

Over the past several weeks we have been looking at some of the world's major religions. We have looked at Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. Today we are going to look at Judaism.

In some ways I feel very comfortable talking about Judaism. After all, our Old Testament is nothing more than the Hebrew Bible in with the books in just a slightly different order.

For me, I love the stories of the Old Testament more than the New Testament stories. Don't get me wrong, I fully believe and love the theme of the Gospels that our salvation comes through Jesus, but the stories themselves in the Old Testament have so much depth and excitement that I have been drawn to them from the first moment I started reading the Bible. Where many here in this congregation have a deep love for the Apostle Paul's Epistles, I have that same love for the Old Testament.

But for as many times as I have read the Old Testament, or have done studies about Judaism, I was still pretty ignorant about modern day Judaism.

So today, we are going to look at how Judaism got started; after all, Christianity and Judaism cling to the same stories of the beginning of our faith. Then we are going to discuss some of the beliefs of modern day Judaism, the three main divisions of their religion, and look at how they compare to Christianity today.

The Jews and Christians share the same common beliefs in how our religions got started. We both have the same story of the One True God that created the entire universe.

Judaism begins, "In the beginning, God created the Heavens and the Earth" and then it takes us through Adam and Eve – then to Noah and the floods.

But their religion points to a family of people with whom God entered into a special relationship – called a covenant relationship – blessing them so they might become a blessing to others.

Around 2,000 BC – God chose Abraham and his wife Sarah – who lived in what is now Iraq – to be the Patriarch and Matriarch of this great nation of people.

When God spoke to Abraham he told him he would be the father of a great nation if he trusted in God. His offspring would number more than the stars.

Now this all sounds great. You would have some kids, they would have kids and before you knew it, you would have tens of thousands of relatives.

Now here is the hitch – Abraham and Sarah didn't have any kids. But I guess there was still some time because Abraham was only 75 and Sarah was only 65 – plenty of time.

But looking at God throughout the Bible – isn't that just how he is? Doesn't he so often choose the most unlikely of us for great things? Maybe those unlikely choices are to remind us that it is not about us – but it is about God – because it is God that does these wonderful things.

So God chose Abraham and Sarah – but to just make it more interesting – he waited until Abraham was 100 and Sarah was 90 to give them a son – Isaac.

Isaac in turn had a son named Jacob. Many of us might be able to identify with Jacob because Jacob struggled with his faith. He did so both literally and figuratively – in one part of the scriptures we read where he wrestled with God. Because of that God changed Jacob's name from Jacob to Israel – which means, one who wrestles with God.

Now Jacob – or Israel – had 12 sons and several daughters. His 12 sons and their descendents became the 12 tribes of Israel which some of you may have heard of before.

This is the foundation of the Jewish history – they are the sons and daughters of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Now if we were going to look at the rest of the Old Testament, we would see a recurring theme.

The Old Testament is about God making covenants – which are unbreakable agreements – between Himself and the Jews. We see him make covenants with Abraham, Moses, all of the Israelites and King David.

Each time we see God offering his blessings of love and guidance and protection in return for obedience, trust and faithfulness.

Each time we see the people enter willingly into these covenants.

But then as we go through the Old Testament, we see generation after generation of Israelites that break the covenant with God and start to embrace other gods. They leave behind the laws that God had given them.

Then we see that they wander away from God and the covenant that protects them, and then the surrounding nations attack.

Of course the people cry out to God, repent – say they are sorry – and then God delivers them and they start the covenant over again.

Then, the Israelites turn their back on him again and wander away from the covenant that protects them, fall into trouble again – they cry out to God who is still there – loving them – repent – come back under his protection and He redeems them again.

This same story is repeated throughout the Old Testament.

Israel's history is marked by struggles to remain faithful, times of oppression, and God's covenants and promises to these people.

Now it is important that we realize that these stories aren't just Israel's stories - they are our stories too.

As humans we have a tendency to wander. How many times have we made promises to God in those times of need - "Please God, make this headache go away, and I promise I won't drink again.", or "Help me get through this and I'll be a better person - I'll even go to church every Sunday", and even "Please let my husband's test results come back favorable and I'll be a better Christian" - then, over time, we tend to wander away from these promises. But then when we turn back towards God, doesn't He take us back every time?

All of us are like Jacob at some point - we wrestle with God.

Now that is a little bit of the history of how Judaism got started. Their religion also emphasizes Moses - and the 10 Commandments and other rules that were given to him.

The first five books of the Hebrew Bible are called the Torah - also referred to as the books of Moses. Other parts of the Hebrew Bible contains books from the prophets and they have writings like the Psalms, Proverbs, Job and others.

