

Genesis 25:1-11

Abraham took another wife, whose name was Keturah. She bore him Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah. Jokshan was the father of Sheba and Dedan. The sons of Dedan were Asshurim, Letushim, and Leummim. The sons of Midian were Ephah, Epher, Hanoch, Abida, and Eldaah. All these were the children of Keturah. Abraham gave all he had to Isaac. But to the sons of his concubines Abraham gave gifts, while he was still living, and he sent them away from his son Isaac, eastwards to the east country.

This is the length of Abraham's life, one hundred and seventy-five years. Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people. His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron son of Zohar the Hittite, east of Mamre, the field that Abraham purchased from the Hittites. There Abraham was buried, with his wife Sarah. After the death of Abraham God blessed his son Isaac.

Funeral Tales

On February 25 1994, during the holy month of Ramadan, hundreds of Palestinians gathered for worship, in the Ibrahimi mosque in Hebron at the Tomb of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs. A US-born Israeli military physician, Baruch Goldstein, armed with an automatic assault rifle, walked into the mosque. As worshippers knelt in prayer, Goldstein opened fire, reloading once. By the time he was stopped, 29 worshippers were killed, and more than a hundred had been injured.

The shooter was Jewish. His victims were Muslim. Both have one thing in common with us, who are Christian, and that is the person who is buried at the Tomb of the Patriarchs, Abraham.

It is his story we love to tell as do our Jewish and Muslim brothers and sisters. We do so, as we often do when a loved one dies, by recalling their life lived by reading their obituary.

Obituary

Abram "Abraham" ben Terah, age 175 years, died in Hebron (present day West Bank) in 1975 BCE. He was born in 2150 BCE in Ur Kasdim, Sumer (present-day Southern Iraq) to Terah of Ur and his wife (name unknown).

Abram was a proud nomadic rancher/shepherd and a prophet, who was rich in livestock, gold and silver.

He grew up in his family's hometown of Ur in Chaldees (Iraq). At the age of 75, he received a Divine invitation to leave his family home and hometown of Ur, and to strike out on adventure that would take him to unknown places around the larger region, all based on the promise of a new home, a nation even, and that his family line becoming more numerous than the stars. With

his wife, Sarai, and their nephew, Lot, they packed up their belongings and followed the Divine Voice.

Abram, along with his first wife, Sarai, would be given the names Abraham and Sarah by God, as a sign of their Divine Covenant to become a blessing as a people.

Unable to produce a child for Abraham, Sarah, took matters into her own hands, and gave him her slave-girl, Hagar, as another wife. Hagar became the mother of Abraham's first son, Ishmael. Fourteen years later, Sarah and Abraham, while advanced in their ages, finally had a son, Isaac.

Family conflict caused a major rift between Sarah and Hagar. Hagar and Ishmael were forced to live apart from Abraham.

Abraham caused further family conflict, when he took Sarah's child, Isaac, bound him, and was going to sacrifice him to God. While Abraham did not follow through, thanks to the appearance of a ram, his actions caused his estrangement from Sarah and Isaac, who lived apart from him.

When Sarah died at the age of 127, Abraham purchased a burial cave, and had her body buried there.

After her death, Abraham reunited with Hagar and his son Ishmael, moving to be closer to them. He also remarried Hagar, who had changed her name to Keturah. Together they had six more sons.

As the father of Ishmael and Isaac, Abraham became known as the common Patriarch of three major faiths Judaism, Islam, and Christianity.

Abram was also a descendant of Noah on his father's side. He had two brothers, Nahor and Haran. He was blessed with his wives, Sarah "Sarai" who preceded him in death, Hagar, Sarah's slave-girl and mother of Ishmael. Together, these women bore him 8 sons.

Abram is survived by his wife, Keturah (Hagar); and his eldest son with Hagar, Ishmael (Adishah); his son with Sarah, Isaac (Rebekah) and their sons, Esau and Jacob, and six sons with Keturah, Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishak and Shuah; along with their spouses, and numerous grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

He was preceded in death by his father, Terah; and his first wife, Sarah.

Burial will be held at the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron son of Zohar the Hittite, east of Mamre, near Hebron, next to his first wife, Sarah.

