

LIVING IN THE HEART: PEACE

Genesis 12:1-4

Abraham is one of those well-known figures in the Bible because he is the father of our faith. He is also the father of two other faith traditions: Judaism and Islam through Ishmael. We all admire his faith and courage to trust in God's guidance in his life. Yet, as we look at the current conflict in the Middle East, I find myself asking, "Would the world have been better off not having Abraham and these three faith traditions?" His relationship with God was supposed to be a blessing not only for his family and tribe but also for all nations. If we look at our world today we see so much conflict in the name of these three faith traditions and over the land that Abraham was promised. It seems like this great promise has become a curse for the Palestinians who live in the worst conditions in the world under a brutal occupation. What happened to this great promise? Did God not foresee the potential problems and misunderstandings this promise to Abraham was going to create? What about all the problems that were created by Christianity and Islam? What about the Inquisition and the brutality of the Christian Crusades? What about the rising Islamic fundamentalism and its focus on violence and hate? What about Christian Zionists who blindly support the State of Israel to bring all the Jews to Israel in order to hasten the second coming of Christ? These are some of my questions of faith and also the questions of many faithful Christians in the Middle East.

There's an old proverb in the South: *"When you're up to your waist in alligators, it's hard to remember that the original objective was to drain the swamp."* I believe that there is nothing wrong with God's promise to Abraham and to the nations through him. The main problem lies in the fact that as human beings we always seem to forget the main message of faith because we seem to be swimming waist deep in alligators. Alligators of fear, hate and greed surround us and always take a hold of our hearts and we forget that we are blessed so that we may be a blessing to others. Faith is about our inner quality of blessing and the blessing of others. It is not about our certainties and rights. It is not about who is right and who is wrong. Faith is about trusting in God and having peace within us and around us. The peace that comes from faith is not limited to when things are going well. The doctrines and teachings of faith are supposed to help us remember and focus on our experience of God. They are the means to this greater reality of love and service. Yet, they often end up being the main goal of our faith. When they become rigid objectives they become useless and even harmful.

The Promised Land that we hear about in the Bible was not materialistically better than where Abraham was living. It was the journey with God that made it important. It was the trust that Abraham had to develop that made it significant, not the location and the land itself. It was the experience of faith that made it important.

Abraham lived in about the year 1750 BCE. He was from the city of Ur that was located on the banks of the Tigris-Euphrates River, south of present and ancient Baghdad. The city of Ur was part of a sophisticated civilization, much more sophisticated than we imagine. There are excellent archeological ruins from that section of the world in the Mari and Nuzi materials. We discover that the average size of home in that ancient civilization was 13-14 rooms. That means their economy was rich and well developed, and therefore the houses were large with several rooms. Their education was well developed. From archeology, we learn that their civilization could do square roots and the cube. We learn that the children went to school and wrote on clay tablets with styluses. We learn that they had sophisticated canals and ditches for water. The city of Ur, Abraham's ancient hometown, appears to be as culturally sophisticated as ancient Egypt. So, when we hear about Abraham being called to the Promised Land, we can think of it as a sacrifice for him to leave the land of his ancestors and the comfort and wealth of his culture. He didn't need to flee any poverty or problems in order to find a new home. What he actually needed was to let go of his comforts and securities in order to learn to trust God more and to know God's peace that passes all of our understandings. **Abraham's peace and assurance in life didn't come from the materialistic successes of life, but from his relationship with God.**

It didn't come from having arrived in the Promised Land. It was about arriving into the heart of God's love. Whenever he lost track of that, he faltered. Whenever he focused on that, he was able to be a blessing to others.

As we look at our individual lives and at our world today we can certainly see where our fears and obsessions can lead us. The Prophet Amos said, "But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an everflowing stream," and all that we get stuck doing is fixing the water system of the stream. As people of faith, we often focus on who's got it right and who's got it wrong and we forget that faith is about experiencing God and not about our limited ways of defining God. The Middle East, which is the birthplace of Judaism, Christianity and Islam is stuck in an endless battle of fears and beliefs. Our lives are sometimes consumed by our personal fears and struggles. Yet, in the midst of it all we hear the voice of God calling us and promising each one of us, just like Abraham was called and promised to be blessed so that we may be a blessing. The choice is ours: Living in the heart, in God's peace in our lives and in the world or living in fear and in separation from others, especially those who are different from us.

