, or the one dedicated to former U.S. President John Kennedy in Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia? There’s even a perpetual flame to keep Elvis Presley warm at Graceland, in Memphis, Tennessee. In fact, there are perpetual flames all over the world, and throughout history, carefully maintained to provide a beacon of memory or hope, to save sailors from shipwreck, to guide the lost home, to warn friends that enemies are advancing. Beyond its simple usefulness, the power of flame extends to its ability to evoke something eternal, something powerful, something mystical, something like God. And the tending of that flame, as an act of discipline or obedience or service, or even just simple necessity, marks the life of those who keep the fire burning, that its purposes, God’s purposes, are served.

Abraham and Sarah are just such tenders of flame. The ancients in many cultures believed that fire was a gift from the gods, or at least from a lightning strike. Fire is one of those elemental things beyond our control, but so useful that once you have it, you really want to keep it going. The first self-igniting matches

date only as far back as the year 1805, and so producing fire was always much more difficult than sustaining it, although keeping it going had its challenges too. Abraham and Sarah weren't exactly self-igniting in the heir-producing department. For decades, they had waited for baby-producing lightning to strike Sarah's womb, and for decades they waited in vain, the tension mounting as the chances of producing someone to carry on their names and legacies grew slimmer and slimmer. Like unsuccessful cavemen rubbing sticks together, they blew and they fanned, but the sparks did not turn into flame. And so they turned to stealing someone else's flame, and so, as the story goes, Abraham "went in to Hagar, and she conceived," Hagar being the Egyptian surrogate, Sarah's servant whose baby would be Sarah's own. Rather than relying on the promises God had made of a great nation coming forth from Abraham, he and Sarah tried to get their own family's fire started from another source of flame. The results were a mixed blessing: a child, and heir, for Abraham named Ishmael, but also a house divided as the two women battled for who would be the keeper of Abraham's flame.

In the midst of that strife, however, God's lightning did strike Sarah, and she conceived and gave birth to Isaac when Ishmael was still a boy. And as we read tonight, the gift of Isaac was not enough to satisfy Sarah that her flame would burn perpetually, and we see her trying to eliminate the threat Ishmael might one day pose. We heard that when she saw the two boys playing together, she decided that one must go, and so she charges Abraham with doing away with Hagar and

Ishmael. Now, Abraham, being a rather wise tender of the flame, and also, it seems, a rather compassionate sort of fellow, is troubled by this request, and as we heard, God responds to his distress, and in the end, both Hagar and Ishmael are saved from an unfortunate fate. Ironically, as we will read next week, Abraham almost gets burned by the flame, as God commands him to take Isaac, the son of promise, and sacrifice him like an animal in a burnt offering. God's fire is an unpredictable thing indeed.

On the surface, Sarah seems a little petty, and maybe even nasty. What kind of person would cast out into the wilderness a helpless woman and child, to starve, or die of thirst, or exposure? She doesn't seem like the kind of a mother of the nation we would really want to celebrate or model ourselves after. After all, she's the one who came up with the idea of having Hagar be her surrogate in the first place. And yet, perhaps Sarah is more of a role model than we might think, wiser than her husband, clearer about God's plans than the rest of the household. Perhaps Sarah had a keener sense of just what it would take to keep God's flame burning, to protect it against being extinguished. We often credit Sarah with jealousy when she casts out Hagar and Ishmael, but maybe she deserves the benefit of the doubt for seeing that it would not be long before Ishmael was old enough to see what was at stake, and to try to assert his claim as Abraham's first born son, even if that meant that Isaac suffered some kind of "accident" while they were out playing or hunting or tending the flock. She knew the story of Cain and Abel. Call Sarah the

world's first conspiracy theorist, if you will, but also call her a fierce and faithful keeper of the flame that took so long to get kindled within her.

It is not, of course, that God can't take care of keeping the divine flame going, but for some strange reason, God has entrusted to us its care. We are called to be keepers of the flame and the tending of that flame, as an act of discipline or obedience or service, or even just simple necessity, marks the life of those who keep the fire burning, that its purposes, God's purposes, are served. There is no more important task for the disciples of Jesus Christ than to assure that his hope and his grace shine forever, even if that means we run the risk of being remembered as being a little petty, and maybe even nasty. No less a figure than Christ himself reminded his disciples that he came "to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother. Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me." As disturbing as it may sound, our obedience to God's call and claim on our lives takes precedence over any other claims others have made on us, or that we have established for ourselves, even if those claimants are the ones we hold most dear, like family, or country, or self. For what will it value any of the things we hold dear, if they are not seen in the light of the divine flame?

