

October 9, 2016

World Religions: Judaism

Genesis 12:1-5

Opening words: Why are you a Christian? Can you answer that question without revealing to the world your prejudices? Your prejudices are not funny, because they expose your ignorance. Can you answer that question without giving your family history? One of the blessings in your life is that you were born into a Christian home. It is nice that your grandfather was a preacher, but Jesus must be your Lord and Savior. Can you answer that question without mentioning your relationships within the church? You can make friends anywhere. Can anyone here answer the question, why are you a Christian, with sound theological reasoning? This sermon series, *World Religions*, is designed to help you answer the question, why are you a Christian, using basic Christian theology. Each one of the other world religions has theological flaws. In the past three weeks, we have looked at Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity. Next week, we look at Islam. Today, we look at Judaism.

Our scripture lesson for today comes from the very first book of the Bible, Genesis. It is important for you to remember that Genesis can be divided into two sections. The first section is called prehistorical. You know stories from this section: the creation of the world, Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah's Ark, The tower of Babel. They answer the question, why? Why do certain things exist in the world, such as sin, foreign languages, etc. The second section deals with patriarchal history. This section tells us about the lives of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. Our scripture lesson for today is the introductory verses of the second section, the calling of Abram. Listen to these sacred words, Genesis 12:1-5.

Genesis 12:1-5 The LORD had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.

²"I will make you into a great nation,
and I will bless you;

I will make your name great,
and you will be a blessing.

³I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you."

⁴So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Harran. ⁵He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Harran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.

The great Danish theologian and philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, told the story of a prince who was running an errand for his father one day in the local village. As he did so, he passed through a very poor section of the town. Looking through the window of his carriage, he saw a beautiful young peasant girl walking along the street. It was love at first sight. He could not forget her. He returned to that section of the town, day after day, just to see her. His heart yearned for her, but there was a problem. How could he develop a relationship with her? He was the prince and she was a peasant. He could order her to marry him. It was within his power to do so. But he wanted this girl to love him from the heart, willingly. He could put on his royal garments and impress her with his regal entourage, and drive up to her front door with soldiers and a carriage drawn by six horses. But if he did this, he would never be certain that the girl loved him, or was simply overwhelmed with his power, position and wealth. The prince came up with another solution. He moved into the village dressed only as a peasant. He lived among the people, shared their interests and concerns, and talked their language. There is a happy ending. In time, the young peasant girl grew to know him, and then to love him. In time, they married. If you can understand that simple story, then you can understand the incarnation. God entered this world in the form of Jesus because he loves us. The incarnation plays a major role in basic Christian theology, but it is absent in Judaism. It is their theological flaw. If you understood Kierkegaard's simple story of the prince and the peasant girl, say, "**Amen!**"

What do these eight people have in common?

Sigmund Freud
Woody Allen
Albert Einstein
Natalie Portman
Leonard Bernstein
Paula Abdul
Gene Simmons
Jesus of Nazareth

This is the answer: Each one is or was Jewish. They are not the only Jews in the world.

According to Pew Research group, the Jewish population in the world in 2014 totaled 14.2 million. That is about 0.2% of the world's population. Judaism is considered a major world religion, not because of numbers. Judaism is considered a major world religion because of influence. Judaism is found in eighteen different countries around the world. The majority of the 14.2 million Jews live in two countries, Israel and the United States. There are six million Jews in Israel, making it the only country in the world with a Jewish majority. However, there are more Jews living in America; 6.8 million. The closest worshipping body of Jews to us is the Ohev Tzedek congregation near the corner of Shields and Glenwood, 5245 Glenwood Avenue, Boardman.

Judaism can be traced back to our scripture reading for today. The Jews say their religion began with God in approximately the year 2,000 BC. For it was God who sought out Abram and Sarah. They were the most unlikely of couples to begin a new race, but God has always used unlikely people to do his will. When God called Abram, he was 75 and Sarah was ten years younger. They lived in present day Iraq. Once selected, Abraham and Sarah had to wait an additional 25 years for their son, Isaac, to be born. You remember the story. Isaac was the father of Jacob, who had twelve sons. Those twelve sons became the twelve tribes of Israel. Jacob's son, Joseph, led the people into Egypt to escape the famine. At first, life was good in Egypt, but time changed things. Years later, Abraham's, Isaac's, Jacob's and Joseph's descendants found themselves enslaved in the foreign land and they prayed to God to be liberated. God heard their prayers. God sent a liberator named Moses, who led them out of Egypt. Through Moses, God divided the sea so they could escape the Egyptians, proving the Hebrews were God's Chosen people. Yet, they couldn't handle success. They forgot about God when Moses was receiving the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. Their punishment was forty years in the wilderness. Sad but true, Moses only saw the Promised Land; he never entered the Promised Land. That was Joshua's job. He established a new nation. History tells us the people, once again, forgot about God. He did his best to get their attention. He changed political leaders. He changed the form of government. He sent prophets to speak on his behalf, but the people just wouldn't listen. The nation that started with such hope ended badly. They were exiled. Yet, in spite of their shortcomings, God continued to love them. I believe, God still has a special relationship with the Jews. If any of that story sounds familiar, say, "**Amen!**"

