

Community Church of Issaquah

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Three Fathers to Remember in the Bible

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It certainly isn't a surprise to anyone in the church when I say that in both the Old and New Testament, the society of the Jews, and even Jesus's followers were heavily patriarchal. Even the mention of women by name is so rare compared to the men who are major characters in each of the sixty-six books of our Bible. In those days, men were the strong leaders of family and religion. In the patriarchal society, women and children were considered property rather than equal family members or parents. History tells us that in the Old Testament times, men were permitted to have more than one wife in an effort to father more sons than daughters in hopes of expanding the tribe of Israel. Polygamy was very common in the times before Christ. Even two of the fathers I will talk about today had more than one wife. But polygamy is not the subject of today's message. Fathers is the subject.

Abraham, the father of the nation Israel, had three wives but not all at the same time. Jacob and Esau each had multiple wives – Jacob two and Esau three. David, the second king of Israel had eight wives and somewhere over 18 children but them. David's favored son, Solomon had 700 wives and 300 concubines, which is at best eye-opening and shocking. So, how does someone comb through the Scriptures and find any men who are honorable fathers or grandfathers? I confess that when I chose this topic for Father's Day, I had to reprogram my brain a bit and simply focus on the relationship the men had with their children, particularly their sons.

Let me begin with Abram who later was renamed Abraham and who was the husband to a woman named Sarah. There is much written in the book of Genesis about Abraham and his moving around a good bit, including a time when he lived in Egypt. While there in Egypt, he was fearful of what would happen if Sarah were known to be his wife, so instead, he told the pharaoh that she was his sister. Later Abraham returned to his homeland, Israel. It was there that he helped his nephew Lot be saved from the four kings of surrounding tribes which resulted in the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. As a result of his actions, he was declared righteous by his faith and his name was changed from Abram to Abraham.

It was during the time before the tribal destructions that he was visited by three men, assumed to be angels. During that visit, he was promised a son to be born to his wife, Sarah, who was in age beyond childbearing years. As time moved along, Sarah lost her belief that she would give birth to a son, so she encouraged Abraham to take Hagar, one of their servants, as a wife who gave birth to Abraham's first son, Ismael. In time, though, Sarah did give birth to a son who was named Isaac. It was this son that Abraham is most noted as a father.

Believing he was following the message of God, Abraham took his son, Isaac, from their home and into the mountains where he had planned to offer Isaac as sacrifice. The importance of his action is not that he did not want to father his son, but that he believed he must follow the instructions from God. He was practicing obedience in a very dramatic way. But before he could complete the ceremonial sacrificial offering of his child, God intervened and told Abraham that Isaac should live because his father had been faithful to God. Here is an example of a person who loved his God and sought to follow God's leading but was willing to offer his beloved son if that was God's desire.

Rejoicing that his promised child was now living and a source of joy, Abraham was practicing his faith. The story in Genesis tells that because of his faith, God was to make Abraham the father of the nation of Israel. That was half of his reward for following God's will. The other half was having a wonderful son, Isaac. Abraham sent his second wife, Hagar and her son Ismael away, devoting himself to his wife Sarah and their son. When Sarah died at the age of 127, Abraham married Keturah and fathered six more sons, yet he left everything to his promised son, Isaac. Abraham died at the age of 175. That's remarkable in itself and adds to a fascinating story of a father and his promised son.

The Old Testament also has much to say about another father whose name was David. David was the son of Jesse who was the grandson of a well-known woman in Scripture, Ruth. We are familiar with the biography of this noteworthy character in the history of Israel. Having begun his life as a young man who followed his father's footsteps and was a shepherd. During those days, an unusual encounter with a man named Goliath, whom David slew with his slings and stones. That incident brought him to the attention of the ruling king, Saul. David was taken to live in the palace but was forced into hiding when Saul believed he was trying to take his throne. It was there he was noted for his musical abilities and ministered to the king and his family. At the death of Saul and his son Jonathan in battle, David was given the honor of being king.

It would have been a more beautiful story about this young man's rising to fame if David had behaved, but he didn't after he committed adultery with Bathsheba. It was his violation of the Jewish laws that caused him to pay a very big price for his legacy. David had wanted to be the one credited with building an incredible temple for Jerusalem, but that was denied to him because of his infidelity, his violations of his faith in God and the horrible bloodshed of his reign. One of David's sons, Absalom, rebelled against his father and tried to overthrow him, but failed and died.

in the attempt. David had seven wives and fathered another son we know by the name of Solomon whose mother was Bathsheba. It was Solomon that David chose as his successor instead of his oldest son, Adonijah.

