

## Abraham's Faith

*Romans 4: 1-8, 13-17 ~ March 12, 2017 ~ Heritage Lutheran Church*

In today's sermon text St Paul writes:

***What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh?***

Father Abraham is a mystical figure for many modern Christians. His legacy extends back an additional two thousand years beyond the two thousand years since Christ. So we are separated from Abraham by over four thousand years of history. On the surface it seems like this span of time would serve to make Abraham less significant in today's world. Nothing could be further from the truth. Abraham serves as the progenitor, the original father, of three very significant groups of people in the world today. Those groups are Jews, Muslims, and Christians. Even though these three groups of people have dominated world news in recent months, not once have I heard any news caster say, "And it all started with Abraham..." But it did, as we shall see.

Let's begin with the Jews since that heritage is the most obvious and best documented. Traditionally all Jews trace their racial bloodlines back to Abraham. These bloodlines take very specific paths for the first three generations of Jewish history. Genesis starting after chapter 11 is totally dedicated to recording this line of descent. We are familiar with the stories about Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the twelve tribes of Israel. This is the Jewish story. It tells about their religious heritage, but even more important it tells about their racial origins. Being Jewish can be about a race, a religion, or both. Unlike Christians, it is quite possible to be thoroughly Jewish, but not believe in God at all. The Bible gives numerous examples of this where many Hebrew people, Kings, and entire Israelite kingdoms spent decades in idolatrous religions that had nothing to do with the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Now let's turn to the issue of how Muslims are related to Abraham. The Muslim connection to Abraham comes from the original source of the Islamic religion, Muhammad. To explain this, it is important that we address some common misconceptions. Muslims do not in any way grant authority to the stories our Old Testament tells about Abraham. In fact the Muslim holy book, the Quran, tells completely different stories about Abraham than our Bible does. The Muslim's primary connection to Abraham comes from the belief that Muhammad in particular and the Arab people in general are descendants from Abraham through the line of Ishmael.

Ishmael was the son of a union between Abraham and Sarah's servant, Hagar. The situation behind this event was Sarah's frustration with not being able to bear a child for her husband Abraham. Providing an heir through a surrogate like Hagar was a generally accepted practice at that time in history. But the Bible condemns it, not on moral grounds, but because it demonstrated a lack of faith in God's promise to Abraham.

Muslims claim that as the first born son of Abraham, true spiritual authority is passed through Ishmael's line. Muhammad, thus gains his spiritual authority from Abraham by his bloodline through Ishmael. According to Muhammad, Abraham is the first true Muslim through his practice of four of the five religious pillars of Islam. First, he rejected idolatry. Second, he obeyed God's will. Third, he made pilgrimage to Mecca. And fourth, he made sacrifice to God. The fifth pillar, the fast of Ramadan, was not yet established until after the angelic revelations to Muhammad. It was these revelations, received by Muhammad from the archangel Gabriel that form the Islamic holy book, the Quran. No tradition of the connection between the Arab race and Abraham was maintained anywhere outside of Genesis prior to this time. It's religious significance was revealed to Muhammad by angelic visitation.

So for Muslims, Abraham is a distant relative to their great prophet, Muhammad. He serves as a model for the ideal Muslim through his acts of obedience. But the relationship of faith between God and Abraham has no meaning in Islam. Only obedience is considered. The obvious religious reason for the Islamic connection to Abraham is to establish a religious precedent that predates either Moses for the Jews or Jesus for Christians.

So let's clarify what this means in today's context. Many people today live in ignorance about the real issues that surround Abraham for the world's most prominent monotheistic religions, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. The uninformed even want to suggest that Abraham furnishes a kind of common heritage for binding these three religions together. Nothing could be further from the truth. Yes, we are all talking about the same historic figure. Abraham was a real person who lived in the fertile crescent during the late bronze age. But he was significant in vastly different ways for these three prominent religions. For the Jews he was the genetic source of their race that would coalesce through Moses into the Jewish religion. For Islam, Abraham gives historic authority to their prophet, Muhammad, and the religious structure he established. For Christians, Abraham presents the prototype of what faith in God means for humans. This understanding is what Paul explains in today's sermon text.

