

A Legacy in the Wilderness
The Third Sunday after Pentecost
Sunday, June 21, 2020
The Rev. Paul McLain

“God was with the boy, and he grew up; he lived in the wilderness.” In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

Ott always had a wild streak. As a boy growing up in Oxford, Mississippi, he was always outside riding his bike. Ott and his bicycle gang of neighborhood boys discovered all the steepest hills, the juiciest berry patches, the most bountiful automobile dumps, and the clearest creeks. His sister Ruth recalled, “Ott could even turn around on the seat and ride backwards while it was going.”

Since they had no swimming pool, Ott led his gang in building a dam of mud and sticks on the property of his neighbor, William Faulkner. When the dam was finished and an afternoon thunderstorm filled the creek with water, they were delighted to find that a wonderful swimming hole had been made. They stripped down to their underwear and jumped in the water. It was muddy but cool through all the summer days.

Ott started building other things including a log cabin, a canoe, a tennis court, and a sailboat. There seemed to be nothing he couldn't do. He excelled in his studies at University High School, Ole Miss, and Harvard Medical School. He outgrew his childhood nickname of Ott and went by his given name, Arthur Guyton. He was well on his way to fulfilling his dream of becoming one of the nation's most gifted cardiac surgeons.

During a stint in residency of working 120 hours straight, Arthur experienced a sharp pain in his lower back and a fever spike. He diagnosed himself. He had paralytic polio. The next step for him would be boarding a train for Warm Springs, Georgia for months of rehabilitation. Beyond that, he had no idea if or what kind of future he would have. He was in the wilderness.

The wilderness is where the slave woman and her son are banished for the second time by Abraham and Sarah in our Old Testament lesson from Genesis. As the very least he can do for exiled prisoners, much less his son and the mother of his child, Abraham gives the woman and her boy a little bread and water. And then he sends them out and again renders them homeless. Each time in the wilderness, the messenger of God speaks directly to the slave woman. In fact, she is the first person recorded in all of scripture to receive such a messenger.

And the messenger of God has the decency to do something that Abraham and Sarah found beneath them – he calls her by her name, Hagar. And gives her the name for her son, Ishmael, which means ‘God hears.’ Perhaps God gave her that name for him because God hears us best when we are crying out in the wilderness. Maybe that's also the place where **we** hear God best. Like Arthur Guyton, Ishmael is destined to be a man of the wild. And like Arthur, his journey almost ends before it's even started.

When Hagar runs out of water, she places Ishmael in the bushes. Like any good parent, she can't bear to see her child die. But yet, like any good parent, she can't leave him either. In this impossible situation, Hagar cries out and weeps. Ishmael cries too. And, true to Ishmael's name, God **does** hear. He not only promises water, he promises much more. God tells Hagar, 'I will make a great nation of your son.'

Carol Newsom writes, 'Hagar, who earlier occupies the same place as Sarah, now occupies the same place as Abraham.' Hagar is now a female patriarch. And God sets in motion two parallel paths. Ishmael as the firstborn son, should be the leader of the settlement path. Legally, he is to inherit a double portion of land and livestock, and to be Abraham's heir as leader of the family. Instead, he is cast out to lead the wilderness path, where he will have to make his way in the desert. His half-brother Isaac, the second-born son, by rights would have received less land and would have been expected to find his fortune elsewhere. Instead, he becomes the leader of the settlement path and takes Ishmael's rightful place as lord of the manor. Both the wilderness path and settlement path are blessed. But it often appears God may favor the uncharted path in the wilderness, the uncertain path where we must rely on God for everything.

Arthur Guyton didn't know what to expect in Warm Springs. His time outside in the Pine Mountain waters and forests, and his intense program of rehabilitation for polio helped him restore most of the use of his right arm. Arthur's inventive spirit from his childhood came back to him. He worked with his fellow patients to design a leg brace, a hoist, and created the 'joy stick' version of the motorized wheelchair.

Without bitterness, Arthur gave up on his dream of being a surgeon. 'But,' he said, 'that means I can devote myself to the two things that mean most to me: medical research and raising a family.' Arthur, his wife Ruth, and their two sons at the time headed home to Oxford, where he became a professor. Their family grew to ten children-eight boys and two girls. All ten children went on to become physicians, not by Arthur's choice but by theirs from being around him.

When they moved to Jackson, Mississippi for Arthur to help start the medical school there, he enlisted the children to help him build a concrete house. His son John recalled, "Daddy once pointed out that his neighbor, William Faulkner, or 'Mr. Bill' as he called him, had done him one better. He had a concrete boat." All the kids were inspired to get outside and experience the world around them. The oldest son, David, used his first-ever optical instrument, a magnifying glass, to burn leaves. He later became an ophthalmologist.

Arthur's daughter Jean remembered, 'We were just encouraged to be kids. I would spend time lying in the grass just watching the clouds. When it rained, I put on a raincoat and boots and played in it. That's the way I raised my kids, too.' Arthur bought an arc welder, and he and his son Steven learned to weld together. Steven later built a homemade go-kart. Like young Ott, David and Robert built sailboats. Greg built a ham radio. Arthur once said, 'You know, being in a wheelchair was an advantage. It brought me closer to my kids.'

Arthur went on to achieve worldwide acclaim as Dr. Arthur C. Guyton, author of *The Textbook of Medical Physiology*, the premiere medical school textbook still in use today. But perhaps his greater gifts were as a father and mentor. He taught his students the same way he taught his children. Arthur said, 'Teachers should allow students to learn, rather than always simply trying to poke information into them.' His many devoted students now call themselves 'Guytonians.'

Arthur and his wife Ruth died from injuries in a car wreck in 2003. Sometime later, their oldest son David went back to their old concrete home on Meadow Road in Jackson. No one lived there anymore, the windows were broken, and the copper wire had been stolen. Tearfully, David said, 'It's sad. We built so much of it.' But then all the fond memories came rushing back, and his face broke out into a sly Guyton smile.

Perhaps Hagar broke out into that same smile when she remembered that fateful day God called her by name, led her to water, and gave her son the promise of leading a nation. Like Arthur, I imagine her as a parent who gave her son space to roam the wilderness, to experiment with his bow, to grow to be a leader, to cry out to God in his own way. Hagar did all this as a homeless single mother, practically left for dead by Abraham. She had to learn for herself how to be both father and mother to Ishmael in the harshness of the desert. Ultimately, Hagar has the last laugh as both the father and mother of a pathway to blessing.

Hagar and Arthur Guyton knew that the true legacy of God is not just the promised land of milk and honey, nor even a house made of concrete. Instead, it is forged generation after generation through lessons learned love shared, and wild hearts awakened. *Amen.*