

AND SO IT BEGINS

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Genesis 12:1-4a

The book that we called the Holy Bible is a collection of divinely inspired writings that span centuries. Through these writings, many people have attempted to describe what it means to live in the presence of the one we know as God. These writings take many forms. They are poetry and songs, they are histories and theological argument, they are lists of laws and rules and expectations, they are myths and parables and more. These writings describe to us what it means to be a people of faith and follow God's will.

These scriptures begin at a most logical point—creation itself. In Genesis, we find two accounts for creation. The first account describes God creating the cosmos in seven days. Clearly, this story raised questions such as, if God created and declared it good then how do I explain the awful things in this world. And so we have the second account which tells of humanity's sin and disgrace—an action which got the first man and woman removed from their idyllic garden.

Then we read of their descendants and the first taking of a life and how the humans multiplied across the land. God looked at them and saw wickedness and in disgust decided to wipe them out and start over. But God relented and spared the family of Noah. After the flood, Noah's family multiplied and spread.

Then God approached one of Noah's descendants—a man named Abram—and initiated a new chapter in scripture. God said to this man, *Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.* God asks Abram to take a risk, to leave the land he knows for an uncertain future.

Abram has a wife, Sarai, and servants, and others who work for him. He has wealth and animals. He is a nomad so it is not an impossible task for him to relocate as God demands. But God is asking him to venture not just to a different location but to an unknown destination, *to a land that I will show you.* God is asking Abram to leave his father's home and resettle in a place that he knows nothing about. You have got to admit, it is quite a risk.

God accompanies this request with a promise. God tells Abram, *I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*

And so, Abram goes. And when he takes the first step with his wife and his servants and his camels and his sheep and his goats and his nephew, he initiates a great journey that we continue today, a journey across continents and a journey

across centuries. It is the journey of faith, a journey that leads us away from where we are to a place known only to God.

As a church, we are such a community of these pilgrims traveling together on the same road that Abram traveled. We are not alone. There are millions of bands of travelers moving across this vast spiritual wilderness following God to the place of promise. Some groups are enormous, like an army. Some are small, like a family. Some are not even groups but are simply individuals trying to make it alone. Some groups move in a straight line with purpose and passion. Others zig and zag and circle around like a hunting dog looking for a scent. Some grind to a halt and don't move for decades.

Christians are not the only ones following Abram. Three of the world's religions look to Abram—or Abraham as he is eventually known—as a patriarch, as the beginning. We Christians trace our religious lineage back through Jesus and his origins in the Jewish faith. Together, we worship the god of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

However, as we know from scripture, in addition to Isaac, Abraham had another son, a son born to his wife's maidservant Hagar—a boy named Ishmael. As scripture tells us, out of jealousy, Sarah, Abraham's wife, demanded that Hagar and her son be sent away. Sarah did not want Hagar's son to inherit what she believed should go to her son Isaac. Abraham acquiesces to his wife's demand and casts Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness. They should have died but they are rescued by an angel and God's promise to Abraham to make a great nation is extended to his son Ishmael. Scripture describes Ishmael as being the ancestor of the Arab tribes of the Sinai and Arabian deserts. In him we find the third branch of the family of Abraham.

In the 7th century AD, one of these Arab people, a man named Muhammad, sought to call his fellow Arabs to engage in a single-minded devotion to God—one God. The religious landscape in his part of the world was chaotic with his people worshipping a variety of gods. It was not his original intent to found a religion. But to reform the religious practices of his people. Muhammad is regarded as a prophet.¹

So now, Christians, Jews, and Muslims—three of this world's great religions—look to Abraham as a patriarch, a common starting point.

Each of these faiths embrace monotheism—the belief in one God, and one God only, the creator and sustainer of life. This God calls all people to worship and to

¹ In Muhammad's day, Christians and Jews lived throughout the Arab lands and Muhammad preached tolerance—even protection—for these groups.

follow simple laws of ethical conduct—to love neighbor as oneself, to treat others fairly, to love peace, to strive for justice, to give generously to the poor.

As Christians, we have certain understandings of what it takes to be a good Christian. We are expected to worship, to pray, to give charitably, to care for others. We share these belief with the Jews. Muslims have what are known as the Five Pillars of Islam. The Five Pillars offer a framework of the Muslim life. The Five Pillars are, 1. a declaration of faith, 2. obligatory prayer, 3. compulsory giving, 4. fasting, and 5. pilgrimage.