So, what made David a notable father? It was his choosing the son of his beloved mistress to be king after his death at the age of 70. David was denied the privilege of building a temple for the worship of Yahweh because of his actions and the type of reign he had as king with the excess of violence. But because of his deep love for Solomon, he chose him to inherit the privilege of building the temple, which he did. Until its destruction by the Romans, it was known as Solomon's Temple, rather than David's Temple. If David could not follow his dream, he wanted his son to do it. As an aside, it's interesting to note that Solomon had 700 wives and more than 300 concubines.

The New Testament has a completely different take on fatherhood, and I'd like to share one of my favorites. There was a noted high priest named Zechariah who was a devoted and much-loved leader for the Jewish people. It was the custom for the priests to go into the sacred Temple of the Lord and to burn incense on behalf of the many people who would stand outside waiting for the priest to come back to them. It was on one of these days that Zechariah had gone into the temple to burn the incense that an angel came to stand beside him at the incense table and frightened and confused him.

It was the angel to spoke to Zechariah telling him that he and his wife Elizabeth would become parents. Both Zechariah and Elizabeth were very old and had never had children. The angel, however, told Zechariah that his son, who would be named John, would be filled with the Holy Spirit and minister to all the people. It would be his purpose in life to make people ready for the coming of the Lord. When Zechariah

asked the angel how he could know it was true what he said, the angel told him that he was Gabriel who stood before God.

The people who had gathered wondered why Zechariah was taking so long and when he came out of the Temple, he could not speak and went home.

Elizabeth, who had been the source of much ridicule because she was barren was overwhelmed when she became pregnant and did not even leave her house for the first five months of her pregnancy as a precaution so that when she did go out, people's shame for her would be taken away. It was during her sixth month of pregnancy that her cousin, Mary, the mother of Jesus came to visit to tell her about the angel's promise that she would have a son even in her virginity. When Elizabeth gave birth, she was told to name the son after her husband or his family. Elizabeth told everyone that their son would be named John and the people were confused until Zechariah found his voice and told them what the angel had instructed him to name the child and what the child would grow to become and do.

The life of John, the Baptizer, is familiar to us as he became the foreteller of Jesus's ministry. His father, Zechariah, seems to fade into the background after he regained his voice and named his son. There is more to that story of this remarkable father. We know that the magi who came to Herod seeking to find Jesus caused Herod to fear that someone would give birth to a son to overthrow his reign. Out of that fear, Herod commanded that infant sons born at that time were to be slain. Mary and Joseph took Jesus and fled to Egypt. Zechariah and Elizabeth hid their son. As a result, Zechariah was executed for not giving his baby son to be slain, two years after the birth of John.

It would be easy to wedge a short story here about Joseph, the stepfather of Jesus. Having listened to the angel, he

did what he was told, honoring Mary and taking heaps of ridicule for marrying a pregnant young woman. But Joseph was with Mary in Bethlehem at the birth of Jesus. It was Joseph who took Mary and the child to Egypt for protection from Herod's mandate to slaughter infant boys. And it was Joseph who was with Mary when Jesus snuck away at the age of 12 and taught in the Temple. But sadly, he is never mentioned in the Bible again. Yet, my belief is that he was one remarkable stepfather or in truth, Jesus's earthly father.

Fathers. Grandfathers. They have significant places in the Scriptures. Yes, I am aware that not all of their stories are only positive, but each one has a role in the world where Jesus came to live and ministered. Abraham became the father of Israel. David was one of the ancestral fathers whose vintage led all the way to the birth of Jesus. Zechariah fathered the man who led the way for Jesus to do his earthly ministry. And Joseph – well, he filled in the gap for a child whose heavenly Father needed an earthly father to care for the promised one.

Like some of the men here, I am a father and a grandfather and that role has been the most satisfying and rewarding of my life. To close our service today, we will engage in a time of honoring the men who are fathers, who were fathers, who now are grandfathers and great-grandfathers. None of us have been perfect, but we are perfectly blessed to have known or to now know amazing men in our lives who have filled that role. It's time to do the honoring.