Father Abraham had two sons. Two sons had Father Abraham. Okay, I know... the song says he had many sons and that I am one of them and so are you. But it all began with two sons. The first, Ishmael, the son of an Egyptian slave woman named Hagar, is born out of Abraham's and Sarah's understandable doubt that God's promise will be fulfilled. The second, a miracle child, is born to Abraham and Sarah in their old age against all odds. Ishmael is the first-born; Isaac is the chosen one. In short, it's complicated.

In Genesis 21, where we find our story for today, Isaac, the miracle child, is now old enough to wean, and Abraham throws a party to celebrate the occasion. But the celebration doesn't last long for everyone. We quickly learn that there isn't room for everyone at this particular party or in this particular family.

Now, every time I read this story, I realize how much there is to unpack and explore within this familial saga. There is so much family drama, so many fractious relationships. There is confusion about what God is up to, and tensions to be explored around the topic of “chosen-ness” and promise. I'm left wanting to understand more about Abraham and Sarah and their actions in this story. As a father myself, I can't imagine the tension Abraham is feeling in this moment. Ishmael is his first-born son, not the promised one, but a treasured child, nonetheless. Yet his wife and his God are encouraging and assuring him that sending him and his mother away, out to the desert, is the right thing to do.

If we get too bogged down here in all of these details and relationships, or move on too quickly to the rest of the Abraham and Isaac saga, we run the risk of missing some important features of this particular part of the Abrahamic story. If we don't stop and give Hagar her due, we miss out on some powerful messages.

You see, as Abraham is sending Hagar and Ishmael off into the wilderness, he puts bread and a skin of water on her shoulder, along with Ishmael. At this point, Ishmael is a teenager and capable of walking through the wilderness on his own. But still, his mother takes him onto her shoulder and carries him through the wilderness. Her love for her child is stronger than any sense of despair or desolation even in these bleakest of circumstances. Hagar carries her child, literally shouldering the burden of their current situation, as she ventures into the wilderness and the unknown.

Here's the thing, there may not be much in this story to which we all can personally relate, but we have all had our own experiences of journeying through our own wilderness places, haven't we? And even though a part of what it means to be in the desert is to feel deserted, I'm willing to bet none of us has ever walked
those places alone. There are people along the way – be they parental figures, friends or even strangers – who hoist us up onto their shoulders so we do not have to face the wilderness by ourselves. And it is often there, in the wilderness with those companions, that we meet God who we realize has been there supporting us all along.

It reminds me of the late 1960’s song by The Hollies called, “He Ain’t Heavy, He’s My Brother.” You may know it:

_The road is long_
_With many a winding turn_
_That leads us to who knows where_
_Who knows where_
_But I’m strong_
_Strong enough to carry him_
_He ain’t heavy, he’s my brother_

Those iconic words have symbolized more than just the spirit of that song. In fact there are a number of tales as to where the line, “he ain’t heavy, he’s my brother” originated.

One such story comes from the early 1900s when a Catholic priest named Father Edward Flanagan started a home for orphaned and homeless boys called Boys Town.

Back in 1918, a boy named Howard Loomis was abandoned by his mother at Father Flanagan’s Home for Boys, which had opened just a year earlier. Howard had polio and wore heavy leg braces. Walking was difficult for him, especially when he had to go up or down steps.

Soon, several of the Home’s older boys were carrying Howard up and down the stairs to help him get where he needed to go.

One day, Father Flanagan asked one of those older boys if carrying Howard was hard.

The older boy replied, “He ain’t heavy, Father... he’s my brother.”

That soon became the motto of Boys Town, complete with a statue of a boy on another boy’s back, and all these years later that motto still symbolizes what the children there learn about the importance of caring for each other and having someone care about them.

“He ain’t heavy, he’s my brother” is an important message beyond Boys Town, too. It is a message for all of us, all the time. At some point in our lives, most of us have needed to be carried by someone, either literally or metaphorically. And, at some point, we have likely carried someone else. We’re human. We stumble. And we look to each other for help when we do.