***For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness."***

This text is crucial for the formation of modern Christianity. But it is not as obvious as it seems at first. The foundational expression of Christian faith lies in an intellectual, psychological, emotional response from an ancient human being. Abraham believed in God. We could say he was born that way. Or he might have had experiences that prepared him for faith. But however it happened, the key historical significance for Abraham, from a Christian perspective, is that he believed in God. Not just believed in a general way, but lived with an openness to God that enabled him to hear God's promises. We can wonder about how many different bronze age people God may have approached with such loving and generous promises. But we only know about Abraham. Abraham believed in God to the extent that he could hear God's promise. It was a promise to an aching childless heart who desired descendants for generations to come. It was a promise to a landless nomad who desired a home and a place which belonged to his family. By faith Abraham heard God's promises. By faith Abraham believed God's promises. By faith Abraham acted on those promises and his life was transformed accordingly. This is the righteousness to which Paul refers. A promise made and a promise believed. That is righteousness. That is what sets the world right. That was the nature of the Abraham's faith. It's source can only be from God himself. The promise itself created the faith. As St. Paul puts it:

***That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring—not only to the adherent of the law but also to the one who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all...***

Christians are connected to Abraham through faith, not through genetics like the Jews, nor through religious principles like the Muslims. Abraham is every Christian's spiritual father because we share his faith in the same God. We share the heritage that God has created in this world through Abraham's descendents. As Christians we understand God's purpose in Abraham's faith and action to be the beginning of God's plan to bring our Lord Jesus into the world. Jesus was never plan B. He was always the fundamental purpose for Abraham's faith and its corresponding righteousness. That plan has now come to completion through the birth, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In those acts of grace Jesus spoke the promises that create our faith. It is these promises of Jesus that sift the world. Those who have inherited the faith of our spiritual father, Abraham, are justified, like Abraham on the basis of that faith alone. This is the inheritance that we

receive from Abraham. It is the faith that is created in us by God's Spirit just the way Abraham's was. Our faith is created in response to the promises of Jesus. Like Abraham, the promises which create faith in us contains the call to go. It is the call to go, make, baptize, and teach. It is the call to witness to Jesus by our lives and words in a way that makes his promises known. And in the spreading of those promises the Spirit creates faith in others. Other's who also become the children of Abraham.

As Christians we are not bound to a single racial line, nor are we confined to the religious mandates of a particular culture. Christianity crosses every barrier, every nationality, every culture in the world. It has poured itself into every society, because its central feature, faith in the God of Abraham, is created when and where the Holy Spirit wills it. St. Paul watched with amazement as faith in Abraham's God spilled out of its traditional Jewish mold into the gentile world. The flow of this faith knows no boundaries. The Bible unlike the Quran translates well into all the world's languages. And in every language it speaks to its readers of Abraham's God who loves. A God who sends his son into the world to save it. St. Paul puts it this way:

***In hope [Abraham] believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been promised, "So shall your offspring be."***

You, my friends, are the recipients of this hope from your father Abraham. You are saved by the same faith. Your faith in Christ Jesus is your righteousness, just like Abraham. It is the only righteousness you will ever need. God's Holy Spirit touches you with grace. He creates faith in you. And he raises the same hope in you. A hope that many nations and many people may know the faith you have received. A hope that you pursue in daily living through your call from God to serve your neighbor. Who knows what winning word, what act of kindness, or what gesture of acceptance will give God's Holy Spirit just the opening needed to work faith in the hearts of those you serve. This is part of the Gospel promise in which you believe. We plant, we water, but God gives the growth. Maintain that hope. Don't be confused by the foolishness of the world. Live each day in Christ with the faith of your father Abraham. And look forward with Joy to life everlasting.

The cross is full. The tomb is empty. Jesus is alive and leading us out to go, make, baptize and teach disciples. Let us take up our cross and follow him.