

A People of the Book

Scriptures: Genesis 21: 9-20; 2 Timothy 3: 14-17

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I. Introduction

A couple of weeks ago, my wife Jeanine and I had a chance to see a Othello at the Shakespeare Theater Company, and in an attempt to do a slightly different take on the play, Michael Kahn had, rather than highlight a fellow's ethnicity as a person of color, he really was highlighting a fellow's set apartness as a Muslim. He used some of the language in that wonderful play to highlight some of the social anxiety that we have in our country around the religion of Islam.

For many decades we have spent a lot of brain power and spilled a lot of ink about how we as Americans, and particularly as Christian Americans, relate and should relate to the world's second largest and most rapidly growing religion. And, of course, this has also been a point of significant dialogue in our current presidential debates with frankly a lot of our collective fears and anxieties on display on the world stage.

So, at the suggestion of a handful of you, I decided it would be helpful for us to spend a few weeks reflecting on Islam and our relationship with Islam. And it would be reasonable to ask why would we talk about Islam in the context of a Christian worship service? I want to start off by saying that Christian worship is largely meaningless unless we're talking about relevant issues, right? And this is a highly relevant topic for us to try to engage as people of faith.

Second, we as Methodists have a doctrine that John Wesley called the doctrine of prevenient grace, and what John Wesley meant by that term is that God's grace, God's Holy Spirit, is always at work among us even before we are aware of what's happening. And for John Wesley what that meant was that the Holy Spirit is speaking to everyone even before they're cognizant of it and that gives us a basis for engaging people of other faiths because as Wesley understood it, God is moving and speaking to them too and that part of our responsibility then as Christians is to see those places in other people's traditions where the God that we know as revealed in Jesus Christ is operating.

And I want to suggest also that there are some things that we can learn from our Muslim brothers and sisters about our own faith that I hope will be helpful and deepen our walk. So, we're going to be spending four weeks talking about this and I want to begin picking up on the theme that we are all a people of the book and all cousins essentially as children of Abraham -- Jews, Christians, Muslims, together all tracing our roots back to the great patriarch.

II. The Basics

By way of a little bit of background, Muhammad was born in what is now Saudi Arabia in the city of Mecca in the Year 570. He was orphaned at a fairly early age and was raised by his grandfather and then his uncle, and was a very talented young man. He as a relatively young man was hired to work with a wealthy widow of Mecca whose name was Khadijah, who was so impressed by him that even though he was significantly her junior, she asked him to marry her and she became his first wife and one of the early very powerful and influential women in the Islamic community and an important source of counsel for Muhammad.

Mecca in Muhammad's day was a very vibrant metropolis, on some trade routes and a pilgrimage site for a lot of different faith traditions. So, it was a city that was highly polytheistic. And in the midst of all of the gods that were being worshipped, Muhammad was very struck by the communities of the Jews and the Christians and the God that they worshipped and so spent a lot of time studying Judaism and Christianity and starting to engage in a life of prayer. Now part of that prayer journey involved periodic retreats by himself in a cave that was on the hillside outside of Mecca where he would go to be in prayer by himself for periods of time. And about the age of 40, so roughly the Year 609, 610, he had a very powerful visionary experience in which the angel, Gabriel, came and started to teach him about God.

He didn't initially talk to people about this vision and the subsequent visions because they went on for the next 23 years. But fairly early in that process Gabriel instructed him to start instructing others about the things that he was learning. And so, he started to become a teacher and preacher, sharing the things about God that the angel, Gabriel, had revealed to him which would eventually become the text of the Qur'an. These visions lasted for 23 years until the prophet's death in 632 CE, at which point all of these sayings were collected into the Qur'an. Fairly early on within a handful of years after Muhammad's death, there was a single version of the text that is the standard version across the world today. Muhammad did not receive the instructions that are the Qur'an in the order in which we have the Qur'an right now. A lot of the teachings that Gabriel gave Muhammad were aimed at specific events and situations that he was dealing with in his life so that Gabriel would give him these words from God and then tell him where in the text he wanted this passage to be. So, by the end of his visionary experience he not only had the words from God, but he had sort of the order that the angel wanted him to have them in.

The Qur'an is roughly the size of our New Testament. It's divided into chapters just like our Bible which are called *Surah*, and there are 114 of these in the Qur'an. The longer ones tend to be towards the front and there are some shorter ones towards the end and they range greatly in length -- some are quite long, 20 pages, and some are just a verse long -- on a whole range of topics. And if you read the Qur'an -- and I would encourage you to take a look, it's very easy to get your hands on a copy -- you'll note that the tone feels very much as though God is speaking to the reader. There's not

a lot of narrative like there is in our scriptures of the Jewish and the Christian scriptures. It's very instructional and very much aimed at the one who is reading.