Now we don't organize our Old Testament in the exact same order as the Jews do, but up to this point, everything else is pretty much the same.

But the next part is where we differ. They have a collection of writings - enough to fill an entire law library - with over three million words. This collection is called the Talmud.

The Talmud includes commentaries written by rabbis over the centuries to help people interpret the Torah for their lives. The rest of the Talmud is composed of sermons, teachings and stories about how to interpret the commentaries and how to interpret the Torah.

So now that we know a little about the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud, let's dig a little more into Judaism.

Just like we have denominations within Christianity, there are branches or divisions within Judaism. In the United States there are three major divisions: Orthodox, Conservative, and Reform.

Those that consider themselves Orthodox Jews would consider the Torah – which is the first 5 books of the Old Testament and Talmud – the interpretations and commentaries on those – to be given directly by God. God's exact word divinely given. When you think about the Orthodox Jew we typically think of men with their curly locks and flowing beards, dressed in black.

Those that consider themselves to be Conservative Jews believe that the Torah was divinely given as well, but don't necessarily agree that the Talmud was divinely given.

And finally those that consider themselves as Reform Jews believe that the Torah is divine inspiration and the Talmud was simply written by human beings. This is the type of Judaism that most of us are probably familiar with.

So what does it mean to be a Jew today? For the Orthodox Jew, it means continuing to live to the letter of the law that Moses handed down. But for many other Jews it simply means trying to be decent human beings and passing on several traditions.

In Christianity our deeds spring forth from our belief and relationship in Jesus. In Judaism a relationship with God is possible, but the primary goal is obedience to the covenant that God made with Moses and the people.

For those of you who were here two weeks ago, you might remember that the essence of Islam is found in the saying, "There is no God but Allah, and Mohammad is his prophet."

Well we can say the essence of Judaism is captured in Deuteronomy 6:4-5 which all Jews are supposed to have on their hearts and minds and it reads, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength."

As Christians, we recognize those words as well, because Jesus said that those words are the first and greatest commandment.

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Many Christians wonder if the Jews are still looking for the Messiah – the savior.

The Orthodox Jews still pray daily for the coming of the Messiah. They believe that the Messiah will rebuild the temple, restore Israel's system of sacrifices and usher in a new age of peace and the whole world will recognize the biblical God and the truth of Judaism.

The Reform Jews on the other hand have left behind the idea of a literal Messiah. They now believe that the scriptures that reference the Messiah should just be spiritualized or turned into basic principles of faith.

I don't know how many times I have heard the question, "How come the Jews never accepted Jesus?"

Actually many of the Jews did. The first Christians were Jews. They weren't called Christians at the time but followers of "The Way." They weren't trying to start a new religion, but were earnestly trying to be faithful to their own Jewish religions and customs. Many of these Jews knew that they were following the Messiah that was promised long before.

As a matter of fact, all but one of the New Testament authors were Jewish. And by the year 50 AD – it is said that nearly one-third of the people in Jerusalem were followers of The Way – including many prominent Priests and Pharisees.

In fact at one time they said there were more Jewish followers of Jesus as the Messiah than Pharisees and Sadducees combined.

However, as the Gospel of Jesus began to move more and more into the non-Jewish world or the Gentile world, the Jews became more closed to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Apostle Paul saw the truth in the scriptures – JEREMIAH 31:31-34

And Paul remembered hearing that Jesus had said at the Last Supper, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.”

Paul got it – he saw the connection. Through Jesus we had a new Covenant between God and us. Salvation was now possible, not by following the Law in the Old Testament, but by trusting in Jesus who made it possible for anyone – from the least to the greatest – Jew or Gentile – to be able to follow the God of Abraham.

Followers of Christ didn’t need to become Jews – only trust in Christ.

And this understanding by Paul created a great division in the early church. From that time forward, more Gentiles joined the church and the Jews began to feel alienated because they thought God only chose them.

I often wonder where the Jews would be today if the Christians had found a way not to alienate them. I wish and pray that they could find the early faith that James and John had found.

The Bible tells us the Jews are God's chosen people and are to be a light to the world. Through Jesus Christ we are able to join under that Covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – and be a light to the world as well.

We are blessed to have the opportunity to get to know Jesus as the Messiah – the Savior.

What a blessing it is for us to be able to reunite ourselves with Christ – and share that covenant of grace, peace, love and salvation.

So today, as we come together in Holy Communion – let's reflect on that New Covenant that was made possible only by God.

- HOLY COMMUNION.