

Abraham: One God, Three Names

From the series: Once Upon a Time...

Text: Genesis 12:1-3, 21:8-21; Romans 9:1-8, 11:25-36

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

It is serendipitous when a series of messages is set down and then in the meantime one discovers a best-selling book, as happened in this case. Perhaps you have read a major article in *Time* magazine about the book by Bruce Feiler, *Abraham*. Bruce Feiler is a young Jewish writer who in the wake of 9-11 decided that he would try to probe the nature of those three religious traditions that root themselves in Abraham, he being a Jew, but also the Christians and the Muslims. All of us together are of Abrahamic faith. All are rooted, somehow or other, in that founding father. Feiler visited the Holy Land, interviewed the Christians and Jews and Muslims, visited the shrines, the sacred places, and he writes an illuminating and very fascinating study of these three faith traditions all rooted in Abraham and where they have been and where they are today. As I speak to you this morning you are aware of Hebron south of Jerusalem, the city of Abraham, the shrine of Abraham, the place where Abraham purchased ground to bury his wife Sarah and where he, himself, is buried according to tradition. You perhaps know that it was in 1994 that a Jewish settler born in this country, Dr. Baruch Goldstein, entered that shrine of Abraham and gunned down 29 Muslims as they were at prayer. You are no doubt aware that on Friday of this week past Palestinian gunmen killed twelve Israelis on the way to the shrine to say their prayers in Hebron. And so, as we think about "Abraham: One God, Three Faiths," we are speaking about an ancient story, and we are speaking about events that are on the late-breaking news.

It is so very important, I believe, that we get some historical and biblical perspective on the relationship between these three faith traditions all rooted in Abraham. You know the story as we have it in what we have always spoken of as the Old Testament. We speak of it here as the Hebrew Scriptures; it is the Jewish Bible, and the story of Abraham originally is recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures. Abraham, a part of the cultural scene of his day, somewhere in the Tigris-Euphrates area, Ur of the Chaldees, is moved with his family north and west to Hebron, and then he receives a call.

Now we don't know if Abraham was historical or not. He is perhaps a mythical figure, a representative figure. In any case, that which we learn about Abraham in the biblical story is corroborated by the archeological digs. There was this period of time with these kinds of people moving about in that part of the world. Abraham, according to the Jewish story, hears this call to go.

What is it to hear a call? What is it to have this kind of voice within that compels one to pick up and to move on?

In any case, that is the story. Then he goes on his way with Sarah his wife. The promise is to go and he will be blessed and he will be a blessing to all nations. How will he have seed when he is an old man and Sarah is beyond the age of childbearing? Well, this is the promise, of course. And so they wait and they wait and they wait, and he gets discouraged. And then one day Sarah takes things into her own hands and she says, "Have my slave girl from Egypt, Hagar," and Abraham has a child, Ishmael, with Hagar. There are the natural, normal kind of tensions and conflict, but in any case, Ishmael born to Hagar is Abraham's son and Abraham is satisfied with that. But, God says no, according to the story. Sarah will have a son, and this holy line is going to be through that son. I suppose it has something to do with the fact that Sarah was barren we are told at the very beginning of the story, and what the story is trying to say is that God is starting over again. And God is starting over with a barren womb. Well, eventually the child is born and it would seem that all is coming to fruition, except that one day Sarah sees Ishmael playing with Isaac and all of that natural, normal, awful, human jealousy and envy and fear arise and she says to Abraham, "Send her out with her son," which he does. An awful story. And Hagar is about to give up when she hears the voice of God, the angel of the Lord, who says, "There is water. Lift up your son." He becomes the father of a great nation, the Arab peoples. So, there is in the Jewish story itself the legitimacy of Ishmael as the father of many nations blessed by God, the Arab people, so that all of these people are interrelated. They are all cousins or whatever you want to make of it. That is in the Jewish story itself.

