**“Call Me Ishmael”**

“Call Me Ishmael.” Those three words constitute the pregnant opening of one of our national literary treasures: an epic-length novel that now has a revered status that some call hypercanonical. At the time of its publication in 1851 and up until about 1925, however, Herman Melville’s allegory about the human cost of the maniacal quest for the great white whale in Moby Dick was a catastrophic commercial failure. Perhaps the use of allegory – that representation of abstract ideas and principles through characters and events – was too esoteric for a young republic, especially one embroiled in wars with Native peoples and arguments over the humanity of slaves and their place as chattel. Perhaps the republic, not quite a century old in the 1850s, was not yet ready to reflect on issues of race, tribe, the nation’s multicultural reality, exclusion, and otherness. But what one makes of those words – of the reference to Ishmael – will depend on the breadth and the depth of one’s knowledge within and outside one’s own religious family, clan, or tribe.

Melville’s powerful allusion to Ishmael, the literary symbol and Koranic patron of the exiled, the orphaned, and the marginalized, takes us all the way back to the foundational text of Genesis 16 in the Hebrew Scriptures and its first tale about Abrams’ first-born – 4 chapters before this morning’s first lesson. It is a complex and disturbing tale about asymmetrical power relations, abuse, and jealousy. Ishmael is the child of Sarah’s Egyptian slave, Hagar, born not as the result of violent rape or seductive deception, but through an orderly, organized, and respectable ancient Near Eastern practice of surrogacy. This is a practice whereby a mistress willingly encourages sexual relations between her husband and her slave, especially, as in Sarah’s case, when it appears that the wife is barren. Yet the household seems dysfunctional: Scripture says that Hagar “looked with contempt on her mistress” (Gen. 16:4b) when she herself conceives. The Society of Biblical Literature suggests a better translation for that line: “Her mistress was lowered in her eyes.” Sarah reports the stinging sense of slight to Abram who assures his wife that she may “do to her [Hagar] as you please” (Gen. 16:6a). The result is treatment of the young pregnant girl based on absolute power that the Scriptural writer describes as “harsh.” And Hagar flees in the opposite direction of the Exodus – back toward Egypt where she, like Mary, experiences an annunciation: the visitation by an angel who tells her to return to Sarah “and submit to her” (Gen. 9). Hagar is told that she has conceived a son who is to be named Ishmael. (The name, with its Hebrew and Arabic roots, means “God hears”, a reference to God having heard Hagar’s cries about her unjust treatment.) He, too, is to be the father of multitudes, a great nation. But the complexity continues. Ishmael will be, to quote Scripture, “a wild ass of a man, with his hand against everyone, and everyone’s hand against him” (Gen. 16:12). If this is not enough, the angel also predicts that Ishmael “shall live at odds with all his kin” (Gen. 12b). This revelation certainly helps to normalize Ishmael’s role as outsider, especially since the Genesis account of the near-sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham refers to the young boy as Abraham’s only son.

The portion of the reading that we have for this morning occurs in Genesis 21 with the life-altering announcement of the birth of Isaac. Sarah watches the two half-brothers, Isaac and Ishmael at play, and demands this time that Hagar be expelled because the child of a slave “shall not inherit along with my son Isaac” (Gen. 21:10b). Abraham is distressed at the request which is, nevertheless, affirmed by God. “Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of the slave woman. . . it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you. As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring” (Gen. 21: 12-14). God saves the child’s life on their journey through the wilderness when it appears mother and child may die from thirst. Ishmael, nurtured by God, becomes an excellent bowman, takes an Egyptian wife, and disappears, pretty much, from the Hebrew Scriptures. We do know that Ishmael has 12 sons and is present, alongside his brother Isaac, at the death of Abraham at age 175 and when Ishmael has reached the sage age of 137. He reappears very dramatically in St. Paul’s letter to the Galatians, Chapter 4, when Paul names Isaac as the son of the promise and Ishmael as the son of the flesh. “Now this is an allegory,” says Paul. “These women are two covenants. One woman, in fact, is Hagar, from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery (Gal. 4:24b). But the other woman “is free, and she is our mother” (Gal. 4:26). Paul’s concluding lines are arresting:

Now you, my friends, are children of the promise, like Isaac. But just as at that time

the child who was born according to the flesh persecuted the child who was born

according to the Spirit, so it is now also. But what does the scripture say? “Drive out

the slave and her child; for the child of the slave will not share the inheritance with the

child of the free woman.” So then friends, we are children, not of the slave but of the free

woman. For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again

to a yoke of slavery (Gal. 4:28-31).

St. Paul’s reading sets up a binary or polar relation between the descendants of Isaac and those of Ishmael.

