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“Jesus stretched out his hand” (Matthew 8:2).

[Gn 17:1, 9-10, 15-22; Matt 8:1-4](#)

The word “stretch” is used in a number of Jesus’ miracles to describe going beyond the normal bounds. When he stretches out his hand to touch the leper in today’s Gospel, he is both reaching out and exceeding the limits prescribed by the Law. He is responding to a man who has also stretched out to him, risking rejection and further humiliation to seek help from someone he had heard might risk censure for touching his diseased skin. Jesus is typically responding in kind, meeting the leper in the middle of their mutual risk-taking. Because the man is showing faith, Jesus knows healing can take place.

Abraham was honored as the father of faith not only for the Jews but for Islam because he was stretched beyond every limit by God, who called him and tested him repeatedly before revealing the Covenant that would initiate the entire history of the Chosen People and the covenant that would redeem the world. He is first called to leave his native land for a place he did not know, led by God from Ur to the land of Canaan, controlled by a hostile people. Only by cunning and repeated protection is Abraham able to secure the first claim on what would become the Promised Land.

Abraham is already 75 years old when first called and, despite his age, God begins to promise him and his elderly wife, Sara, a child to carry on their memory. Sarah and Abraham both laugh to themselves, not knowing they were already naming the child Isaac, a Hebrew word that means “he will laugh.” As a promise, it was a real stretch, but Abraham believed, and though he was 99 years old and Sarah 90 before the child was born, he kept faith. But God was not done stretching him.

Believing God was directing him, Abraham nearly sacrifices his beloved son as an act of faith. The disturbing story was preserved to reject child sacrifice but also as another sign of Abraham’s absolute faith. God will always provide. St. Paul will use his example to show that salvation is based on faith and not on keeping the Law, which did not come until Moses. Abraham is father of both the Jews, Muslims and Christians because he showed extraordinary faith.

If we review our own histories with God, we are likely to find that the most important experiences involved stretching beyond our comfort zones and control to take risks and make decisions whose outcome we could not predict.

We learn that God never stops calling us, and that each time we respond we learn that God really does keep promises, even if they seem delayed or altered. Once we

determine to see Providence at work, even suffering and loss become invitations to deepen our trust.

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