This story of Hagar and Ishmael offers us the chance to stop and consider the places of wilderness in our own lives and the people who have carried us through those troubled times and places. It invites us to stop and reflect on such questions:

_“Who has carried me when I needed help? Who is helping shoulder the burden I carry now? Where would I be without them? For whom am I doing the very same?”_
But this story also asks us to consider any of the people we have neglected to carry, or any of the wilderness places that we have been implicit in creating for others.

What sent Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness was the fact that they were deemed less-than and unworthy to stay in their place. Hagar was a slave, after all, and Ishmael, a child outside of the promise. What sent them into the wilderness was a compelling sense by someone else that they didn’t belong.

Every day around this nation and around our world people are sent into all kinds of painful wilderness places because a person or a group of people decides that those “other people” do not belong. As a society, we continue to find ways to cast out those who don’t seem to belong in one place or another. Remember that Hollies song I mentioned earlier? One of the verses that comes later in the song cries out:

*If I’m laden at all*
*I’m laden with sadness*
*That everyone’s heart*
*Isn’t filled with the gladness*
*Of love for one another.*

Phyllis Trible has notably identified the ways in which Hagar is a symbol of the oppressed. Trible suggests that Hagar in these stories “becomes many things to many people.” “Most especially,” Trible says, “all sorts of rejected women find their stories in her. She is the faithful maid exploited, the black woman used by the male and abused by the female of the ruling class, the surrogate mother, the resident alien without legal recourse, the other woman, the runaway youth, the religious fleeing from affliction, the pregnant young woman alone, the expelled wife, the divorced mother with child, the shopping bag lady carrying bread and water, the homeless woman, the indigent relying upon handouts from the power structures, the welfare mother and the self-effacing female whose own identity shrinks in service to other.”

African American feminists, or “womanists,” have found in Hagar both a model of their own history as descendants of slaves and survivors of racial oppression, as well as a figure of courage and survival. Scholars like Renita Weems, Wilma Bailey and Delores Williams have expressed how Hagar is a victim of ethnic prejudice and economic and social exploitation, have noted her strength and survival skills, and have shown how her story has been “validated as true by suffering black people.”

Hagar’s story reminds us that we, like Ishmael, have been carried through troubled times, and that like Hagar, we have carried others. But it also reminds us, especially in times like we are living through now, that there are times when we have been the ones casting people out or standing by as systems are created that ensure marginalized people continue to be marginalized. In this country, for far too long, it has been white people standing in the place of privilege, continuing to find ways to keep sending black and brown persons into a variety of deserts and wilderness places. It is long past time that those of us who are white,
especially those of us who profess faith in Christ, begin stepping up to join with our black brothers and sisters and help shoulder the unjust burden of racism that has been placed upon them. The burden of racism can only be lifted when all of us carry the weight to repair the breach.

As Christians, we have a duty to join the work of changing the current narrative. When we begin spending more of our time seeing the problems of others not as “their” problems but “our” problems, when we begin shouldering one another’s burdens and helping all people get from the desert side of the wilderness to the promised land on the other, and when we start recognizing that there are places of wilderness that exist in the world that we helped create, then fewer and fewer of our brothers and sisters are likely to end up in desert places feeling deserted and alone. Because that’s what we are to one another. We are God’s family, brothers, sisters… siblings to one another. And to live as God’s children faithfully is to step up to help right the perpetuated wrongs against one another and to help eliminate the desert places of oppression that have been constructed by privilege.

We all have burdens to carry. None of us is immune from trouble. Yet some of God’s children are unjustly given more burdens to carry. We all have a responsibility to help carry these burdens with and for one another. The good news is that none of us carries the weight of these burdens alone. Hagar’s story ends with God showing up, right when all seems lost, to create life anew.

In fact, in Hebrew, the first few syllables of verse 17 are the name “Ishmael” – meaning, “God heard”. And it is the only time in the whole story that Ishmael’s name appears, as if to emphasize the meaning of that name — God hears. God hears the cries of the outcast and abandoned. When we are in trouble, when we are in the desert, God hears and responds and points us to life. God carries us through when we can no longer carry ourselves or one another. Whatever we are facing, we do not face it alone. Whatever we carry, we are not meant to carry it alone.

Thanks be to God. Amen.