

Genesis 21:18-21

Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17

Romans 6:1b-11

Matthew 10:24-39

"The Life You Find" a sermon for a Sunday of Baptism

There's a story tucked into Genesis this morning that doesn't get a lot of airtime, and honestly, I understand why. It's uncomfortable. A woman named Hagar, a servant, an outsider, someone with very little power in her world, gets sent away into the wilderness with her teenage son Ishmael and not much else. And she runs out of water. And she can't watch her son die, so she sets him under a bush, walks about the distance of a bowshot away, and sits down. And she weeps.

It's one of the most honest moments in the entire Hebrew Bible.

And then, and this is the part that matters, God hears. The text says God heard the voice of the boy. God opens Hagar's eyes. And there's a well. There was water there the whole time, and she couldn't see it. Not until she'd come to the absolute end of herself. Not until she had nothing left to protect.

I want to sit with that image for a moment, because I think it has something to do with why we're here today. We heard Psalm 86 this morning, *"Incline your ear, O LORD, and answer me, for I am poor and needy."* That's not the prayer of someone who has it together. That's the prayer of someone who has gotten honest. Someone who has stopped pretending that their own resources are enough. And the psalmist keeps returning to this posture; not because it's liturgically correct, but because it's *true*. The whole psalm is an act of trust being chosen over self-sufficiency.

And then Paul, in Romans 6, says something that may disturb us. He explains, do you not know that when you were baptized into Christ Jesus, you were baptized into his *death*? We were buried with him. That's not a bit of light metaphor. That's not "you symbolically went through a little transition." Paul is saying that the person who came to the water was one person, and the person who came up from the water is someone new. The old self, the one that organized their whole life around self-protection, self-definition, self-sufficiency, that self has died.

So what does that mean?

Here's where Matthew 10 gets complicated. And I want to be honest with you about how complicated it is, because I think we deserve that, and because I think we're capable of sitting with complexity.

Jesus says, *"Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace but a sword."*

People sometimes read that as Jesus sanctioning conflict, or violence, or division. But that's not what's happening here. The whole chapter is Jesus preparing his disciples to go out as his representatives; to be witnesses to the kingdom. And he's not naive about what that will cost them. He knows they will face rejection. He knows that for some of them, their own families won't understand what they've chosen. He knows that loyalty to this new way of life may put them at odds with the people they love most. In this first century of the middle east... that is a really big deal.

The sword he's talking about is the sword of *decision*. Of allegiance. Of choosing what you're going to let be most central to your identity.

And then he says something that's even harder, on the surface: *"Whoever denies me before others, I also will deny before my Father in heaven."*

That sounds like a threat. But when we jump back to context, Jesus is talking to people who are about to face pressure, real pressure, social pressure, maybe more, to abandon what they believe. He's talking about the coherence that exists in this life. You can't follow Jesus with half your heart and call it following. The person who caves every time it's inconvenient, who is a disciple only when it costs nothing, that person isn't really on this path. It's not judgment so much as a description of how integrity works. Not judgement, but truth.

And then: *"Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me."*

Again, sounds harsh. But Jesus is speaking to a world where family loyalty was the absolute organizing principle of life. Your family was your identity, your security, your reputation, your future. Jesus is saying that there is something that has to be more central than even that. Not because family doesn't matter, not because love for parents or children is wrong, but because if *any* human attachment, even the most sacred, even the most natural, becomes the thing you will protect at the cost of your own soul, then that attachment has become an idol.

He's not asking people to stop loving their families. He's asking people to find out who they are apart from what their families need them to be.

And that brings us here. To this water. To these two people standing with us today.

"Those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

That one sentence is the center of everything. And I don't think it means what we sometimes flatten it to mean; that you sacrifice yourself and get a reward later. I think it means something more immediate, more psychological, more spiritual than that.

There is a version of yourself you have been constructing your whole life. A version built out of other people's expectations, out of your own defenses, out of the things you've needed to believe about yourself to feel safe. And that self, that carefully managed, carefully protected self, is not actually free. It can't be. Because it's always working. Always performing. Always calculating whether it's enough.

Losing your life for Jesus' sake means releasing your grip on that constructed self. It means saying: I am not the center. I am not the one who has to hold everything together. There is something, someone, more fundamental than my own self-preservation, and I am willing to organize my life around that.

And when you do, when you actually do, something opens up. Like Hagar's eyes. You see what was there the whole time. A life that isn't smaller for having let go of control. A life that is, somehow, larger.

Today, two people are going to stand in that water. They're going to go under. They're going to come up.

And what that means, at the deepest level, is that they've decided to stop protecting a version of themselves that was keeping them from the life they were made for. They have said, publicly, physically, irreversibly, *"I belong to something bigger than myself. And I'm not ashamed of it."*

That is not a small thing.

Paul says it this way: *"So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus."* Not "try to feel different." Not "attempt to be better." Consider yourselves. Make a decision about who you are. The water is this decision made visible.

Hagar found a well when she had nothing left. The psalmist found God when the prayer was raw and had nowhere else to go. And these two people, today, are stepping into that same ancient river; the one that runs through every story of letting go and being found.

"Those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

The water is ready. AMEN