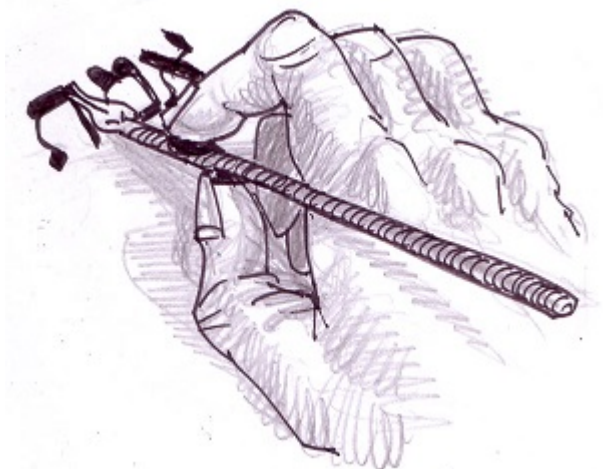


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by Pat Marrin

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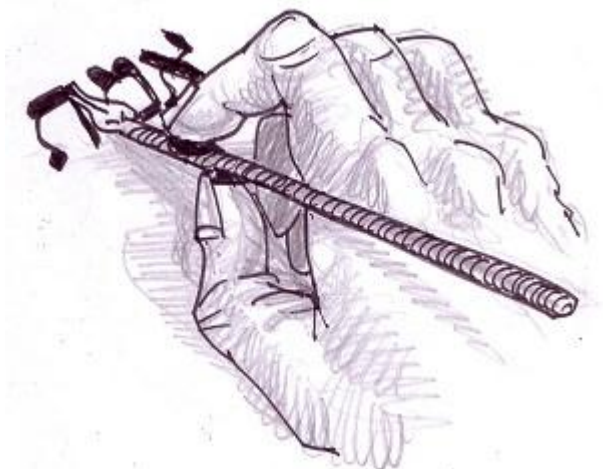
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June 29, 2021

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Note to readers: *I will be taking some time off to travel to visit family during July. Pencil Preaching will resume in August. Thank you for supporting NCR.*

“They begged him to leave their district” (Matthew 8:34).

Gen 21:5, 8-20a; Matt 8:28-34

In the light of increased attention to the violent history of American slavery, today’s first reading about Hagar and Sarah may have actually contributed to the abuse of house slaves by white mistresses, whose husbands had fathered children with them, as Abraham fathered Ishmael with Hagar. If such license was in the Bible, it was justified on the plantation. While slaves found solace and hope in the stories of liberation by Moses, their masters found permission in the stories of the patriarchal period to mistreat them. Reading the Bible is a sword that cuts both ways.

The biblical authors loaded these texts with multiple associations and cross references. Ishmael’s name means “Let El hear” because God hears the boy’s cry when he and his Egyptian mother are expelled from Abraham’s house. The same expression is used in the Book of Exodus to describe God’s attention to the cry of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt. Ironically, they got there because of Joseph, son of Jacob, who was sold by his brothers to the Ishmaelites, Arab traders going down to Egypt. What goes around, comes around. Abraham is not only the father of both Jews and Arabs, but he is also father to the stories of their ongoing rivalries.

The Gospel shows how references were also removed by the evangelists. The story of the Gadarene demoniacs in Matthew is a short version of Mark’s original story (Mark 5:1-17), in which he associates the “legion” of demons cast into the pigs with the Roman legions in control of the pagan district, a detail edited from Matthew’s account. Why? Composed later than Mark, after the Jewish-Roman War that destroyed Jerusalem, Matthew may have regarded it as an unnecessary provocation to Rome.

Observing these possible connections is interesting, but it also enriches our reading of the Scriptures against the historical events taking place when they were composed. In the case of the Genesis reading, it helps us place the Bible in our own context with a disturbing link to American history. It reminds us how potent the Bible is and why it must be interpreted with care. We read the daily Word to find God. The Scriptures invite us to “see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face”

(1 Cor 13:12). When we read with faith, God hears our cry and will not fail to answer.

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