

The Second Sunday in Lent

Lectionary B, Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

Trinity Church, February 25, 2018

Topic: Abraham

The three great monotheistic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, claim a common father – Abraham. Abraham was the first person in recorded history to understand that there is only one God. We read about him in the Book of Genesis. This morning we heard about his covenant with God, that he would “be the ancestor of a multitude of nations.”

God says, “I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.”

This came somewhat as a surprise to Abraham since he had no children by his wife Sarah. Yet, we hear that God would provide a son for them even in their old age. That son was Isaac. And from Isaac came Jacob; and from Jacob

the twelve tribes of Israel. This is the Biblical heritage for Jews and Christians.

Islam also has a claim to Abraham, but rather than tracing their heritage through Isaac, their relationship to Abraham comes through Ishmael, Abraham's first son. Ishmael was the son of Sarah's maid, Hagar. Tradition says that Abraham took Ishmael to Mecca where he married an Egyptian woman and became the father of twelve tribes himself. These tribes are associated with Bedouin tribes around the Middle East from the late first millennium

B.C.E. Ishmael is identified as the progenitor of the Arabs.

While the tradition and folklore of Abraham and the patriarchs of Israel date back to 1996-1690 B.C.E., Abraham was a product not of the time that the story took place but of the time the Old Testament scriptures were written down in the 6th century B.C.E. when the Neo-Babylonian Empire ruled the world. Prior to that, the stories were carried on from generation to generation through oral tradition.

When we translate this common heritage into modern

times we see how difficult it has become from descendants of Abraham to reach common ground regarding the Holy Land. Each one claims that the area encompassing Israel and Palestine is their inheritance from their father Abraham. Jerusalem, in fact, is a center for all three religions. What is known as the Rock is said to have been the place where Adam was buried. Solomon built the Temple there. Jesus prayed there and it was from the Rock that Muhammad ascended. Jerusalem has been called the Navel of the world. The remains of the Temple,

which was destroyed in 70 C.E., is known now as the Western Wall where devout Jews and other religious people often pray. Jesus was crucified in Jerusalem. And the Dome of the Rock is the third holiest mosque in Islam.

For many centuries adherents of each religion have fought over the land. The legacy is one of blood: Muslim/Jewish warfare; Christian/Muslim warfare. When I was in Jerusalem twenty-six years ago the city was surrounded with guards and multiple check points. Since I would be going to Egypt and the United Arab Emirates after

being in Jerusalem, it would not be good to have an Israeli stamp on my passport. So the American Embassy in Cyprus gave me a separate passport just for this visit. The animosity between Arabs and Jews continues to this day. And since as Christians we have a Jewish heritage, we are likely to be on the side of Jews and opposed to Muslims. We see anti-Muslim attitudes even in this country with Muslims labeled as terrorists and protests surrounding the building of mosques.

Perhaps even in our own small way, we could pray and

promote an attitude of compassion for one another rather than succumbing to attitudes of divisiveness. Christian compassion means ‘to suffer’ with someone. It bids us to go where people hurt and to enter into their pain – to be present for them, and when possible, to help. Judaism bids us to repair a broken world by performing acts of mercy and kindness. Islam reminds us that what God has to say to us is informed by both mercy and compassion, and thus it becomes our responsibility to speak and act

in the name of God the Merciful,
the Compassionate One.

It isn't in our power to repair
the whole world, but in small ways
we may be able to promote the
goodness each religion has to
offer, and learn to honor those of
other faiths as we claim with them
Abraham as our father.