He introduces a reading of the reference to Ishmael’s and Isaac’s play that can be found in rabbinic midrash or Biblical interpretation to mean Ishmael’s persecution of his younger brother, Isaac. At the literal level Paul condones violence against the descendants of Ishmael, the slave-woman’s offspring. In the 18th and 19th centuries the major source for the defense of slavery as a lawful and moral institution was Scripture. The story of Hagar’s return to Sarah, for example, was suggested as a Biblical support and affirmation of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1851 – the year **Moby Dick** was published – which declared that it was no longer good enough to escape north to escape slavery. Any slave found anywhere in the republic was liable to be recaptured and returned to his or her master. One had to escape beyond American borders to Canada. The power of a BIblical text is remarkably clear. Paul quotes Genesis and the pro-slavery argument quotes Paul.

One way of seeing how subjective the too brief portrait of Ishmael is in the Hebrew Scriptures is to turn to the **Koran** for a radically different and second subjective portrait that is accomplished with even fewer lines. Very brief reference to the birth of Ismael appears in Surah 37. After Abraham smashes the carved images of the false gods of the people with whom he lives – and risks death -- he prays that he might have a “righteous” son; he is told that he will have a “clement” or merciful son. The very next line of the Surah moves us immediately to the near sacrifice of Abraham’s son, Ishmael. Unlike the Hebrew version, however, God’s or Allah’s test of absolutely fidelity is dual; it involves both father and son. The Koran says: Then, when he [Ismael] was old enough to accompany him, he [Abraham] said, “O My son, I see in a dream that I am sacrificing you; see what you think.” He said, “O my Father, do as you are commanded; you will find me, God willing, one of the steadfast.” Then, when they had submitted, and he put his forehead down. We called out to him, “O Abraham! You have fulfilled the vision.” Thus We reward the doers of good” (Surah 37: 102-105). It is only after this absolute submission to the will of God that there is reference to the conception of Isaac. “And We gave him good news of Isaac, a prophet, one of the righteous” reads the text who, along with Ishmael, will have some descendants who are righteous and “some who are clearly unjust to themselves.” The Surah ends with the celebratory praise of righteous ones from the Hebrew Scriptures: Moses and Aaron, Elijah, Lot, and Jonah. These, we are told, are “God’s faithful servants.” Surah 38 mentions and praises David and Solomon. And Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob “are among the chosen, the outstanding” (Surah 38:47) as are Ishmael, Elisha, and Ezekiel. This inclusion, which includes, throughout the Koran, a tribute to the prophet Isa (whom Christians know as Jesus) is set forth as a structural principle of faith very early in the Koran, in Surah 2. The text reads: “Say ye: "We believe in Allah, and the revelation given to us, and to Abraham, Ismael, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, and that given to Moses and Jesus, and that given to (all) prophets from their Lord: We make no difference between one and another of them: And we bow to Allah" (Surah 2:136).

So much of what Muslims believe about Ishmael comes from the *Hadith* (the record of the traditions or sayings of the prophet Mohammed). The Hadith gives us extraordinary insight into the subjective creation of Ishmael in the Islamic world. According to that tradition, Abraham does more than lead Hagar and her son into the wilderness when God commands that she leave Sarah’s home; he accompanies them to Mecca. When Hagar, the worried mother, asks in whose care Abraham is leaving them, his response is one that she can echo: in the care of God or Allah. The pair run out of water (does that sound familiar?) and Hagar runs back and forth seven times between the hills of Al-Safa and Al-Marwah in search of the life-sustaining liquid. (Modern-day Muslim pilgrims making the Hajj repeat this trek in honor of Hagar.) When she returns home she finds Ishmael or an angel scratching the ground with finger or heel and enough water begins to flow that Hagar is able to dam it up. According to tradition Abraham returns to Mecca to see about Hagar and Ismael and builds the Kaaba, a building inside the most sacred of all the mosques in Islam.

This Koranic view of Ishmael gives us such a richer understanding of how he is constructed by all the people of the Book – the name given to the three Abrahamic religions. The writer of Genesis is put into dialogue with St. Paul, with the author of the Koran, and with Islamic Hadith. But such richness is possible only by moving outside our own fam which we know, form the witness of history, can be incubators of the most virulently racist and intolerant notions about “the other.” When I was a student visiting London (and the overseas world) for the first time in 1976, a young Israeli asked me to companion her to a Catholic Mass. She wanted to go, but was uncertain about ritual actions and the order of the liturgy -- and she feared she might do something inappropriate or disrespectful. I welcomed the offer. The readings that day, however, were inauspicious. There was a reference to the apostles and disciples and their hiding out “for fear of the Jews.” That phrase then and sense was particularly troubling. Afterward she mused that she could understand the pogroms and the Holocaust better with a two-thousand year diet of such chilling anti-Semitism. I tried to explain that this was one statement from the New Testament to be taken into context with Paul’s assertion that in Christ there was neither Greek nor Jew, slave or free, woman or man. I have prayed since then that she had other contact with the family of Christendom. I, too, have hungered and thirsted for more contact outside that family with the larger world of a God outside my own clan.

Amen.