And it goes on then, Isaac, Jacob, the twelve tribes, Israel and so forth, eventually to Jesus, and then after Jesus comes Paul. Now, Paul is a child of the son of Abraham. Paul is schooled in that Abrahamic tradition, that Hebrew tradition. One day Paul has this blinding experience and he is convinced that Jesus is indeed the Messiah, that Jesus is the Christ, that Jesus is the long-promised one. He is turned around in his tracks. Paul the Jew becomes a promoter, an apostle of this Jesus Jewish movement. But, Paul the Jew sees in the experience of Jesus the breaking out of that particularity. And so Paul takes that message beyond the limits of the Jewish community and he is the one who brings the gospel to the world. He gets into conflict with the Jewish community for doing that. But, nonetheless, it is his vision. He sees a universalizing, the universalizing that was in Abraham. Paul now has to figure out how he, as a son of Abraham, can present Jesus as the Messiah with his own community which is not going along with it, to

be sure. There is a Jesus Jewish movement that might have carried the day. It was not at all clear whether the Jesus Jewish movement would become the dominant movement, or whether the rabbinic movement would come to the ascendency. Paul is in that conflict situation. Paul loves his people. Paul wants his people to see Jesus as he sees Jesus. Paul wants his people to see that that universalizing promise in Abraham is being realized in Jesus, that there is now the God of Israel for the whole world through Jesus.

But that is not the way it seems to be going. And so, in Romans he struggles with it, and he says, "I could wish myself accursed if my brothers and sisters according to the flesh could see this. If only they could see this!" But, they don't see it. So, how does he figure that out? He said, "I guess that all of Israel is not Abraham's seed. There is seed of Abraham that is other than Israel. There is a line of Israel within Abraham's seed. It is narrower. Now I realize that everybody that came from the loins of Abraham is not the true Israel."

Well, you can see what Paul is doing. As he works in his other letters, he says we are part of the Mosaic tradition of Sinai and of Moses and that whole community set up after the Exodus. Abraham was 400 years before that; Abraham preceded that, Abraham did not come through the legalities of the Jewish community as presently practiced. Abraham came by faith. Abraham had faith before he was circumcised. Abraham had faith before there was a nation Israel. It was through faith that Abraham was declared righteous. And so, right now faith is enough. Circumcision isn't necessary. The temple isn't necessary. The temple, the circumcision, all of that which was local and particular is now busted open. Now it is possible through faith in Christ to come to God. You see what Paul just did? Paul just used Abraham against Abraham's children. Paul reinterpreted Abraham over against the community whose father was Abraham.

Six hundred years later there was an Arab, a trader and capable person, who had a vision and heard a revelation. He came to the Jewish community in Medina and shared the revelation and they rejected him. But, he was no one to pass off lightly. Mohammed was quite somebody and he had this revelation, and he began to write down what he heard and the long and the short of that is that we have the Koran and we have the fate of Islam. Of course, Paul is a Christian, had a revelation from the true God. Mohammed as a Muslim just got things screwed up in his head. Right? Of course. Paul is our man. I mean, this other guy had too much sun and sand. He started to hallucinate. He thought God was speaking to him.

Well, what we have are three faith traditions and they all root in Abraham, and there is the Jewish story and Paul doesn't deny the Jewish story, but he says that is only the opening chapter and now it is here. And he re-writes the story in terms of Jesus and Abraham and Paul and the Christian movement to the Gentiles. Mohammed has his vision and hears his voice, writes his text, and there has come this great community of Islam in the wake of that. So, we have Abraham: Three

Faiths, One God. And we are killing each other. We are either killing each other for religious reasons, or co-opting religion to fuel the conflict for political or economic reasons. Our world is in jeopardy and in great peril, because we have three traditions rooted in one founder claiming one God. That's where we are.

