



## Standing in Front of Abraham's Grave

So much of life relates to whom we came from—our “family heritage”.

In this regard, whenever I am asked, “How would you describe yourself?”, whether it be in a job interview in the past or another type of conversation, I been tempted to share my own family history.

For example, on my mother's side of my family---my great-great-great-great... grandfather...was Samuel Jordan, one of first English settlers to the North American continent, in 1610, and who was key in founding the colony of Jamestown.

-And my fathers' side, my great grandmother, not nearly as far back, was a Cherokee Native American Indian.  
-And again on my mother's side, not as sterling of a heritage, I am a relative of Jesse James, the famous bank robber known for his quick draw!

There is a lot to this idea of heritage.

Our first reading highlights the one who is often considered the “father of us all”-- Abraham, that figure that has captured the imaginations of artists over the centuries--from Caravaggio to Rembrandt to Marc Chagall in the last century, and of course of writers untold, from Philo to Milton to William Faulkner.

And more importantly he is the most jointly beloved figure by all monotheistic faiths....such as Jews, Muslims, Druze and Christians... all seeing themselves as proud descendants of this Iraqi.

Abraham is one of those unifying symbols in today's strife.

Jews, of course, identify Abraham as their founding father, Christians trace the lineage of Jesus Christ back to him, and Muslims revere him as a friend of God (Ibrahim El Khalil), a father of the prophets, and an ancestor of the Prophet Mohammed (Koran 37:109).

In the Muslim country of Senegal, I grew up around a lot of Abrahams ...Ibrahims ...as that is the second most common name in Islamic culture after the Prophet Mohamed's name.

I grew up of course as a Christian in an Islamic context and my closest friends were Muslim. My father was a minister. And I remember our youth group used to sing a fun little song, titled “Father Abraham”. It went something like this...Father Abraham, had many sons, many sons had Father Abraham, and I am one of them and so are you...so let's all thank our God...Right arm, left arm...etc”. I will spare you the all the motions this morning!

It was innocent enough.....until one day, when I was a teenager, I realized that when we were joyously singing the words “I am one of his sons, and so are you” that we were not including in that embrace all my closest Muslim friends.

And as a young man growing up as a Christian minority in a Muslim majority context, I began to see, especially among adults, the all-too-often tension

and distrust that existed between the two. And I remember thinking, there has to be another way through all the sociological, religious, cultural, political and historical barriers that exists between them.

Obviously, ever since 2001, the building of bridges between Christians and Muslims has become all the more important. And all the more again now...as the issue has entered into political discourse on both sides of the Atlantic.

It would be so helpful if we had some kind of a guide for this journey of harmony.... toward addressing the dissonance that currently exists between them.

And it is here that Abraham, this "wandering Aramaean" comes to our rescue.

Most are already familiar with the broad outlines of his life. The first time the Hebrew Bible introduces Abraham to us he is living in southern Mesopotamia as a part of the Chaldean/Babylonian culture—in what is today Iraq.

Subsequently, his whole clan moved north to Haran (Turkey...on the Syrian border), and there the most formative event of his life occurred; he started hearing voices. In time, Abraham believed that those voices were the very call of God, and so he dared to believe those voices.

The story tells us that Abraham received an extraordinary promise from God: that all the families of the earth would be blessed through him.

So he left Haran and began a journey that never really ended. Abraham and his family moved first to Palestine and then to Egypt and then back again to Palestine where he moved around constantly until his sons, Isaac and Ishmael, were born. A nomadic figure, it

was only toward the end of his life he bought some land in which to bury his wife and later himself.

Perhaps some of you have had the privilege of visiting the Cave of the Patriarchs in heart of the old city of Hebron in the West Bank of Palestine, known as the Sanctuary of Abraham, or the Saladin-era Ibrahimi Mosque to our Muslim brothers and sisters. It is quite a moving place.

