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*Faith in the Face of Mystery*  
Genesis 21:8-21

Despite the confidence, our knowledge of life and the things of this world is so limited.

Near the end of the movie, *Charlie Wilson's War*, a conversation between U.S. Representative Wilson and the CIA operative pursues their great concern about what unintended consequences their secret, noble efforts could yield. Gust Avrakotos, the CIA specialist, begins telling a seemingly unrelated story:

*There's a little boy and on his 14th birthday he gets a horse... and everybody in the village says, "how wonderful. The boy got a horse" And the Zen master says, "we'll see." Two years later the boy falls off the horse, breaks his leg, and everybody in the village says, "how terrible." And the Zen master says, "We'll see." Then a war breaks out and all the young men have to go off and fight... except the boy can't cause his legs are messed up. And everyone in the village says, "How wonderful"...at which point Wilson picks up, "And the Zen master says, "'We'll see.'"*

Many believers today are discovering ancient spiritual insights for the first time. Through a new openness and flexibility in their spiritual pursuit, they are discovering what mystics have known for years—that ambiguity is not something to be feared, but recognized as an integral part of any spirituality that is alive.

Earlier in the week, my high aspirations for a sermon on embracing mysticism was quickly pulled into check by an article in the "Daily Press" and an email from a 14-year-old girl requesting answers to questions about the Presbyterian Church. The girl stated that her questions were the result of a study course in her church on other Christian denominations.

The "Daily Press" article from section B, "Nation & World," focused on the declining membership of another Protestant denomination and cited two

pastors' approaches for stemming the drop<sup>1</sup>. One pastor from Durham was trying a more casual attire approach to turn his church's membership around. He is dressing now in a collared shirt that hangs out over his blue jeans, and is wearing a sport coat with no tie. Rick Warren, the pastor of the Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California and author of *The Purpose Driven Life*, has been doing that for years. This pastor from Durham, the article said, "generally avoids politics but signed a statement urging action on global warming."

The other pastor who was mentioned, from another state, was sticking to a traditional suit and tie, proclaiming that every word of the Bible was true, addressing numerous social issues in his sermon, but felt that holding humans responsible for climate change was ill conceived.

The email that came on Monday to our general church email address requested a few answers to questions about Calvinism. I question whether the email was solely written by a 14-year-old, and was saddened by its arrogant, close-minded manner. The email really sought no answers; it found the Reformed Church's teaching in "total violation of the scriptures" and called for Presbyterian Churches to acknowledge their error and change their ways.

"Religion has always been about honoring mystery," says Richard Rohr. "We have created people who [are] afraid of ambiguity, mystery."<sup>2</sup>

Today's lectionary reading from Genesis 21 is one of those texts that cause you to swallow hard before saying, "The Word of the Lord, Thanks be to God." Today's text has Sarah coming to Abraham after seeing Isaac and Ishmael (both sons of Abraham) playing together. She told Abraham to cast out Ishmael and Hagar, his oldest son and his son's mother. Abraham was obviously distressed. He was being asked to get rid of his own flesh and blood.

Sarah had, after all, encouraged Abraham to sleep with her Egyptian handmaiden in order for Abraham to have an heir. But now that she and Abraham miraculously had their own son, Isaac, Sarah struggled with the presence of another older son born to a slave woman. The issue at stake in their

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Gorski from the Associated Press, "Daily Press," Section B, "Nation&World, June 20, 2008, pp. 1-2.

<sup>2</sup> Fr. Richard Rohr from his lecture "The Edge of Christianity," September 13, 2007, *Living the Questions 2.0*, session 21, "Embracing Mystery."

culture was not that Abraham had another son whose mother was essentially a second wife. Her greatest concern was that, according to Jewish custom and law, the oldest son was to receive two thirds of the family's estate at the father's death, and that the other one third would be divided among the other sons. The widow or widows, received no inheritance, nor did daughters. One's wife was to be cared for by the son. As it stood, Ishmael would receive two-thirds of the Abraham's estate at his death, and Hagar would be cared for by Ishmael. Sarah would ultimately be dependent on Isaac who would receive only part of the remaining third—Sarah, who had been with Abraham since the beginning...Sarah, who was given by Yahweh the miracle of a Son at age ninety...Sarah, whose son was to be the channel of blessings for a nation of people "more numerous than the stars...."

