



Reflections by: Rev. Dr. Randy Bush
Text: Genesis 12:1-3, 15:1-6

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Abraham – One Father, Three Faiths

Imagine three friends sitting in a restaurant corner booth drinking coffee – three people who’ve known each other for years and who get along well. Nothing unusual about that. Now imagine their names are Ahmeer, Aaron, and Andrea and they are people of different faiths: one Muslim, one Jewish, and one Christian. That may seem a bit unusual, but it’s not impossible. If you asked them about their different faiths, they may insist it hasn’t been a factor in their friendship; plus, their faiths have a lot in common. For example, all three of their religions honor the same man – Abraham, the patriarch described in the bible and in the Qur’an. The friends may then insist they are spiritually related because they’re children of Abraham in one way or another. And it would be hard to argue with that perspective.

The biological founder of Judaism was Abraham, a man told by God to leave his home in Mesopotamia and travel to the land of Canaan along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. By his life and actions, Abraham was also one of the spiritual founders of Christianity, for his faithful relationship with God laid the groundwork for all future relationships with the Lord, culminating in our trust in Jesus Christ, whom we profess to be God’s Son. Lastly, Abraham is both the biological and spiritual ancestor for Muslims, through his biological son Ishmael and because of his spiritual submission to God that serves as a guiding example for the religion of faithful submission we know as Islam.

Ahmeer, Aaron, and Andrea could also point to the fact that all three of their faith traditions share a strong commitment to the doctrine of monotheism – the belief that there is only one God whom we worship and serve. Not faith in lots of gods and certainly not worshiping idols we might collect and have around our homes. The Qur’an tells the story that the reason Abraham left his family home in the city of Haran was because Abraham’s family worshiped idols. Evidently they had a large collection of idols that filled his father’s house. Supposedly one day Abraham secretly smashed all the idols in his father’s house except for the biggest one. When his father confronted him about this, Abraham claimed innocence. Then he pointed to the largest idol and suggested his father ask that one what happened. Knowing that the idols couldn’t speak or move, Abraham was challenging the false religious practices of his family and making a case that the only God we should worship is the one true God.

Aaron’s Jewish faith emphasizes this same point. The first two of the Ten Commandments say clearly, “You shall have no other gods before me, nor shall you make for yourself or worship any idols.” This same message is there in Andrea’s Christian faith, as when the

apostle Paul explicitly wrote in his letter to the Corinthians, “My dear friends, flee from the worship of idols” (I Cor 10:14). This message is just as relevant today as it was 2000 years ago. Idolatry happens when we give anything – absolutely anything other than God – the primacy of our energy, affection, and loyalty. We are prone to create idols of things – cars, homes, careers; or we create idols of ideas – worshiping things like success and power; or we create idols of our homelands – believing patriotism is a higher virtue than the biblical values of compassion and peace. But Islam, Judaism and Christianity all speak with one, clear voice against idolatry, insisting there is no god but God.

Sadly, the faiths of Ahmeer, Aaron, and Andrea have clashed with one another over how we are to worship the one, true God. And even though all three faiths draw inspiration from Father Abraham, they fight among themselves over the sacred places associated with him. Think of the clashes in the city of Jerusalem between Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Think of the Dome of the Rock, which Jews venerate because it is one of the oldest sites in Jerusalem with links back to the ancient temple built by King Solomon centuries ago. That same site is sacred to Muslims because it supposedly contains the rock from which Muhammad ascended into heaven. It is the third most sacred place for all Muslims. Their first most sacred place is the Ka’ba in Mecca – a rectangular building to which the faithful make pilgrimages because it was supposedly the first place ever built for worshiping God. And who built it originally? According to legend, it was Abraham and his eldest son, Ishmael.

So we have three religions that reject idolatry and promote monotheism and three religions that have long traditions that converge on the figure of Abraham; yet these three religions developed different pathways for the faithful to follow. For Aaron and Judaism, God’s covenant with Abraham set in motion a relationship that included promises to one particular people and their inheritance of a region of land along the Mediterranean Sea. For Andrea and Christianity, that first covenant is still important but it has been expanded to include all people on earth, no matter where they live. Also, for Christians the one God is understood as a Triune God – Creator, Savior and Spirit, with Jesus Christ recognized as God’s son. For Ahmeer and Islam, the messages of Abraham and of Jesus are still to be honored, but the fullest revelation for them is found in the scriptures of the Qur’an, which doesn’t support the idea of a Trinity nor the language of Jesus being God’s son.