It has been a pilgrimage site for all three faiths for centuries. A Jewish, and eventual Christian sacred site, in the 7<sup>th</sup> century in came under Muslim control until the 12<sup>th</sup> century, when the Crusaders made a church out of it. Only to be retaken and converted back into a mosque 150 years later, when two minarets were added onto it.

Today it serves all three religious traditions: but the site is entered through separate doors according the visitor's faith and it has been and continues to be a place of contention.

Which brings us back to our first reading today, which one could say is the epitaph for Abraham's grave.

And as I read this epitaph, in my mind's eye I love to picture Jews, Christians and Muslims gathered around the grave, reflecting together on Abraham's legacy. And in doing so, this wanderer's life ends up providing us a helpful roadmap as to a way forward out of the discord.... "keys" to understanding, respect and friendship--which is exactly what this art exhibition "THE KEY" is all about.

...toward what his epitaph highlights as the real destiny of Abraham's journey... not a physical destination, but toward "a better country...whose architect and builder is God " (Hebrews 11:10, 16). In other words, a world which reflects the way God originally intended it to be!

His epitaph in our reading says, “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out .....not knowing where he was going. By faith he stayed for a time .....in a foreign land, living in tents...”

It is about much more than a change of geography. This is much more profoundly about a journey in the geography of the heart.

And his journey into the unknown, required a choice on his part.

Interestingly, the word “Hebrew” (ivri) as in “Abraham the Hebrew, comes from a root for “to cross over”.

Abraham is seen as the first to “cross over” ...cross over the river in his case. And like never before there is a need for all of us all to “cross over” into each other’s worlds.... especially as it relates to Muslims and Christians.

Abraham had to leave not only his geographic place; he had to leave behind his narrow-minded and parochial vision, the tendency there is to so often exclude the “strange and the stranger”.

And in so doing he mirrors for all God’s universal embrace for all humanity. By faith he embraced all.... putting aside the common fear at that time of others who are different.

And there has never been a time where the need has perhaps been greater to proactively wage peace on the “other” .... especially in regard to our Muslim sisters and brothers.

I believe we need more than ever is be involved in an all-out effort to help them, not “conquer” the “other”, by good will, appreciation, love, prayer and sympathy. And eliminate all that we can that creates further alienation. Advocating a peaceful approach---and one that is entirely non-confrontational in nature.

This means that more than ever they need to focus on demonstrating the best of our faith’s teachings--as opposed to primarily just “talking” about them—which a lot of interfaith dialogue ultimately is (i.e. impartation of knowledge one to the other)

I love the experience of another journeyer, St. Francis of Assisi in 1219, when he came to Egypt during the height of the Crusades to meet with the Sultan Kamal (nephew of the great Islamic military leader Saladin). Francis came in humility and peace, in contrast to the conquering crusaders. And the Sultan invited him to send his Little Brothers throughout his territory.

And St. Francis went back to Italy and wrote, “Preach the Gospel at all times, and if necessary use words.” They come out of a Muslim context.

And with the widening divide that exists, our day calls for a whole new kind of movement: not of belief, or of religious unity, but one that builds on what we hold in common.

One way to say it is that “we need to build on the Dark Side of the Moon”. For the sake of an illustration, the thin crescent of a moon, which is the Islamic symbol of faith, is of course the part of the moon that we can see because of the reflection. But the majority of the moon is dark. And I liken the slim crescent to what we have different with our Muslim brothers and sisters, and the large dark side, the large part, to what we have in common. And the challenge before us as never before is to build our relationships with each other on the “dark side of the moon” (a la Pink Floyd!).

We are too often blinded by the constant illumination of our differences (the crescent part), that we can’t see all we have in common.

As the early 20th century Lebanese artist, writer and mystic Kahlil Gibran, who profoundly bridged East and West, so beautifully said: “Your neighbor is your other self dwelling behind a wall. In understanding, all walls shall fall down.”

Building on all the commonalities and similarities with our Muslim side of family--from the traditions, liturgical and worship practices, to so much of the theology: monotheism, yes, but also the Creator God), the authority and respect of Moses and the Hebrew prophets, the desire to fulfill God’s goals of justice and mercy, our view of life as sacred, etc...

