

A baptismal meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister of the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Lent IV, March 22, 2009, dedicated to Vanessa Christen Coterel and Alyssa Marie Lane on their baptismal day, to the new members of First Church, and always to the glory of God!

“Jesus and Muhammad”

John 3:14-21

(Part V of VIII in the sermon series “Jesus Before And AFTER Christianity”)

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Karen Armstrong begins her book *Islam: A Short History* with these words:

“During the month of Ramadan in 610 C.E., a (40-year-old) Arab businessman had an experience that changed the history of the world. Every year at this time, Muhammad ibn Abdallah used to retire to a cave on the summit of Mount Hira just outside Mecca in the Arabian Hijaz, where he prayed, fasted and gave alms to the poor. He had long been worried about what he perceived to be a crisis in Arab society.” (*Islam*, Modern Library edition, Random House, New York, N.Y., 2000, p. 3).

Armstrong continues to describe an Arab society that had gained wealth through trade, but had begun to turn on itself in violent murderous cycles of fighting. She speaks of Muhammad’s struggle

with the idea that God had passed them by as Byzantine and Persian empires under Christian and Jewish influence grew and flourished with the faith they practiced, while some within the Arab world came to believe that the high God within their pantheon of Gods, "*al-Lah*" which meant "*the God*," had sent no prophet and no scripture in their own language. In essence, it felt like God had passed them by.

It seemed like the more thoughtful people in Muhammad's world were a lost people, forever exiled from the civilized world and ignored by God (Ibid). "That all changed on the night of 17 Ramadan when Muhammad woke to find himself overpowered by a devastating presence, which squeezed him tightly until he heard the first words of a new Arab's scripture pouring from his lips." (Ibid)

For the next two years, Muhammad would speak to no one except his wife and her cousin, who was a Christian. Each of them was convinced this was the revelation of God. Two years into this experience, Muhammad felt compelled to preach and slowly gained converts. Many were poor. Many were women. He taught no new doctrine of God. His message was simple. God ("Allah") was one.

There were a number of similarities between this new vision and the old faiths. For example, most Arabs already shared the belief with Jews and Christians that Allah would bring judgment on humanity in the Last Days.

Muhammad didn't think he was founding a new religion. He thought he was bringing the old faith in one God to the Arabs, who had never had a prophet before. He taught it was wrong to build private fortunes and it was good to share wealth and create a society where the weak and vulnerable were treated with respect. He taught that if the Arabs did not change their ways, because they were violating the fundamental laws of existence, they were doomed.

This was the teaching at the core of the new scripture or "recitations" which translate Quran. Muhammad would share the recitations through public readings in chapters (surabs). The

revelations were painful to Muhammad, who used to say, “Never once did I receive a revelation without thinking my soul had been torn away from me.” He often convulsed and would sweat profusely as he received these revelations. The “recitations” were poetic and powerful. They were beautiful to hear as prose or poetry. One convert was Umar ibn al-Khattab who was bound and determined to stop Muhammad. But, upon hearing the poetic language of this faith, he said, “When I heard the Quran, my heart was softened and I wept and Islam entered me.”

The new sect would eventually be called “Islam” (meaning “Surrender”) because a man or woman would submit their entire being to Allah in prayer and meet Allah’s demands that all people should be treated with justice, equity and compassion. They would make this submission in prayer three times daily (later five times daily). The prayers, offered prostrate before God, would teach them to lay aside selfishness and pride and recall that before God they were nothing. They had to give regularly to the poor. They had to be generous to the poor. Social justice was THE crucial virtue of Islam. They were commanded to build a community of compassion in which there is a fair distribution of wealth to those in need. If equity and justice came to the community in which Islam was centered, then God was blessing them. (Islam, p. 6)

Muhammad did not toss out any of the ancient teachings of faith. The revelation that God was one God fit well into the Jewish faith. However, one teaching that became an anathema to Islam was the Christian understanding of the Trinity because (in the view of Islam) God can only be one, not three. Taking an approach that Muslims should “take what they like and leave the rest,” Muhammad liked much of what he found in Christianity. As with Judaism, the prophets of old were intended to be read and learned as enlightened ones bringing Allah’s word to his people.

The Quran says wonderful things about Jesus. He was God’s chosen one who brought a pure message of God. In the Quran, Jesus is called “the Spirit of God.” As a result, believers in the Quran love

Jesus, honor him, and believe in him. In fact, no Muslim can be a Muslim unless he or she believes in Jesus.

The Quran says Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary and he spoke while he was still only a baby. The Quran says of Jesus:

“The Messiah (Jesus) son of Mary, was no more than a Messenger before whom many Messengers have passed away; and his mother adhered wholly to truthfulness, and they both ate food (as other mortals do). See how we make our signs clear to them; and see where we are turning away!” (Quran 5:75).

Muslims believe Jesus had a miraculous birth and that he performed miracles throughout his lifetime, including healing the blind, the lepers and raising the dead. The Quran also tells the story of Jesus breathing life into a clay likeness of a bird, saying (in Jesus’ words): “Lo! . . . I breathe into it and it is a bird by Allah’s leave.” (Quran 3:49)

But Muslims differ greatly from Christians about the belief that Jesus was the Son of God and that he was killed on the cross and resurrected. The Quran says, “They did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, but they thought they did.” (Quran 4:156) “God lifted him up to His presence. God is Almighty, All-Wise.” (Quran 4:157) In Islam, Allah could not be split from the one or killed in any way.

As we have been studying Jesus before Christianity, and now as we see his influence “After” Christianity’s formation, we see so much of the Spirit of Jesus come alive in Muhammad’s revelations and recitations. We see Jesus’ compassion for the poor. His outreach to women, his teachings on equity, his miracles, his mother, his story all come alive in the Quran. As it was for Jesus, social justice and equality were significant for Muhammad. Muhammad was fully aware of the power and presence of Jesus, the one he called “The Spirit of God!”

Muhammad’s rejections came at the point where Jesus was an

equal person of the Trinity. His struggle was how to reconcile the crucifixion and resurrection with the story of the man of Nazareth. In many ways, that cross-section of the faiths became the breaking point where one could not be simply reconciled to the other. In similar ways, our text today from John's Gospel clearly spells out the split between believers in the Christ and unbelievers. At this point of departure, the two paths of faith seem unreconcilable.

Just as Christianity emerges and too often has changed the essence of the vision and message of Jesus for more than 2,000-plus years, Islamic writers, historians and theologians will tell you how and where Islam after the prophet Muhammad has changed the essence of the "recitations" over the past 1,400 years. What started out in each case as a prophet of God with a vision for God's people became a religion where the founder's message has too often been lost in the followers actions.

I pray that each one of us seek not only a deeper understanding of Jesus' message and way for our lives, but that we seek to understand more fully the vision and recitations of Muhammad. Common ground is found in understanding another person. In the words of St. Francis it is more blessed to "understand rather than be understood." Rather than bloodshed, much more of God's light and truth needs to be shed on the teachings, the visions, the way, the life and meaning of Muhammad and Jesus. Let us be the ones who seek common ground and find a way to God's truth in these times.

As we move forward, let us remember that we have the greatest teacher on the path to understanding in Jesus. He was always the one to enter the house of those who no one else would listen to or talk to. His open heart in giving and receiving should be our model for dialogue and through this way and through the grace of God we will overcome the divides between our religions. Amen.