- The first pillar is called the SHAHADA—a declaration of faith. In English this declaration is, “There is no god but God (and) Muhammad is the messenger of God.”
- Second is the SALAT, or prayer. Salat calls for Muslims to pray five times a day.
- Third is ZAKAT or charity. Islam calls its people to give alms to the poor and the needy. To give is a form of purification.
- Fourth is SAWM—a call to fast during the month of Ramadan as a form of spiritual self-purification.
- Fifth is the HAJJ or pilgrimage to Mecca. Each Muslim is obligated to make the Hajj once in their lifetime if health and finances permit it.

Today, modern Islam is as multi-layered and complex as Christianity with different branches and sets of beliefs across countries and cultures.

Let me share with you some statistics about world religions. According to a 2010 study by the Pew Research Center, Christianity is the largest religious group in the world with 31.5% or 2.2 billion believers. Second are the Muslims at 23% or 1.6 billion adherents. The third largest group are the **nones** as in “none of the above.” In other words, 16% of the people of the world claim no religious affiliation at all. Hindus are 15%, Buddhists make up 7%, and so on. Judaism, although a vitally important world religion is small, very small. Jews make up only 0.2% of the world’s population. **Question:** Which country in the world has the highest percentage of Christians per capita? The Vatican City. 100%.

Unfortunately, today there is powerful anti-Muslim sentiment in our country. Muslims are portrayed by many as violent extremists dead-set on killing all non-Muslims. This is simply not true.

Yes, there are violent people in the world who are more than willing to use religion as a means to power. These people have existed throughout history in

different religions and they should be condemned. These people rarely represent the religion they are hiding behind.

The current negative attitudes towards Muslims are rooted in the 9/11 attacks of 2001—16 years ago. The 9/11 attacks were perpetrated by the terrorist group al-Qaeda and were immediately and widely condemned by American-Muslims and Muslims around the world such as this statement by the American Muslim Political Coordination Council (AMPCC): "American Muslims utterly condemn what are apparently vicious and cowardly acts of terrorism against innocent civilians. We join with all Americans in calling for the swift apprehension and punishment of the perpetrators. No Political cause could ever be assisted by such immoral acts."

None-the-less, anti-Muslim feelings spread quickly throughout the country. Here in Tennessee, these feelings manifested in opposition to a mosque being built in Murfreesboro. It took years of persistent struggle by the Muslim community before the mosque was finally approved.

In the past few months we have learned that in our country hate-filled actions against Muslims, as well as Jews, are escalating.² Public attacks on Muslims are on the rise. Women have had their hijabs (their head scarves) ripped off. Swastikas are appearing on playgrounds and in other public spaces. In January, a mosque in Victoria, Texas, was destroyed by an arsonist. However, in response, Jews and Christians in Victoria stepped up offering assistance to the Muslim community. The mosque will be rebuilt but until that is completed the congregation will share space in a synagogue.

In recent weeks, hundreds of bomb threats have been called in to Jewish community centers across the country including the JCC in Nashville. Two Jewish cemeteries—one in Philadelphia and one in St. Louis—were vandalized with hundreds of grave markers pushed over or broken. However, in response, Muslim communities have raised money to repair the damaged cemeteries and Muslim-American veterans have offered to stand guard at Jewish cemeteries, synagogues and community centers as needed. Tayyib Rashid wrote on twitter, "If your synagogue or Jewish cemetery needs someone to stand guard, count me in. Islam requires it." Another veteran, Khalid Whalid, wrote, "I spent 10 years protecting our country and I will gladly protect Jewish places of worship if you need me." These are American Muslims responding with compassion, as their faith demands.

² But it does not help that the state senator representing this county, Mae Beavers, in February, told a town hall in Macon County "that Muslim terrorists are planning a jihad in the Bible Belt and are infiltrating churches." She said, "The Muslims, they believe in the Quran and the Quran says that you're going to kill all the infidels." Sen. Beavers later recanted this statement saying that the information she had been given was not entirely accurate.²

I could tell stories like these for hours.

Muslim-Americans are part of the rich, social fabric of our nation. Their practices may seem odd to us, but can you really fault a people who pray five times a day? How is it that we can speak to God in Latin and it is okay, yet when a Muslim speaks to God in Arabic, we get scared and call the authorities? As Christians, we need to stand up in support these people of faith.

Jews, Christians, and Muslims claim a common heritage as children of Abraham. Together we believe in one God and this God calls us all to journey to an unknown place that God will show us. Maybe we are traveling on different roads to get to that place but we all go with God's blessing. We have to remember that God calls us to love our neighbors—not just those who look like us or share the way we worship—but all who are God's children.