And certainly on the mutual respect for Jesus. And having spent most of my life in the Islamic world, I would have to say that no other non-Christian religion has devoted so much loving attention to Jesus as Islam.

And Sufis (the mystics within Islam) are particularly sympathetic to Jesus/Isa, calling him “the prophet of the heart”. It was Ibn al Arabi, the 13<sup>th</sup> century Sufi mystic, who wrote, “The person who catches the disease of Christ can never be cured.”

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And it is also crucial that Christians remember that our faith is actually not a Western-oriented faith, but a Middle Eastern faith at origin---for when this is forgotten, our own true sense of identity is lost—of who we really are and where we come from! It is only due to accidents of history that the center of gravity of Christianity moved to the West. Even our Scriptures are a collection of ancient Middle Eastern books put into one volume for us to carry around.

It is critical for Christians to recognize and emphasize the Middle Eastern origin and nature of our faith in relating to our Muslim brothers and sisters.

It is absolutely essential that we build our relationships with each other on our commonalities.... which is the spirit of THE KEY exhibition....echoing the words of Kahlil Gibran: “I love you when you bow in your mosque, kneel in your temple, pray in your church. For you and I are [children] of one religion, and it is the Spirit.”

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When living in Egypt, it was interesting to observe the great pride taken by Egyptians that their country hosted Abraham on his journey.

Abraham’s epitaph is focused on him being a nomad...journeying...as someone on the move. Abraham reminds us of the importance of pilgrimage, which of course is a pillar in the Islamic tradition.

I think it is critical when Christians and Muslims relate to each other, that we see all ourselves first and foremost as pilgrims---journeying in life---and not having arrived.

So much of religion teaches one that we “arrive,” and borders are put on beliefs--breeding a sense of finality to it. But it is much more accurate to say we are to be “a people of pilgrimage.”

For a pilgrim is someone on the move, always journeying, and therefore more open to asking others for directions, meeting new people---even asking each other for help on our journey of trying to live the life God desires us to live.

It is a certain attitude and spirit: of openness, gentleness and a willingness to grow in our spiritual journey, regardless of where it comes from.

You could say that Abraham’s journey required him to learn what it meant to be a guest. And the fundamental characteristic of a guest is being open to

receiving from the host! It is a posture that breaks down barriers.

I am reminded of that beautiful statement related to all this is from St. Ambrose from Milan, who baptized St. Augustine of Hippo from Algeria: "All truth, no matter where it comes from, comes from God's Spirit."

So the challenge before us is to build on the truth in the other.... and in so doing we can come to a deeper understanding of our own faith.

I especially love a verse in that marvelous pilgrim Psalm, Psalm 84 (The Zabur, 84, to our Muslim friends). It is a psalm that both Christians and Muslims love. And right in the middle of the Psalm it says, "Blessed are those who have set their hearts on pilgrimage".

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In closing, not long ago I watched one of the most profound films I've seen in years. It's a French film, titled *Far From Men*, and it takes place in southern Algeria in 1954 (as the Algerian uprising against the French begins). The story is about how the lives of two very different men, a French-Spanish

teacher (of "Christian" tradition), played by Viggo Mortensen, and a Muslim Algerian accused of murder, are thrown together by a world in turmoil (where their peoples are fighting each other) . . . and they are forced to flee across the barren Atlas Mountains together.

There is a powerful scene towards the end of the film, where the Western teacher sends the Algerian off into the desert for his freedom (as he knows his own people, the French, will kill him).

And as he sends him off into that vast Saharan desert, he says to the Algerian these simple and beautiful words (which Mortensen says in Arabic) .... words that reflect Abraham's faith as he "crossed over" into new territory...both geographically and in his own heart.

*Trust in the Creator. He will be there for you.*

*Give to Him. He will give to you.*

*Ask Him. He will provide.*

Is there really anything more to say?!  
Amen.

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