

This week I was asked to preach on the Abrahamic faiths, which are Christianity, Judaism and Islam.

I want to quickly go over what it means to be an Abrahamic faith and why there are only 3 of them, and how we are connected.

If you already know this, then hang tight, we'll move on in a minute.

So, Abraham is considered the father of Christianity, Islam and Judaism.

This is because our texts tell us that God chose Abraham to carry out the covenant between God and the Israelites.

In a vision, God promised Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as the stars and his offspring would claim the land of many peoples.

Abraham's grandson, Jacob, had 12 sons and established the 12 tribes of Israel.

So, if you are looking at a family tree, you have Abraham at the top, and with his wife Sarah, they have a son named Isaac.

Isaac marries Rebecca, they have two sons, Jacob and Esau, and from there come the Israelites or the Jewish people and then the Christian people.

So, where do Muslims fit into the picture?

Well, going to back to the top of our family tree, we have Abraham, but before he has Isaac with his wife Sarah, he slept with his slave, Hagar (when they thought Sarah was barren), and she had a son named Ishmael.

Now, Hagar and Ishmael were banished, but God tells Abraham that God will make Ishmael the father of a nation too, because he is also Abraham's son.

Muslims believe that Ishmael is a prophet and that he is an ancestor to the prophet Muhammad.

They also believe that Abraham took Hagar and Ishmael to Mecca, which one reason why it is now the most sacred site in the Islamic faith.

So, if you think of the 3 religions as being part of a family, then we all have the same father, Abraham.

Judaism and Christianity are full siblings, children of Sarah, and Islam is our half-sibling, a child of Hagar.

The problem with this narrative is that since the beginning of our religions, it has set two against one.

Christianity and Judaism have traditionally been more united to each other than Islam.

Christians worship a Jew, for heaven's sake.

We have the Jewish scriptures as part of our holy text.

It appears as if it's us against Islam.

The problem with this, is that I don't think most Christians realize how much the Qur'an and Islamic theology draw from Christian teachings, or how much we have in common with Islam.

For example, Muslims believe that Jesus is a prophet.

They believe that he was born of a virgin, that he was strengthened by the Holy Spirit, that he was given a revelation by Allah, which made him a prophet.

They believe he had a bodily ascension into heaven.

The Qur'an says, *"Behold! Allah said: "O Jesus! I will take you and raise you to Myself and clear you (of the falsehoods) of those who blaspheme;*

*I will make those who follow you superior to those who reject faith, to the Day of Resurrection..."* (3:55, translation by Yusuf Ali).

The Qur'an states that Jesus was a miracle worker and that God (Allah) sent the Gospel to Jesus.

So, Muslims highly regard Jesus.

They don't believe he's the Son of God or one third of the Trinity, but they do recognize him as a prophet and they respect him accordingly.

But beyond prophets and teachers and saviors, maybe what's more important are the foundational truths that all our faiths have in common.

We all believe in one God, whatever words we choose to use, whether Yahweh, God or Allah.

We all believe that every living person is sacred, created in God's image.

We all believe that good will prevail over hate, that it's stronger and more powerful than evil.

Another thing we all have in common, that you don't hear much about, is that we all have really problematic messages in our holy texts.

The Old Testament and the New Testament have passages that we disagree with, passages about vengeance and retribution and mistreating people who disagree with you or believe differently.

We all have passages about justified violence.

For example, in Paul's letter to the Romans, he writes, *"But if you do what is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain!*

*It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer."* (13:4).

My point is that any of our texts can be used to justify good or evil, oppression and intolerance or love, peace and acceptance.

It's all about how we interpret them and apply the texts to our lives of faith.

Okay, so now that we know the prophetic lineage that ties us together through Abraham and the ways in which we're not separate from, but connected to, Judaism and Islam through our shared values, how can we use this information in our lives as Christians?

How will we use it to affect our interfaith relationships in this 21<sup>st</sup> century?

I came up with 5 different options.

You can choose the one that works for you, and I will tell you which one works the best for me.

The first option is to be Christian supersessionists.

