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Jun

## Hearing the Voice

Forming a Family/Preparing a People

**FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, YEAR A**

Listening for God amid a painful, confusing story—and learning how God meets the cast-out and suffering.

### REFERENCES

Genesis 21:8-21

Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17

Romans 6:1b-11

Matthew 10:24-39

### COLORS

Green

## Worship Planning Notes

**Focus text:** [Genesis 21:8-21](#)

When I was in high school, I came across a quote, often attributed to Tom Clancy, that I've returned to again and again over the last couple of decades: "The difference between fiction and reality? Fiction has to make sense." I've heard others talk about fiction as a container for rehearsing ideas, emotions, and strategies for living in the real world. As a book lover, I can attest to the power of story to work out the distress, anxiety, joy, contentment, and confusion of real life. Fiction helps because it makes sense when real life doesn't. Now, the Bible isn't fiction. The Bible is story—sacred story that we believe communicates truth about God and God's relationship to and with

God's creation. But, according to Tom Clancy's definition of fiction, the Bible isn't fiction, because it doesn't always make sense.

Our focus text today is one of those stories that doesn't make sense. Why would God allow—even encourage—Abraham to cast out Hagar and Ishmael? What is Abraham thinking? Why in the world is Abraham the “father of many nations” if he can't be a good father to his own son? These are all legitimate questions that people bring with them to worship. Questions bubble up out of all the ways their lives haven't made sense. It may be tempting—and even worthwhile—to point out that we receive this story through the writer's imperfect perspective that likely favored Abraham and Isaac over Hagar and Ishmael. We can wrestle with Abraham and Sarah's actions without twisting ourselves into knots trying to save them from themselves. Yet I suggest we take a page from God's playbook in this story and listen. Listen for the voices then and now that cry out in suffering and anger because of mistreatment at the hands of those in charge. Listen for the wounds congregants carry from twisted relationships with parents or parental figures. Listen for the despair that overwhelms and the vulnerability of having to start anew, to find our way and build a life in the middle of a desert.

And then, answer. What are the wells toward which we can guide one another? What wisdom can we share when we feel cast out? What resources can we share with our neighbors? What safe haven can we provide for children caught in the middle of grown-up disputes? We don't understand everything God does in this story. It's possible the writer didn't fully understand either. So, let this time of worship be one of listening and wrestling, believing that in the listening and wrestling, God hears us, responds to us, and guides us toward flourishing so that we can bring blessing and flourishing to our neighbors.

**Author bio:** *Dr. Lisa Hancock, Director of Worship Arts Ministries, served as an organist and music minister in United Methodist congregations in the legacy Northwest Texas and North Texas Annual Conferences. After receiving her Master of Sacred Music and Master of Theological Studies from Perkins School of Theology, she earned her PhD in Religious Studies from Southern Methodist University, where she researched and wrote on the doctrine of Christ, disability, and atonement. Lisa is also the co-lead of the Growing in Grace: Accessible Worship for All God's Children initiative.*

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