It seems Jesus is having a bad day. We all know the feeling. We have a point we are trying to make and it feels like people aren’t listening, they’re not getting it. Jesus so wants us to know this amazing insight about life: there is no need to fear. God’s love is abounding. God’s love is for all. God’s love permeates all of life…it reaches out to comfort and nurture. In God’s love, we live life from a place of peace, a peacefulness that trusts God’s goodness will ultimately come to fruition. In God’s love, we are inspired to know the role we play in loving and healing this world. There is no need to fear. Jesus is trying to help us understand this most important insight about life, but the message isn’t getting through. So, he resorts to startling us: “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and one’s foes will be members of one’s own household.” Whoa. What is he saying? He is saying listen and learn from one another. Perhaps it is your son or your daughter or your daughter-in-law who is offering a startling new idea, who wants you to know this good news: discovering how to live in God’s love is new life. Ah, but, it’s a bad day….Jesus’s frustration is boiling over and so he continues: “Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.” Again, whoa. What is he saying? He is saying, remember, all love begins in God’s love. It’s the best news…God’s love is eternal.

Our Old Testament lesson reminds us that God’s eternal love is for all. We hear the story of Hagar being cast out into the wilderness. Hagar is the servant of Abraham’s wife, Sarah.
Both Sarah and Hagar have sons by Abraham. Sarah’s son is Isaac and Hagar’s son is Ishmael. Though Isaac and Ishmael are playmates, Sarah begins to worry about Isaac having to share his inheritance with Ishmael. So, Sarah insists that Abraham send Hagar and Ishmael away, into the desert where resources are scarce. Sure enough, Hagar and Ishmael run out of water. Of course, Hagar is terrified that Ishmael will die in the wilderness. Now, one of the reasons this passage is significant is that when God reaches out to comfort Hagar, God calls Hagar by her name. God says, “What troubles you, Hagar?” Hagar is a woman in a patriarchal culture; she is an Egyptian slave. Yet, God calls her by her name. This is Scripture’s way of saying, “Listen closely! This announcement is important!” Ishmael, Abraham’s first son, will survive and he will be the Father of a great nation. Ishmael is the Father of the Islamic faith. We are reminded of the deep roots that bind Christians, Jews and Muslims together. God’s love is for all.

I’ve been thinking a lot over the past week about Paul Ryan’s words to the House of Representatives after the shooting at the practice for the Congressional Baseball Game. He said, “An attack on one of us is an attack on all of us.” His words are an achingly hopeful statement of unity in this divisive climate. Let’s reflect on these words a moment longer: “An attack on one of us is an attack on all of us.” Don’t these words get to the heart of what it means to live together in God’s Creation? We all belong to God.

So, how do we learn not to fear, but to live in God’s love and hope? Let’s go back to Hagar. Another reason this passage is significant is that Hagar cries out to God, “…she lifted up her voice and wept.” When we express our sorrow and our anger and our disappointment and our confusion to God, when we question why God has seemingly abandoned us, what we can hold on to is that we are calling out to God, that deep in our soul we know God. God is present; God loves and heals. Our cry is our faith. Being in relationship with God is not about decorum,
about being polite and modest. Being in relationship with God is about being true to ourselves, about being true to all of our emotions. It is about giving over all of our self to God. David R. Blumenthal, Professor of Judaic studies at Emory University, writes: “And how do you love the Lord, your God, with all your heart? By allowing yourself to be silenced by the presence of God, a silence of amazement and receptivity. And by not allowing yourself to be silenced by God, by speech which is strong and just” (Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest, Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993, epigraph). We live in love and hope when we call on our faith and offer our authentic selves to God.

This seeking is precisely why we come together in community…to support one another in our desire to live life in God’s love. Dwight Zscheile, an Episcopal priest who wrote the book The Agile Church, talks about how in today’s world, the individual self has become the ultimate authority, a lonely and narrow place from which to live. Zscheile offers that when we get wrapped up these days in discussing church membership, we should step back and consider a new approach. Instead of asking, “How do we do church differently,” we should ask, “What is the Gospel for us and for our neighbors?” What is the Gospel? The Gospel is community in a culture of individualism, forgiveness in a culture seeking perfection, reconciliation in a world of enmity and division, and abundant life in a culture of scarcity. Our faith is community, forgiveness, reconciliation and abundant life. These four cornerstones will heal the world: community, forgiveness, reconciliation and abundant life.

Let us continue in Jesus’s footsteps and offer this message to the world: all love begins in God’s love; God’s eternal love is for all; in God’s love, we live life from a place of peace, a peacefulness that trusts God’s goodness will ultimately come to fruition; in God’s love, we are inspired to know the role we play in loving and healing this world. There is no need to fear.
Amen.