

Tracing our spiritual family ancestry: What does it mean?

Note: In 2012, *MLive.com* was a partner in the communitywide “Year of Interfaith Understanding” initiative. The success of that project led to an ongoing effort to build interfaith understanding in West Michigan. This new column, *Interfaith Insights*, is one such effort. It is coordinated by Douglas Kindschi, director of the Kaufman Interfaith Institute at Grand Valley State University, and will be written by Kindschi and others in the interfaith community.

By Douglas Kindschi

We tend to think of our family in terms of ancestors. In my case, we have traced our fam-

ily lineage in Switzerland back to the 1400s.

But what about tracing one’s spiritual family ancestry? As Christians, we tend to look back to Jesus as our spiritual “founding father” or perhaps to Paul who brought the gospel to the Gentiles.

In the current spirit of interfaith understanding, there is frequent reference to the Abrahamic faiths. Indeed, Christians, Muslims and Jews all look to Abraham as the father of their faith. In the sense that we see Abraham



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as our common ancestor, it expands considerably our spiritual family to include more than half of the world’s population.

GETTING GRANULAR

But what if we go back and look closely at the Noah story? We tend to think of Noah in terms of the flood, the ark and the animals “two by two.”

We also remember the rainbow as a promise that God would never again bring destruction on the human race. But the rainbow is described in Genesis 9 as a sign of the “everlasting covenant” that God has made never again to destroy the Earth. It is not just a covenant with Noah, but with “all of

your descendants after you.” That includes everybody. We are all descendants of Noah; he is our spiritual ancestor.

As we look closer, we see that the covenant is not just with Noah’s descendants, but with “every living creature” and even with the Earth. The language is quite clear and most inclusive. Genesis 9:16 quotes God as saying: “When the rainbow is in the clouds, I will look upon it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is upon the Earth.”

CARING FOR SURROUNDINGS

The covenant not only includes all humans but

animals as well. We are in community not only with all persons of every faith, but also with our environment, as God’s covenant includes all living creatures.

CHALLENGING ASSUMPTIONS

This expanded understanding of our spiritual family and our spiritual ancestor challenges us to think more clearly about people who are different from us; they are part of the family. We might have our differences — what family doesn’t? — but we need to think in terms of brothers and sisters, all children of God, all created in God’s image. And we also need to treat with respect all living creatures, all

of our environment.

While God promised not to destroy the Earth again, nothing was promised about whether mankind would ever destroy the Earth and all living creatures. Unfortunately, we live in a time when that possibility actually exists. We have the weapons available to do to the Earth, to humanity and to all living creatures what God has promised not to do to us. Let us accept the challenge and understand that we are all descendants of Noah. He is the spiritual ancestor for all of mankind. We need peace in our spiritual family, as well as sensitivity to the environment, the house in which we live together.

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