A story appeared in TIME Magazine in March of 2007 about a group of Indian soldiers from the United Nations Interim Force who are stationed in Lebanon to help keep the peace between Israel and Hizballah. What was interesting about them is not only their work as soldiers but what they introduced to the communities they were assigned. Every weekday these soldiers would embark on an unusual kind of peacekeeping mission—one that didn't require guns or ammo, or even shoes. Their focus, in fact, is on promoting inner peace as they operate what must be the first roving yoga ashram ever to appear in south Lebanon, a region better known for guerilla warfare and air strikes than for deep breathing, chanting and headstands.

Yoga is catching on in Fardis, a small town in the foothills of Mount Hermon, where the Indians began their program with about 20 Lebanese schoolchildren. The kids, aged 5 to 13, appear to enjoy the opportunity to roll around the floor before class, and a flexible few look like yoga prodigies. School teachers say the yoga class leaves their charges calmer and more attentive throughout the day, and the Indians hope this soothing effect will be contagious. "If you are at peace with yourself, you can be at peace with your neighbors," says Lieutenant Colonel Karan Singh, infantry officer and amateur yogi.

These soldiers are not naïve to the pains and struggles of the world. At home, they are known as the 15th Punjab Infantry Battalion—the oldest, most decorated and, according to them, the most admired unit in the Indian army. Founded in 1705 by the Maharaja of Patiala, they earned their stripes fighting wherever the British Empire needed them, including the Middle East. During World War I, they fought in Gallipoli, Sinai, Gaza, and Jerusalem, and formed a major part of the British force occupying Iraq during the 1920s. Since India's independence from Britain, they have seen action in their country's grim conflicts with Pakistan. Their last mission was counter-insurgency against Islamic militants in Kashmir. They have known all kinds of struggles and bitter battles, yet they have not lost track of what really gives people peace. They know that the only way to lasting peace in the area is for people to learn how to live in their hearts, how to find peace in God's presence.

On the cover of your bulletin there is a list of signs of inner peace. It is fun, but also has a lot of truth to it if we use it as a guide to help us in times of fear or stress. I want to remind you of your faith in action piece for this season of Lent to practice checking in with your heart. Peace in your life and in our world is dependent on each one of us learning about inner peace. Abraham set out on a life-long journey in faith to learn about trusting God. (see next page)

One of the greatest problems facing America today is political anger. As Christians, we are called to contribute to a society which is bitterly divided on so many issues. Some scholars and community leaders worry that we are so deeply divided that violence may become a more common response to conflict than nonviolent protest, civil disobedience or traditional forms of negotiation. So, when we learn and teach about living in our hearts and finding inner peace, our mission is of critical importance to the world because as we are so divided over our politics we get consumed by these divisions and forget the work of justice and peacemaking. May you find and know the peace of God in your life and may you be able to follow the lead of the Spirit even as it may lead you away from your comforts and certainties to God's amazing adventure of love and service. Amen.

Sunday, February 17, 2008 bulletin cover had the following signs of inner peace listed on the front cover:

Signs of Inner Peace

- *A tendency to think and act deliberately, rather than from fears based on past experiences*
- *An unmistakable ability to enjoy each moment*
- *A loss of interest in judging others*
- *A loss of interest in judging self*
- *A loss of interest in conflict*
- *A loss of interest in interpreting the actions of others*
- *A loss of ability to worry*
- *Frequent, overwhelming episodes of appreciation*
- *Contented feelings of connectedness with others and nature*
- *Frequent attacks of smiling through the heart*
- *Increasing susceptibility to kindness offered, and the uncontrollable urge to reciprocate*
- *An increasing tendency to allow things to unfold, rather than resisting and manipulating*

--- Author Unknown