The story of the Jewish people is not just a history lesson. It is much more personal. It isn't just the story of past ancestors. The story belongs to every generation and is preserved in two ways. The first is a written tradition called the *The Tanakh*. The Christian world calls *The Tanakh* the Old Testament. The second is an oral tradition called *The Talmud*. This tradition is not divinely inspired; it was created by mankind. It consists of commentaries on the ancient text, sermons and laws.

Much like Christianity has three branches, Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox, Judaism has its three branches:

1. **Orthodox Jews** believe in both the written and oral tradition.
2. **Conservative Jews** believe in the written tradition only.
3. **Reform Jews** also reject the oral tradition, and reject the idea that the Messiah will ever come in human form.

That is a lot of information to take in in a short time. If you will confess that this is all a little confusing, say, "**Amen!**"

When Scottish theologian John Baillie taught at Edinburgh University, he made it a practice to open his course on the doctrine of God with these words: "We must remember, in discussing God, that we cannot talk about Him without His hearing every word we say. We may be able to talk about others behind their backs, but God is everywhere, yes, even in this classroom. Therefore, in all our discussions we must be aware of His infinite presence, and talk about Him, as it were, before His face."

That old preaching illustration about God could have been told by a minister or a rabbi, in a church or a synagogue. The Judaic and the Christian understanding of God is nearly identical. There is no tension between the Jewish world and the Christian world over the understanding of God. The reason is obvious. The Christian faith was born out of Judaism. Mary and Joseph respected all the customs and practices of Judaism. They raised Jesus to be a respectable Jew, who both feared and respected God. Much of Jewish theology revolves around God.

If you research what Judaism believes, you find this list. It was written by Rabbi Rambam, who lived between the year 1135-1204. He said all Jews believe in these thirteen principles:

1. God exists.
2. God is one.
3. God is invisible.
4. God is eternal.
5. Prayer is to be directed to God alone and to no other.
6. The words of the prophets are true.
7. Moses' prophecies are true, and Moses was the greatest of the prophets.
8. The Written Torah was given to Moses.
9. There will be no other Torah.
10. God knows the thoughts and deeds of men.
11. God will reward the good and punish the wicked.
12. The Messiah will come.
13. The dead will be resurrected.

We have no problem accepting twelve of the thirteen principles, because they deal with a Jewish understanding of God, which is our understanding of God. The only principle that we object to is number twelve, "The Messiah will come." That is their theological flaw. We believe the Messiah has already come and his name was Jesus. To the Christian world, believing in the resurrected Jesus is not optional, it is indispensable. We believe God came to us in the form of Jesus Christ. That is why Christmas is so important to us. God became one of us. Jesus was the Emmanuel; *God is with us*. Jews believe they can reach out to God with prayer and laws. Christians believe God came to us. There is a world of difference. There is a world of difference between contacting

someone and being with someone. If you have experienced that to be true, say, **"Amen!"**

Routinely, ministers are on call for one another. Several years ago, I was on call for one of my colleagues. He called me on the way out of town. He said, "Russ, I only have one person I need you to visit." He told me her story. She had suffered a stroke and lay in the intensive care unit at Northside Hospital, unconscious. She had a son and a daughter who both lived out of state. The only one in the area was her husband. I went to the hospital that day and found her. She was lifeless and surrounded by machines. Sitting next to her bed was her husband. I introduced myself and he introduced himself. His name was Bud. He told me they had been married for over sixty years. I sat with him for a while and was impressed by his devotion. I went back the next day and Bud was there. I went back the next day and saw Bud with his son. The next time I went back I saw Bud and met his daughter. Over that two-week period, I saw Bud every time, and every time he looked more tired. His concerned children encouraged him to go home and get some sleep. There was really nothing he could do, but he wouldn't go. Against all hope, he wanted to be there when she opened her eyes. On my last visit, I confessed my respect for him. He had sat in the same chair next to her bed for hours. He quietly responded, "Russ, she is the love of my life. I have to be here. I have nowhere else to go."

Jews believe in God, but Jews don't believe in the incarnation. If you don't believe in the incarnation, then you don't understand the depth of God's love. God came into this world because he loves us! He had to come. He couldn't stay away. There was no other place for him to go. John 3:16 says it best, *"God so loved the world that he sent his one and only son..."*

Will you pray with me?