Christian supersessionists believe that Christians have superseded Jews as the chosen people of God.

They believe that the New Covenant that Jesus made with his disciples at the Last Supper, has fulfilled the covenant that God made with Moses, which includes the 10 Commandments.

God told the Israelites that God would send them a Messiah, and while Jews believe they're still waiting for that Messiah, Christian supersessionists believe that Jesus is that Messiah and that Jews need to convert to Christianity and follow Jesus.

So, Christian supersessionism holds the belief that Christianity is the fulfillment of Judaism.

Now, the second option is to be a Christian exclusivist.

They believe that the only, or the exclusive way, of getting into heaven is through salvation through Jesus Christ, and all others are going to hell.

So, both of those are one way of relating to our siblings of other faiths.

You profess that Christianity is the only path, that it's the fulfillment of the Jewish faith, that all other religions are false.

I am sure we have all heard of people like that, either personally or at least on the nightly news.

Another way of living in a multi-religious world, which might be more pleasing in our sight, is to be quietly and politely tolerant.

We all know what this is like; especially if you hear that someone is part of another religion that you don't know much about.

You nod and smile and you're friendly, not rude or mean, you don't hate them.

You just know that you're different, so they're going to do their things and you're going to do yours, and we are going to coexist with a thinly veiled layer of tolerance.

So, that's the 3<sup>rd</sup> option.

The fourth way of relating to people of other faiths is to value pluralism and to celebrate religious diversity.

This goes a step beyond the option I just offered.

You don't just politely tolerate other religions, but you learn about them, you engage with people who practice them.

You appreciate their rituals and their beliefs.

You aren't threatened by other faiths, but you understand religious diversity as being one manifestation of God's creativity at work in our world.

You appreciate the variety of ways to come together as people of a common faith, to create community and worship a common God and change the world in God's name.

You are committed to your religion and your practices and rituals and beliefs, for those are the truths that work for you, but you understand that there are multiple truths.

You recognize that what's true for someone else might be different from what's true for you and that's okay, as long as we can live together peacefully with a deep respect for one another.

Now, there's one more way of living in our pluralistic world, one category which is becoming more and more popular, and that is to have multi-religious belonging.

This is someone who says that they claim an identity in more than one organized religion, like they're a Buddhist-Christian, for example.

Another version of this, is to have multi-religious households, in which parents are raising their children in more than one faith.

This is becoming more and more socially acceptable as people draw meaning and value from different religious beliefs and practices.

So, that's it, from one extreme to the other.

You can believe that your faith is the only right one, all others are wrong, you can quietly tolerate other religions, you can be in active partnership with other religions, and you can find a home in more than one religion.

Now, I told you that I would disclose which of these options I align the most with, and it's the option in which we are in active, dynamic relationship with people of other faiths.

I believe we have more to learn and gain from communing with people who practice a different religion, who access the divine through different rituals.

It might sometimes challenge us, but that can also help us gain a clearer understanding of what's ultimately true for each of us.

I think it's also important that we think critically about why we practice the religion that we do.

I am sure you each have your own story as how you became part of this congregation.

Maybe it's because you were part of another faith, got turned off from it and found yourself here.

Or maybe it's because you were raised in this tradition or because you moved to this town and heard our church had nice people.



But all these reasons are circumstantial.

It's not like, when we become cognizant beings, we stand in front of a religion buffet, weigh all the options equally, without bias, and choose the one that works for us.

The country, town, family and culture that we are a part of all influence the religion that we practice.

I firmly believe that if I was raised in another country, in another family, I could just as well practice a different religion.

I say this because I think it's important for us to be humble and remember that nobody knows the ultimate, truth, if there is one.

That's something we don't get the privilege of knowing until we pass on.

So, while we're here, I say that we strive to celebrate all that we have in common with other faiths, especially our Jewish and Muslim siblings.

Our 3 faiths make up almost half of the world's population, so if we were able to get along, that would get us a long way towards sharing this planet peacefully, without hatred or violence or wars waged in the name of religion.

Amen.