There are a lot of really interesting parallels between some of the passages and stories that are in the Qur'an and our scripture. You will hear in the Qur'an stories about Adam and Noah and Abraham and Lot and Isaac and Ishmael and Jacob and Joseph and Aaron and Moses, Job, David, Solomon, Elijah, Elisha, Jonas, Zachariah, John the Baptist, Jesus, and Mary. Interestingly, Moses is the character that is mentioned the most in the Qur'an, more than anyone else. Jesus is actually mentioned more often than Muhammad, who was a vehicle for God's word in the Muslim tradition, and interestingly, there is more material on Jesus' mother, Mary, in the Qur'an than there is in the New Testament, an entire chapter written about Mary. And in Islamic traditions, all of these characters had the designation of being prophets. They were, in the classic Hebrew sense, speaking for God. And in Islamic tradition the culmination of that process of calling prophets was calling Muhammad, who gives the final revelation for the people who are Muslim.

So, while there's a lot of commonality or a lot of common stories, there are also very different twists on some of those stories. So, for example, you heard just read the passage about God choosing Isaac as the person through whom God's covenant would be continued. In Islamic tradition, of course, Ishmael, the child of Hagar, who is kicked out of Abraham's home, is the one through whom God's covenant is perpetuated. And in an interesting twist in that interesting and disturbing story about God calling Abraham to sacrifice Isaac on the altar in Islamic tradition, it's God calling Abraham to sacrifice Ishmael on the altar. So, same story and different characters.

One of the important distinctions to keep in mind as we engage Islam is that, of course, in Christian tradition Jesus is God's consummate revelation about what God is like, and in Islamic tradition Muhammad doesn't play that role at all. Muhammad is a channel through whom God speaks the words of the Qur'an, but Muhammad is in no way a divine figure, very revered certainly but he doesn't have at all the same theological significance as Jesus in our tradition. And in fact, when Muhammad is speaking not in a trance -- you know, he'll go into these trances when the Qur'an would be given to him -- when he's not speaking in one of those trances, his words were still recorded and noted, but they don't have the same theological significance as when he is speaking for God. So, the teachings of Muhammad and the details of his life are collected in some writings that we call the *Hadith*, but they don't have the same theological significance even though Muhammad is speaking them as when Muhammad is speaking and channeling these words from God.

So, it is tempting just because there's a visual similarity to compare the Qur'an with the Holy Bible and to compare Jesus with Muhammad. But Christian and Islamic theologians have said that the better analogy is to equate the role that Jesus plays in our tradition with the role the Qur'an plays in Islamic tradition. For Muslims, the Qur'an is the word and most clear revelation of God. It is God's word to us. For us as Christians, Jesus is God's word to us. Now we learn about Jesus and reflect on Jesus

through the stories of scripture but scripture as an authority is always secondary to who Jesus is. Jesus is the Word and the stories of scripture are to unpack and explore what God's word is about in Jesus.

We're going to come back to that in just a minute. But I want to at least touch briefly on one of the elephants in the room whenever we're talking about Islam, which is to what degree does the Qur'an support the use of violence? This is obviously a topic that is a huge matter of debate and I want to start off by saying that there're some conflicting witness in the Qur'an about violence in the same way that there is conflicting witness in our scriptures about violence, right? I mean, there are some passages in the scriptures where God instructs the children of Israel to decimate entire communities and people as they enter into the Promise Land that are frankly troubling. And in same way, there are passages in the Qur'an that permit the use of violence.

Now, in terms of the context for those and the ones that are most often used by militant Islamists, radical Islamists, are from the second surah, which is the longest of the *Surahs*, and the context of that is that when Muhammad started preaching in Mecca, he was preaching a message of radical monotheism that was very much at odds with the polytheism of the city. So, Muhammad's early movement of Muslims started to experience some significant persecution in Mecca, and eventually Muhammad took the entire community about 250 miles away to another city called Medina, where they thrived for a number of years.

However, the persecution from Mecca continued over years and finally culminated in a series of significant battles between the Muslim community in Medina and the city of Mecca in which the Muslim community won. And part of the passages that address that out of the second *Surah* give permission to Muslims to defend themselves against outside religious forces that would keep them from living the faith that God had called them to live. So, there is a clear permission in the Qur'an to use violence and force in self-defense.

Now, it is a pretty significant stretch to move from a permission to use violence as self-defense to blowing up helpless, unarmed citizens around the world in terrorist attacks. And so, the vast majority of the Muslim community would condemn that reading of the Qur'an, but there are certainly authoritative figures in the Muslim community who have used those passages to argue that because they have a feeling of Islam being persecuted and their way of life being attacked in some cultural ways by the expansion of Western values, democracy and capitalism. The argument has been made that the Muslim community is under attack and therefore they have the right to respond with violence and aggression. Now again, that's a very small minority opinion but it is a significant minority and a minority that frankly commands a great deal of the world's stage. And while we do deplore the heinous acts that justifies, the rationale behind it is not that the radical Islamists hate Americans because we're Christian or because we're Americans.