A graveside celebration of life will be led by his two sons, Ishmael and Isaac.

My experience with writing obituaries is very limited, so I turned to a colleague at Gunderson Funeral Home, Janelle LaFrombois, who assists families with writing obituaries for their loved one.

I mention this because the topic of funerals, funeral planning, and burial sites have been a part of many conversations over the past week. Some of these have taken place while at Gunderson Funeral Home. A couple took place here while discussing the idea of a "Scatter Garden" in Lake Ripley Cemetery. A scatter garden being a landscaped memorial area where families can spread the ashes of their loved ones.

In addition to these, it was a year ago this weekend that I was back in my hometown of Vincennes to inter the ashes of my mom, beside those of my father.

As if these were not enough for me to talk about, they really are not the one that got me thinking about funeral planning and burial plots and the coming together of Ishmael and Isaac to bury their father, Abraham.

But before I share that story, let me ask you if you have made pre-arrangements for your funeral and burial? Will you be buried in a casket or cremated, and buried in an urn? If cremated, do you want to be buried in a cemetery or have your ashes scattered some place that was special to you? If buried, have you purchased a cemetery plot? And in making arrangements, have you considered a "green burial", one that does not require embalming, but needs to happen very quickly after death? And what type of funeral service would you like? A traditional church service? A non-traditional, celebration of life gathering?

Staci and I both know that we would like to be cremated, though we have not had a serious conversation about what we would do with each other's ashes. I have had thoughts of asking Staci to scatter mine up in the Hidden Farm Road Meadow area near Shadow's ashes. I have considered having hers scattered in a bird sanctuary, as she loves birding.

What never entered my mind was to have our ashes buried in the Kroghville Cemetery, but that is now a possibility.

It seems that Sam and Bess, like my parents, purchased extra plots, and with cremation, there is plenty of room for us. This is serious conversation among Staci and her sisters, and one we will have to have among ourselves, and with Sam.

As we discussed this at Staci's birthday dinner last weekend when her sisters and their spouses were in town to help us celebrate, I jokingly told them, that if that's what they did with my ashes, I wanted some of them to be scattered in Lake Ripley Cemetery, so Sam and Staci could visit my summer lake front residence.

Have you and your family had these types of conversations? Have you discussed this with your pastor? All of these can be very helpful, because as we know, funerals can bring out the best in family, and they can also bring out the worst.

That could have been the situation between Ishmael and Isaac when it came time to bury their father, Abraham.

While the two stepbrothers did not live together, the family divisions were still a part of their lives. Those past conflicts could have created some difficult situation in planning Abraham's funeral, but whatever the two brothers felt towards each other, they set those differences aside, so they could honor their father's wishes when he died, and bury him next to Sarah.

According to Monica McGoldrick, a Family Systems Theory therapist and educator, 'death and other major loss pose the most painful adaptational challenge for it [i.e. the family]—as a system—and for each surviving member. Its impact reverberates through all the relationships in a family.' When a change takes place in a family through an addition (marriage, birth, adoption) or subtraction (divorce, death), it opens up the possibility for both positive and negative change."

McGoldrick adds, "Loss can strengthen survivors, bring them closer together, inspire their creativity, and bring out their strengths." Conversely, 'It can also leave behind a destructive legacy of dysfunctional coping patterns.'"

Ishmael and Isaac, reconciled after the death of Abraham found a way to bury their father.

Which brings us back to the massacre at Abraham's grave, a burial site that had united two brothers, but had more recently become the site of violence, killing and sorrow.

Jonathan Shay, MD, is a psychiatrist who work with veterans. He writes: "healing from trauma depends upon communalization of the trauma - being able to safely tell the story to someone who is listening and who can be trusted to retell it truthfully to others in the community."

(Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character, 4; published on the Jewish Theological Seminary website)

My hope in our genuinely telling the story of Abraham's far from perfect life and estrangement with his family, that in doing so through the lens of his death, we might finally learn to come together as family, acknowledge our estrangement and the suffering and pain we have caused one another, and then as a family, turn towards our shared future when there will be no more suffering, violence, mourning and death, and all things will be made new.

In life and in death, Abraham belonged to God. He is now all story, and a story we love to tell.

Amen.