All three of these religions developed in the Middle East. Surprisingly, the distance between Jerusalem and Mecca is only 911 miles – about as far as between Milwaukee and New Orleans, or Milwaukee and Disneyworld. Judaism traces its roots back to 1800 BCE; Christianity arose in the 1st century CE; and Islam originated around 7th century CE. A time span of over 2500 years separates these three religions, so it is not surprising that they do not agree on fundamentals of faith – which texts to treat as sacred, which figures to venerate over all others. Now, I am not saying all three religions are equally true and interchangeable. I remain a follower of Christ and a Christian minister. But in

this day and age of stark divisions, doesn't it make sense to celebrate the things that unite us – the things that despite all our differences we can still agree on?

Thankfully, in addition to Judaism, Islam and Christianity all honoring Father Abraham, there is something in his call story that can unite us today. It's in the bible story that first introduces Abraham, found in Genesis 12. Vs. 1 – Abraham is told to leave his home and go to a new land. Vs. 2 is a word of reassurance. Abraham is told he will be a great nation and blessed by God. Vs. 3 reiterates the promise that Abraham will be blessed. But at the heart of those last two verses is the reason for all this. God said to Abraham, "I will make your name great so that you will be a blessing." And in the next verse, God says "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." All of this – the call to leave home, to follow God to a new land with the promise of children and a great future is solely given for one reason: that Abraham and his descendants will be a blessing to others.

Blessings are usually other directed. Someone sneezes and you say, "Bless you." At a marriage or baptism, a blessing is offered. At a special occasion, you give someone a card, a gift, or say a short speech as a type of blessing to commemorate that special day. In and of itself, a blessing doesn't change anything or fix anything. It mostly just reminds us of what is already there – the love a couple shares, the miracle of new life, the joy as a new chapter unfolds for someone you care about. The author Marilynne Robinson wrote, "A blessing doesn't enhance sacredness; it acknowledges it." (Gilead)

The Catholic writer Henri Nouwen said, "To give someone a blessing is the most significant affirmation we can offer. It is more than a word of praise or pointing out someone's talent. To give a blessing is to affirm and say "Yes" to a person's Belovedness." The Jewish rabbi Lawrence Kushner has said, "The one who offers a blessing is like a coach whispering to an athlete before a competition, 'You can do it!' More than words of encouragement, blessings literally bring forth and make real an otherwise unrealizable force. [And] God needs us to summon blessings [for others]."

Long ago, Abraham wasn't sure he could do what the Lord asked of him. He worried that because he was old and didn't have any children, he could never live up to the tasks God had set for him. But in Genesis 15, God reassured him, telling him to look to the heavens and try to count the stars, for of such a number shall his descendants be. And Abraham believed God and in that was his faith and righteousness; it is what made him the father of three different religions.

So far today you've chosen to worship God in a Presbyterian church. We've had times of silence and offered prayers of confession seeking God's grace and forgiveness. Our organist is gone today, so we've sung quiet hymns accompanied by the piano and heard an Old Testament psalm sung in Hebrew as our anthem. In an anxious, tense world we've come to this quiet place to think about bigger things – to literally ask once more

why we're here on earth. Over the past few moments, we've dared to ask what it means to share a common religious ancestor with people that otherwise are so different from us. Yet God's call to Abraham is offered to all of us, asking us simply to be a blessing. To do what we can to bless others, to whisper "You can do it!", to sanctify moments with a word of kindness, grace or support. God's promise to Ahmeer, Aaron, Andrea, and each of us is the same: "I will bless you and make your name great – Why? So that you will be a blessing."

We may not feel up to this task and need reassurance, just as Abraham did. But take heart. In the words of Madeleine L'Engle, "God always calls unqualified people. God, whose ways are not our ways, always seems to choose those least qualified. For if God had chosen great kings, successful merchants, wise leaders, it would be easy for these people to think they accomplished by their own virtue the blessings God asked them to complete" (The Irrational Season). God chose us, Christian, Muslim, Jews, this day, right now, to be a blessing. Too often we over-think this faith business. What's been true for 3000 years is really quite simple. Friends, just be a blessing. Be a blessing to others. AMEN