Escazú Christian Fellowship is like the churches elsewhere from which we come, each of them the keepers of the flame in their communities. We are the beacon of hope that saves sailors from shipwreck, guides the lost home, and warns friends that enemies are advancing. We are a reminder that God is always present

and active in the world and in the life of our communities. And each of us is a flame unto ourselves, shining some light into the gloom, bringing some hope into the midst of despair. Collectively, we are as bright as the morning star. But more than just being that flame, each individual, and each church is called by God to take that flame to the particular gloom to which God has sent it. Although it may seem like it is enough to simply keep the flame going, that all may see it from a distance, the truth is that there are still a lot of corners that need to be illuminated, the places where human beings hurt and hope, the places where justice is denied, and suffering is tolerated, the places where shalom is just a dream and captivity is a way of life. And those places will not be reached simply by staying home and being comfortable, by simply wishing away threats to extinguish the flame. No, those places will be reached when we take the kinds of risks that Sarah took, and that Jesus took, to go to those particular places of gloom with our little flame.

Where is our particular gloom? At ECF, we are listening for God to tell us where that is. God's vision for God's people was first revealed in Ur of the Chaldeans to a man named Abram whom God simply told to pack up his things in faith, and go to the place that God *would* show him. He went with nothing but the promise of land, descendants, and blessing, but he went nonetheless, toward an unknown, yet certain destination. God still calls us that way, to unknown, yet certain destinations, and we are listening for that call. God still reveals those visions for God's people. But the journey implies risking something. Abraham

risked his security, his sense of home and identity, his very life as he lived as a stranger in a strange land. And so it is with Abraham, and God's provision for him, that I want to conclude tonight. To this point in the story, Abraham has risked a lot, and I have to believe that he was a little troubled by the idea of risking even more just because his wife was acting a little jealous and insecure. She was asking him to risk a sure thing, Ishmael, for a less sure thing, Isaac, even though God had assured him that Isaac was a sure thing. It took long enough to get even one son, that reducing his chances of an heir by 50% didn't really seem like such a great plan. And so, as the story reads, "The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son." But this is the beauty of the story, that God provided for Abraham in his distress, and gave him the strength and the courage to join Sarah in keeping the flame, knowing that God would provide for Ishmael and Hagar in the wilderness.

I think this is an important story for churches that are trying to discern the direction God intends for their ministry, and for disciples who are trying to discern just where God is leading them, and for high school graduates headed off to college, for there will always be choices and temptations like the one facing Abraham and Sarah. As we take our flame into our particular gloom, we will always be challenged by the things we hold dear, our traditions, our comfort zones, our particular and personal sacred cows. For some churches their Ishmaels are their buildings, for others the threat of losing members or money, for others their

prestige in their community. All of these things aren't necessarily bad things, but they may be, as Sarah discerned, threats to the flame. As disciples, our Ishmaels may be our retirement plan, or the love and respect of our parents, children, or friends, or our identity as workers, not necessarily bad things, but perhaps, as Sarah discerned, threats to the flame. Please do not misunderstand me: I am not suggesting we go around and try to eliminate all the threats we perceive. I do not think God is calling us to make pre-emptive strikes on our cherished institutions of family and nation and way of life. But I do think God is calling us to be prepared to let those things go when they come into conflict with that all-important task for the disciples of Jesus Christ of assuring that his hope and his grace shine forever, even if that means we run the risk of being remembered as being a little petty, and maybe even nasty. In the end, I think God honors what we cherish righteously. Abraham rightly cherished Hagar and Ishmael and God took care of them when Abraham was able to let them go. In the same way, God will take care of what we let go, or what we decide must take a backseat to the keeping of the flame. It is no coincidence that at the conclusion of Abraham's trip to the mountaintop to sacrifice Isaac, he named that place "The Lord will provide," for even though he had let one son go, and was called even to let the remaining son go, God did in fact provide, and the flame still burns today. May God help us to put ourselves in service to keeping the flame, trusting that God will provide for whatever we must let go of to be free for the privilege of that service. Amen.