

# Abraham's brood: Abraham had eight sons, not one

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [September 11, 2002](#) issue

When John Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, I was sitting in Miss Wyatt's seventh grade classroom at Tuscaloosa Junior High School. My wooden desk was next to a wall with high windows, and while the news came over the intercom I watched dust motes drifting in a beam of light as if they had been excused from the law of gravity. The scene is still so vivid to me that it might as well be in a framed photograph on my desk.

When the first World Trade Tower was attacked I was taking roll in my Tuesday morning world religions class. We were due to begin our unit on Islam that day, and while it would be another hour before any of us saw a television, it was a class that few of us will ever forget. That moment in 2001 is as vivid to me as the one in 1963, because during each of them the world changed forever.

Or at least that is what we said. "After 9/11 it is a whole new world," we said, although what we meant was that on 9/11 we became part of the world that had been there all along. There was nothing new for any of us about seeing bombed-out buildings, dazed rescue workers and tarp-covered bodies on television. What was new was seeing them in America, against skylines we had memorized from the movies. It was not the world we lost on 9/11 but our privileged position within it, and for a brief moment that was frankly thrilling, at least for those of us who were somewhat removed from the epicenter of grief.

I heard some of the best sermons I have ever heard in my life during the weeks that followed the attacks. Preachers who had been wondering how they were going to hang on until retirement suddenly remembered what they were supposed to be doing. The prophecies of Amos and Micah leapt off the page. So did the prescient teachings of Jesus. There were scuffles over the placement of the American flag in church sanctuaries, offering rich opportunity to discuss the difference between patriotism and faith. People who had never thought twice about worldwide Islam or

U.S. foreign policy began to glimpse startling connections between the two.

The times were ripe for transformation of church and state, as most such times of crisis are, but as the crisis aged, self-examination turned fairly quickly to self-defense. One year later, most people I know are more concerned about the recent downturn in the stock market than they are about another terrorist attack. No matter how many times I push it away, one of the chilling last lines of Flannery O'Connor's short story "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" keeps coming to mind. "'She would of been a good woman,' the Misfit said, 'if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life.'"

Since I have no gift for analyzing any situation but my own, the question that concerns me on this first anniversary of the attacks is how they have changed my life. There are all the obvious practical changes, of course. Like everyone else, I leave for the airport earlier than I used to. I do not carry my Swiss Army knife in my carry-on bag anymore, and I stay in the shortest hotels I can find. Although I am aching to see Damascus, Antioch and Aleppo, I spent my summer vacation at the Grand Canyon instead, and I am in no hurry to renew my passport.

But none of those precautions represents any deep change of consciousness, especially about my identity as a Christian. That change has become focused for me in a phrase I once used without thinking. It showed up regularly in my sermons and lectures. I worked it into the mission statement of the last church I served, and it appears in the Piedmont College mission statement as well. The phrase is "Judeo-Christian tradition," and I cannot use it anymore.

Even before 9/11, I knew that there were problems with it. The continuity between "Judeo" and "Christian" is a Christian confession, not a Jewish one. While both faiths share the stories and core values of the Hebrew Bible, their ancient disagreement about the central character of the Christian Testament suggests that these are two distinct traditions and not one. Anyone who wants to defend the hyphen on the basis of shared ancestry and scripture comes quickly to the question that few of us have asked until now: where is the second hyphen, the one that connects the first two to the Muslim branch of the same tradition?

Among the many other awakenings of 9/11 was the realization that Abraham had eight sons, not one, and that his firstborn was a boy named Ishmael. When Abraham cast him and his mother out into the desert, it was God who saved them, promising

to make a great nation of Ishmael. The promise came true for both of Abraham's elder sons, although Isaac's kin understandably preserved the story of their own nation and not the other. Now Ishmael's nation is back in the story again, as diverse and difficult as any nation, but no longer possible to ignore.

Many of us who are exploring our relationship to one another have decided to ditch the hyphens altogether. We are speaking of "the Abrahamic tradition" instead, and while we are discovering almost as much about what divides us as we are about what unites us, we are naïve enough to believe that the peace of the earth depends on our engagement—on that, and on our faith in the one God who has given us all the same vision of a whole world made new.