

*Shalom. As-salamu alaykum.* Peace be with you.

Christians, Muslims, and Jews all wish one another peace; we greet one another with a similar blessing; and why not? Christians, Muslims, and Jews all look to Abraham as the father of our faith.

Things begin to come apart at this point. Jews look to Abraham's son, Jacob. Muslims claim that Ishmael was the true son. And we Christians tag along by saying that Jesus, who was a Jew, was the fulfilment of the covenant promise that *“kings shall come from you.”*

We wish one another peace, but do we live together in peace? Don't make me laugh. Al-Qaeda brings terror to our shores. ISIS (or is it ISIL) broadcasts its atrocities via YouTube. Israel treats Palestinians (who are both Christian and Muslim) in ways that invite comparison to apartheid. And do we want to re-visit some of the things we have done at Guantanamo and in secret prisons around the world and God forgive us in too many encounters on our streets in the aftermath of 911?

This is no laughing matter, but then again, maybe a little laughter is just what we need. Maybe we need to chuckle like 99 year old Abram, who heard God name him, him! Him? – The father of many nations. Abraham.

1. The Invitation: Walk before me and be blameless.

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*Genesis 17:1 (NRSV) When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to Abram, and said to him, “I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless.*

How do we do that? How do we keep the faith and keep the peace? We're not very good at it. We tend to do one or the other. We keep the faith and peace pays the price; somehow keeping the faith and holy war/crusade/jihad go together; or, in the name of peace we dilute and diminish faith, in particular practicing our faith. We Christians need to keep our Jesus-talk to a minimum. Let's just talk about God or the Creator or the Holy One. Muslims and Jews need to learn how to blend in; dress like the rest of us; eat like the rest of us; and let's not be asking for special treatment because you need to pray 5 times a day or because your Sabbath starts at sundown on Friday and ends at sundown on Saturday. In the name of peace, we reduce our religions to the least common denominator, to generalities and platitudes; we reduce religion to the trite and the trivial in the hope that in this way peace will be with you.

Can we do better than that? Can we be better than that?

## “STAND ON THE PROMISE: THE FATHER OF MANY NATIONS”

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The answer to bad religion isn't less religion; it's better religion; religion that is humble before Almighty God and does not presume to defend him against unbelievers. After all, if God is Almighty then surely he can take care of himself.

A humble religion isn't afraid of what other people believe. Abraham is promised that he will be the father of many nations; not one nation; not even of one faith; many nations. The covenant with Abraham, this promise on which we are invited to stand, expects that people will be different, and that is OK; in fact, it's what God promises.

God isn't asking us to conform to some uniform standard. God is asking us to be the best we can be. And like Elsa in *Frozen*, to “let it go.”

“It's funny how some distance  
Makes everything seem small  
And the fears that once controlled me  
Can't get to me at all!”<sup>1</sup>

Don't be afraid. Stand on the promise. Don't be afraid because your neighbor believes differently than you do. Don't be afraid because your neighbor lives differently than you do. Don't be afraid. Stand on the promise. Be the best Christian you can be.

And ironically enough, all of Abraham's children agree in our Scriptures that being the best Christian, Muslim, or Jew requires us to love God with all that is in us and to love our neighbor. This is how to walk before God and be blameless.

### 2. STAND ON THE PROMISE: The Father of Many Nations

God makes a promise to Abraham, and the foundation of faith is the deep trust that rests secure in the midst of all that life throws at us that when God makes a promise God keeps a promise even when God's promises fly in the face of reality. We submit ourselves to the promise and rejoice in the fulfillment to come.

*Genesis 17:4–7 (NRSV)* <sup>4</sup> “As for me, this is my covenant with you: You shall be the ancestor of a multitude of nations. <sup>5</sup> No longer shall your name be Abram, but your name shall be Abraham; for I have made you the ancestor of a multitude of nations. <sup>6</sup> I will make you exceedingly fruitful; and I will make nations of you, and kings shall come from you. <sup>7</sup> I will establish my covenant between me and you, and your offspring after you throughout their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you.

That is quite a promise, especially when we remember that Abraham is 99 years old and Sarah is 90; which is to say that God's promise is impossible.

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.stlyrics.com/lyrics/frozen/letitgo.htm>

No wonder Abraham laughs. No wonder Sarah will laugh, but there is more to their laughter than disbelief; this something more may be the missing ingredient that keeps Abraham's children at each other's throats rather than side by side and shoulder to shoulder for the sake of peace.

Abraham laughs in wonder at what God can do. It is impossible that he and Sarah have a child, much less that be the father of many nations. But God has promised; God Almighty has said it will be so; and Abraham submits to the promise and believes it will be so; he believes it so completely that he laughs with the joy of any man who has just learned that he is going to be a father.

Can it be that the path to the better religion that overcomes the bad religion that is the source of so much suffering and evil in our world begins with us taking ourselves and our religion less seriously? To be clear: I am not suggesting we slack off and only practice our faith when it is convenient! That just replaces one form of bad religion with another!

No, as Erma Bombeck (God rest her soul) taught us: "Laughter is the best medicine." "Laughter rises out of tragedy, when you need it the most, and rewards you for your courage."<sup>2</sup>

Laughter is a sign of security; to truly laugh (and not that insecure tee-hee-hee that shows just how anxious we are) but the deep laughter that starts in our bellies and becomes a fully body expression of joy, to laugh like that we have to be relaxed; we have to feel safe; we have to be in our comfort zone.

What would Christianity be like if we were known for our laughter? What would we be like if one of our defining characteristics was our joy? We don't take ourselves too seriously. Yes, what we believe matters to us; we strive every day to walk before God and be blameless. But we don't get bent out of shape if that means one thing to us and another thing to our neighbor. We aren't threatened by difference – in our world, in our neighborhood, even in our church.

Perhaps on that day, that day when Christians, Muslims and Jews can together laugh at ourselves and laugh in wonder at the impossible that God Almighty has made possible; we are all children of Abraham; perhaps that will be the day when our wish will come true: *Shalom. As-salamu alaykum*. Peace be with you.

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<sup>2</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erma\\_Bombeck](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erma_Bombeck)



“STAND ON THE PROMISE: THE FATHER OF MANY NATIONS”

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Until that day, live and laugh that vision into reality; be the best Christian you can be. Walk before God and be blameless, and if you can do that with a smile on your face and laughter in your soul – so much the better!

Until that day, stand on the promise that God has indeed made Abraham the father of many nations. I am one of them, so are you, and so are they. Amen.