It's not about belief. It's about action. It's about the feeling of being under assault on some cultural level. And frankly it's a response that we see among Christian fundamentalists occasionally too, that there is a cultural war happening and that more conservative Christians often feel -- and I've had a lot of these dialogues with brothers and sisters who are Christians around LGBTQ issues, that there's a sense that they're losing a cultural battle and there's a desperation that that brings. That's not again a justification but I think it's important to try to understand some of the motivations there.

III. Learnings

A couple of things that I want to offer up as places that we might learn from our Muslim brothers and sisters about their relationship with the Qur'an and our relationship with the Bible. The first is that because the Qur'an is so sacred and every word is so sacred, there has from the beginning of Islam been a very powerful command to memorize and deeply immerse one's self in the words of the Qur'an. And Muhammad's followers, as he would get new revelations, would memorize a lot of the passages and by the time of his death, there was a significant body of his followers who had memorized verbatim the entirety of the Qur'an. And memorizing the entirety of the Qur'an continues to be a significant spiritual discipline in Islam to this day.

And I want to suggest that while we view our Bible slightly differently than the Qur'an is viewed, there is something to be learned there about how we immerse ourselves in our own sacred scripture, because frankly sometimes it feels to me like we bring a fair amount of casualness to how we engage scripture and what we know about scripture. As we have talked at various points in the past, scripture is the witness of our community over a thousand years to its walk with God. And while we do not believe it is God's actual verbiage to us, it is the Word of God and we have, I think, both a responsibility and an opportunity to engage the word of scripture in a more intentional way than we often do.

So, I want to invite you as we continue this journey together to start to look at places in your life where you could do a little more Bible study. We have *Join the Journey* in between services here and a variety of wonderful Sunday school classes. We have two Bible studies that are happening on Wednesday night, one here, one over at Wesley. And we've got *Disciple* Bible Study that's meeting on Thursday evenings. So, there are a lot of opportunities to plug in and start to understand and know our scriptural witness better. And I think our Muslim brothers and sisters invite us to engage in that discipline with a little bit more focus than sometimes we do.

On a related note, many of the Muslim prayers, and we will talk a little bit more about prayer next week, but virtually all of the important Muslim prayers are in fact words from the Qur'an. And we likewise have in our scripture a host of powerful prayers that we have as resources in our own prayer life. There are a lot of them spread throughout scripture, but I want to just suggest that one of the most valuable resources we have in learning how to pray is the Book of Psalms which is nothing but the prayers

of the community to God. We use those occasionally in our liturgy, but this is a resource that each of us has to aid us in our own prayer lives.

So, I want to encourage you as we live into this dialogue with our Islamic brothers and sisters to make more use of the resource that we have in the Book of Psalms and throughout scripture as a tool to teach us how to pray. And I want to invite you to at some point this week to open up the Book of Psalms and pick one and pray those words as though they were your words. Find the places of resonance where what the psalmist is struggling with are maybe things that you're struggling with -- maybe fear, maybe guilt, maybe a sense of being persecuted, maybe joyfulness, maybe a sense of triumph. Where are those places -- because you see all of those emotions in the Book of Psalms. So, you've got this wonderful resource of prayers that have been used by our community for the better part of 3000 years as a resource to learn how to be in conversation with God. It's a powerful, powerful gift.

Now the last point I want to make in terms of things that we can learn from our Muslim brothers and sisters is an area of difference, and it has to do with how we view scripture. As I have said, for the Muslim community, the Qur'an, they are the words of God. They are directly from God's mouth and they are the clearest and most authoritative revelation of who God is. That is a different relationship than we have with the Bible. We understand the Bible to be authoritative and to be the word of God, but we understand the most authoritative word of God to be the person of Jesus Christ. So Jesus becomes the lens through which we read all of scripture and make sense of all of scripture. So when we're wrestling with a witness to violence and some of the troubling stories -- like the sacrifice of Isaac in the scripture -- our primary interpretive tool is the life of Jesus Christ. The scripture is how we learn about that story but the scripture is not the ultimate authority for us as Christians. Jesus is the ultimate authority for us as Christians and everything we understand God to be saying through scripture we understand through the prism of the life of Christ. And, dear friends, that's a prism that we bring to all truth.

IV. Conclusion

Whenever we engage in reflections about another faith tradition, there is often the tendency either to highlight the extreme differences or to erase all the differences and just say, "We're all working on the same God, trying to get there under different paths." Neither of those is actually a faithful way of engaging. For us as Christians, the faithful way of engaging is to see through the life of Jesus where truth resides, whether it's in our own set of sacred scriptures or whether it's in another set of sacred scriptures or another faith tradition.

Knowing that the Holy Spirit is always working, it is looking at all of those witnesses through the lens of who Jesus is that we discern and identify truth. Dear friends, when we can do that we can step away from the fear and anxiety that is always present when we engage the other. And I think what I would want us to reflect on as we move through these weeks together is using Jesus as the lens, where is there truth and where is there a common ground that we have with our Muslim brothers and sisters,

what can we learn from them, what can they learn from us as we all seek to be a faithful family of God together -- children of Abraham and people of the book?

Amen.