At my lectionary group early this past Tuesday morning, the local Rabbi, who adds great perspective to an otherwise very-Protestant group, said, "That's not exactly what the Hebrew says. (None of the rest of us bring our Hebrew Bible or Greek New Testament.) Turning to her Hebrew Bible she said, "The reason that I am familiar with that passage is that I've recently done a study of directives by God in the Jewish Bible. It doesn't say, 'do as she tells you,' but rather something that means more nearly, 'listen to her...pay attention to her...listen to my voice through her suffering and pain.' There are other passages where God says, 'do as he or she tells you,' but this is not one of them."<sup>3</sup>

"Pay attention." That is the call to any serious follower of God. Pay attention to your surroundings. Listen for my voice not just in scripture, but in the voice of every human. Listen to the birds of the air. Experience the presence of God in the wind and salt water. Observe what is happening to the earth. Be sensitive to your body. Listen to the voice of God, not only in the kind words and acts of others, but listen to God through the pain and suffering of others.

To Moses who asked for the name of the One behind the Burning Bush, he heard the words, "I am who I am." Its linguistic structure means more correctly "I am who I am; I was who I was; and I will be who I will be."

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<sup>3</sup> Gilah Dror is the Rabbi at the Rodef Sholom Temple in Hampton, Virginia.

Mystery is at the heart of any true follower of God. And, the idea that one can be intimately connected to that mystery, that source of compassion, that source of creative power is awesome. Mystery refers to something unexplainable and beyond comprehension. It derives from the Greek word *myein*. *Myein* has to do with the eyes and lips and means “to close.” In other words, it is beyond human ability to see and define.

My first memorable encounter to such was as a six or seven-year-old, swinging by myself in the back yard of our home. The wind was blowing gustily and I felt a connection with Creation that went beyond my ability to articulate, with no desire to try to explain such to anyone else. In adult language, I would say today that it was too sacred to try to explain.

At about the same age, I had a reoccurring fantasy of being out-of-doors and being lifted up from the ground eight or ten feet through the effort of both mental concentration and the simple back and forth movement of my arms, and being held in that suspension.

Later as an adult I learned to meditate, often using a Psalm as a beginning point of focus. Learning to go into such deep meditation, I would lose consciousness of where I ended and the rest of creation began. The world is full of mystery. On the latest unmanned Mars mission, scientist discovered that 97.9% of the universe is not visible to the human eye.

In her manifesto on mystery, “The Summer Day,” poet Mary Oliver confesses that she doesn’t know exactly what prayer is, but she does know “how to pay attention.” Could it be that simple, that by simply “paying attention,” by living the questions, we open ourselves to a perspective on life that prepares us to embrace mystery and encounter God on a much deeper level?

Did you catch the rest of the story of Hagar and Ishmael? God told Hagar not to be afraid. God had heard the voice of the boy where he was, and that a great nation would also come through him.

“The Summer Day”

*Who made the world?  
Who made the swan, and the black bear?  
Who made the grasshopper?  
This grasshopper, I mean-*

*the one who has flung herself out of the grass,  
the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,  
who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up and down-  
who is gazing around with her enormous and complicated eyes.  
Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly washes her face.  
Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.  
I don't know exactly what a prayer is.  
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down into the grass, how to kneel down in  
the grass, how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,  
which is what I have been doing all day.  
Tell me, what else should I have done?  
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?  
Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
with your one wild and precious life?*

— Mary Oliver

### **Genesis 21:8-21**

<sup>8</sup>The child grew, and was weaned; and Abraham made a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. <sup>9</sup>But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. <sup>10</sup>So she said to Abraham, "Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac." <sup>11</sup>The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. <sup>12</sup>But God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you. <sup>13</sup>As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring." <sup>14</sup>So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba.

<sup>15</sup>When the water in the skin was gone, she cast the child under one of the bushes. <sup>16</sup>Then she went and sat down opposite him a good way off, about the distance of a bowshot; for she said, "Do not let me look on the death of the child." And as she sat opposite him, she lifted up her voice and wept. <sup>17</sup>And God heard the voice of the boy; and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven, and said to her, "What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. <sup>18</sup>Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him." <sup>19</sup>Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink.

<sup>20</sup>God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness, and became an expert with the bow. <sup>21</sup>He lived in the wilderness of Paran; and his mother got a wife for him from the land of Egypt.