

## **“Kith and Kin In Abraham: Jews, Christians and Muslims”**

**Old Testament Genesis 12:1-3 Qur’an Surah 5:48**

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The rise of conflicts in the Middle East, Iraq, Afghanistan, Iran and what has been termed the “global war on terrorism” has led some to embrace the concept of the “war of civilizations” between the Christian West and the Muslim East. Tune in Christian fundamentalist preachers like Rev. Hagee in San Antonio and you will hear plenty of talk along the lines of the forces of God, namely the Christians, being in conflict with the forces of Satan in what he and others call the Islamo-fascists. There is a book out now in which an atheist simply says religion in general is the problem and that religion of any kind inherently leads to conflict and hatred between people. Given world events it would seem that all these points of view have some credibility, but does it have to be that way? Let’s not be too quick to answer this question.

Today is Worldwide Communion Sunday. This is the day we celebrate the unity of the Christian Church worldwide, in all its various denominations and manifestations. At this time we declare that we are all one in Christ. We may well be one in Christ’s heart up in heaven but it seems all too obvious that we are not one down here on earth! Down here on earth we have a great deal of trouble recognizing some of our fellow Christians as being brothers and sisters in Christ. It would seem that not only do we have trouble getting along with other religions, we also have trouble getting along with other Christians!

The same can be said of Islam. It too claims that all its followers are part of the worldwide ummah, that all Muslims are brothers and sisters no matter where they are from or what their ethnicity might be. Yet we know they too

do not always act that way. The conflict between Shia and Sunnis is a good case in point.

Jews too claim that they are united as Children of Abraham. Yet they too have their rifts and conflicts between competing groups and understandings of what it means to be Jewish. At the Wailing Wall, one of their holiest sites, Orthodox and Reformed have to pray at separate sections of the wall lest conflict breaks out.

I have come to believe that it is not religion, in and of itself, that is the problem. It is one's interpretation of their religion that is the determinative factor. I have repeatedly found that I have more in common with a liberal, for lack of a better word, Muslim, Christian and Jew than I do with a fundamentalist of any stripe, Christian or otherwise. Fundamentalists tend to see God in legalistic, exclusivist, and judgmental terms. Liberals tend to view God as a God of grace, love, and a source of cosmic unity and blessing.

In a sense we see both of these interpretations of God at work in our passage from Genesis 12. Verse 3 states, **“I will bless those who bless you, and I will place a curse on those who harm you. And all the people of the earth will be blessed through you.”**

Where should we put the emphasis in this passage? I suspect the fundamentalist would tend to focus on the opening which speaks of blessings for God's people and curses on those who oppose them. The liberal would tend to focus on the concluding section which speaks of universal blessing. Frankly, universal blessing would seem to be the thrust of this passage. Certainly, given world events today, the path of blessing is the one we need to get on rather than the path that leads to “curse.”

Notice that, Abraham, the man of faith, is told that should he follow the path that God is laying out for him, that he will become a “blessing to

others.” The “others” here is not just those who will join him in what will become the Jewish faith, although they certainly would be blessed by his actions as well. A person of God becomes a source of blessing to all they meet, not just for those of similar views. Among the various Abraham stories in the Old Testament there a number of stories where practitioners of other religions are blessed by God because they treated Abraham and Sarah in an appropriate and ethical fashion.

Notice that the only ones who are cursed by God in this passage are those who “harm” Abraham and the future children of Abraham. Curse does not come down on those who don’t convert to Abraham’s religious views, only on those who physically harm them. Basically, God is cursing and condemning religious intolerance here! God does not approve of inhumanity based on religion. Such inhumanity is the road to curse not blessing. Such inhumanity does not allow Abraham to be a source of blessing or for the “other” to be a source of blessing. Blessing is found in mutual respect and ethical actions towards all whom we meet.

It should come as no surprise to us that Jews are Children of Abraham. We read a very short part of this story this morning in Genesis 12. Over and over again we are told they worshipped the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. We also know that Jesus worshipped and prayed to this same God of Abraham. At one point in the New Testament we are told by Jesus that the Children of Abraham are not simply those who are physically descended from Abraham, but those who do the will of God. We are told that God could raise up Children of Abraham from the stones, should God so desire! As followers of Christ we too are Children of Abraham.

Muslims also claim to be children of Abraham. They make this claim both as physical descendants of Abraham, through Hagar and her son, by

Abraham, Ishmael; and by virtue of their claim that they too worship the God of Abraham and the God of Jesus. Many Christians do not recognize this, but frankly I personally see no reason why we shouldn't accept this claim. Jews, Christians and Muslims are kith and kin in Abraham and through the God of Abraham. If we would begin with this premise the practitioners of all three religions would most certainly be on the path of God's blessing rather than the path of God's curse. In recognizing this claim our religious faiths could become a source of unity rather than division and conflict.

This past week I was invited to speak at Texas State University. I was given the very interesting topic, "As a Christians Minister What Passage from the Muslim Qur'an Would I Preach From?" If you would like a copy of this talk there are copies on the table in the narthex.

As soon as Mike gave me this topic I knew immediately what passage I would choose. It is a passage that I dearly wish was in our New Testament. It is passages like this one that make Islam potentially more tolerant than Judaism or Christianity. I would always close my Comparative Religion classes on the last day of the semester with this quote from the Qur'an. It raises the interesting question. If God is all powerful, why didn't God make all the people on earth ONE religion? Good question isn't it? It would solve a lot of problems if God had made us all one religion!

Let's take a closer look at it. Two reasons are given for God allowing a multiplicity of religions.

First, we are told that God allows all these different religions to exist to "try us." It is my experience that in studying other religions, in talking to people of other religions, I am stimulated to examine my own beliefs and practices. Differences can make us think about why we believe what we

believe and do what we do. Differences can cause us to pray and meditate on our basic beliefs and questions that arise from the presence of different views and beliefs. Differences encourage us to go “deeper” into the exploration of God and God’s will for ourselves and the world.

In exploring differences, we might well be surprised to learn that there are many commonalities between religions. Religions tend to answer similar questions and address similar human needs. Most religions pray and meditate. Most religions have some version of the Golden Rule. Most religions teach the virtue of compassion. Most religions offer a path to what Jesus called “the peace that passes understanding.”

The second reason given for the multiplicity of religions is also quite instructive. We are told that all the religions of the world are to “**press forward in good works.**” Besides offering the stimulation that comes with differences the various religions are to engage in a vigorous effort to do good works.

What a marvelous thing it would be if the various religions would engage in a competition NOT to determine who has the most truth or the best path to God, but rather compete in doing good. Imagine if all the religions competed in such things as: Who could build the most hospitals and clinics to care for the sick; who could feed the most hungry people; who could build the most housing for the homeless; who could work the hardest for peace and justice! Talk about a path to blessing! This would surely be a blessing to the world!

If we do this will this smooth away all differences? No. Would we have to say all religions are equally true? No. Would we have to say that everything every religion does is good? No. Frankly, this passage from the Qur’an makes it clear that all questions will not be answered. Life in this

world will still remain complicated and confusing. It makes it clear that there never will be a single worldwide religion. So it is that we are told that it is only after we die and stand before our Creator and Sustainer that **“God will tell you that concerning which ye disagree.”** “Father Abraham had many children, many children had Father Abraham. I am one of them and so are you so let’s all praise the Lord. Amen.