So, where do we go? Just briefly. There is a quote in one of the inserts in your liturgy from this Bruce Feiler book, *Abraham*, and in the midst of that quote there is a quote from Walter Brueggeman who is in the Presbyterian seminary in Decatur, Georgia. I have met him, know his work. He is probably as fine an Old Testament scholar as we have in the country today. And so, Bruce Feiler goes to him and says, "Help me to understand this," and Walter Brueggeman as a confessing Christian says,

"It is perfectly legitimate for the Jews to tell their story back to Abraham. It is perfectly legitimate for the Christians to tell their story back to Abraham. It is perfectly legitimate for the Muslims to tell their story back to Abraham. What is not legitimate is for any one of the three traditions to claim that theirs is the only story."

Brueggeman uses these wonderful words like "twisting the tradition" or "confiscating the story," because what he recognizes is that those stories are interpretive movements. I love that phrase. Brueggeman says our religious stories are interpretive movements. Our religious stories are the stories we tell in order to try to understand who we are. They are stories that try to help us to understand about this fascinating, perilous, exciting, fantastic, scary business of human existence. That's what religious stories are. And you have interpretive movements. You have stories told in order to give some sense, to make some sense out of the data, out of the experience, out of the past that has come down to us. The Jews do it legitimately as they tell their story, and we do it legitimately. Paul had a grand vision. Paul could see that this Jewish Jesus was enough for the whole world, and Mohammed, obviously Mohammed had hold of something, for he brought about a tremendous tradition of people who yield their lives in obedience to the will of Allah.

David Hartman has been another teacher of mine, a rabbi from Jerusalem. David Hartman, when he comes to this story of Sarah and Hagar and that awful human anguish and bitterness and rivalry, says, "Let's look at it, folks. We wrote the story. Let's think again. Let's change the story." And I would say, "My God, David Hartman, that's the Bible. You can't change the story."

And David Hartman would say,

"Oh, that's your Protestant problem. As a Jew the living tradition always trumps the text. It is the ongoing living tradition, the oral tradition that always has a greater authority than the text. Israel lived most of its centuries without a text. It wasn't until the sixth century BCE, in exile, that the scribes began to write down the story, and Ezra came back to the

second temple community and they had a story. They dotted the i and they crossed the t and that is when they began to get into trouble. They are storytellers. They were better off without a text."

And David Hartman says, "Don't let the text lead you to places that you know you ought not to go."

The more I wrestle with this and think about this, the more I am convinced. Do you want me to say something radical? Do you want me to say something that you can take out of here that will scandalize the whole community? It's high time that we burn all the Korans and we burn all the Bibles. We'd be better off without a text, because then we could look at each other in the eye, heart-to-heart and begin to say, "What in the world is going on? Because when a text literally interpreted makes me hate you, the text is wrong. And when a religious community is bound to an ancient text that is leading it to destruction, to conflict, to war, to hatred, it is wrong. A written text needs always to be interpreted by the Holy Spirit and the ongoing story of life and the ongoing living tradition. And unless we do it, unless we break free from bondage to the story, we will end up killing each other, and you know it is a very real possibility as we sit here. We are living on the edge of our seats. We are scared to death, and the whole is on tenterhooks.

We read the quote down at the bottom, "There are fanatics who are misusing the story and making it a literal word of God, absolutizing it and justifying their hatred, and justifying their violence."

Most of the religious community just keeps it going by not being radical enough and facing the story enough. It is possible, another scenario is possible. Bruce Feiler, the young Jew who went on this pilgrimage, saw something different. He saw another possibility. Walter Brueggeman, the Old Testament scholar, sees another possibility. David Hartman, a rabbi in Jerusalem, sees another possibility. I see another possibility. It is religion which is not doing what it ought to be doing that has brought the world to the edge of disaster. It is high time that we look each other in the eye, heart-to-heart, human being to human being and begin to live out our story that is told us.

References:

Bruce Feiler. *Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths*. New York: William Morrow and Co./HarperCollins Publishers, 2002.