

## ***Understanding One Another: Islam***

8<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost, Year A ~ Genesis 21:8-21

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This morning as we continue to think about understanding other faiths, we turn to a story which is at the root of understanding how three of the world's major religions are deeply related to one another—the Abrahamic faiths, or the faiths that flow from Abraham and Sarah—Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. It frequently gives me pause to remember that our own faith is intimately related to both Judaism and Islam, especially since our relationships today are often burdened by deep prejudices and even hatred.

Today's scripture is a piece of the story of how Muslims and Christians are related. Which makes me pause for a moment to mention something that confused me for many years—and it may confuse some of you as well. If it doesn't, you will just know how dense I can be! We are used to the name of a faith and the people who practice it being very similar. For instance, Christianity is practiced by Christians, Hinduism is practiced by Hindus, and Judaism is practiced by Jews. But people who practice the faith of Islam are not Islamists—they are called Muslims. Actually Islam and Muslim come from the same Arabic root. Islam means submission to the will of God, and Muslim means one who submits to the will of God.

Now, let's return to today's story. Abraham and Sarah are the husband and wife instructed by God in the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter of Genesis to go to the Land of Canaan, the promised land, where God would make a great nation of them. Unfortunately, the couple remained childless for many years, making the promise of a great nation....well, impossible. In her desperation, Sarah insisted that her husband Abraham have a child with her slave, Hagar. That child was a boy named Ishmael. The pregnancy obviously provoked harsh feelings between Sarah and Hagar. At one point, Hagar runs away while pregnant, and is visited by an angel of the Lord. Now, in the Bible, we know that is an important thing when a pregnant woman is visited by an angel of the Lord. It means that the expected child is special in some way. In Genesis 16, the angel of the Lord tells Hagar to return to Abraham and Sarah's family, and name her son Ishmael, or "God hears."

Later, Sarah gives birth to Isaac. In today's scripture, several years after both boys are born, Sarah gets jealous of Hagar and Ishmael, and makes Abraham expel them from their home—basically Hagar and her son become homeless and helpless.

I would like for you to close your eyes for a minute and imagine with me. Imagine that you are sitting on sand, grainy, rough sand that shifts under you every time you move. Imagine that it is very hot, and you are in a sandy place with no trees, no water, only a few scrubby bushes about 2 or 3 feet high. No signs of life are around you except a few bugs scuttling across the sand. And the sun is beating down on you relentlessly. And you have drunk your last bit of water, and you have eaten the last morsel of bread given to you by your family, and you can

think of no way to find more water or food, and you look at your young child, perhaps three years old, sitting under a bush a few yards away, and he is hungry and thirsty, and you are just sure both of you are going to die.

And surely, you, along with me, are crying out, “Why, God, why?” We are outraged that Abraham would listen to Sarah and send Hagar out into the wilderness with her young son. And we are perhaps more outraged that Sarah, who had begged—begged—Abraham to have a child with Haagar in the first place would have the audacity to tell Abraham to kick them out of the house. It seems an unnecessary, unjust action that tears at our hearts. They had done nothing to deserve it, Haagar and Ishmael—and they are cast into the wilderness, presumably to die.

But they don’t die. God rescues them. And Ishmael becomes an ancestor of Muhammad, Islam’s greatest prophet. Without Ishmael, there is no Muhammad. Ishmael is a prophet in the Muslim faith, and Muhammad is the Last Prophet who received the Qur’an, the holy book of the Muslim faith.

So, the origins of Islam and Christianity are tied together. Why is it, then, that we so often struggle to understand one another? Perhaps, as Philip Wogaman and others suggest, it is because we have a tendency to compare the best of our faith with the worst of Islamic faith. When we think of Islam, we think of 9-11 or the Taliban or other extreme examples of this faith, and we compare it to the faith we practice, arguably one of the better examples of Christianity. But, there are also some extreme examples of Christianity. Think about the medieval Crusades, genocides reported in the Old Testament, and even images from Revelation where the enemies of God will be slaughtered.<sup>1</sup>

The best place to begin understanding what we might learn from Islam is with the best in both faiths. To begin that conversation, take a look at this Amazon Prime commercial from 2016, featuring a priest or pastor from the Christian tradition and an imam, a Muslim religious leader.

(Priest and Imam Video)

I have to thank my daughter Kate for showing me that commercial a few weeks ago when we were talking about this worship series. Certainly both religious leaders have in common some work out knees! But that brings me to one of the things I admire most about Islam, its devotion to spiritual disciplines through the five pillars of the faith. What you saw the imam doing was one of the five daily prayers that Muslims practice—one of the five pillars. The five pillars are:

1. “To affirm that there is no god but God, and Muhammad is his messenger”

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<sup>1</sup> Wogaman, J. Phillip, *What Christians Can Learn from Other Religions*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2014.

2. To fast during the daylight hours throughout the month of Ramadan—Ramadan marks the first revelation of the Qur'an to Muhammad.
3. To pray at five specified times each day.
4. To give alms (or gifts) to the needy.
5. If possible to go on a once-in-a-lifetime pilgrimage to the sanctuary in Mecca that is believed to have been built by Abraham.

These five pillars may sound a bit strange to our ears, but they involve things that should sound familiar—

1. belief in one God;
2. marking sacred times with different life patterns—think about how Christians are encouraged to practice Lenten disciplines;
3. Spend time with God daily.
4. Give to the poor.
5. Pilgrimage—remember from our Pilgrim People study last fall that a pilgrimage is a holy journey.

The difference is, a practicing Muslim places much more value than the average practicing Christian on these spiritual disciplines. Yet, we know that the more we practice our faith—the more we worship, the more we spend time talking and listening to God, the more generous we are, the more we share our faith—the more we do these things, the more deeply we are able to be in touch with the Holy Spirit's presence in our lives and in our church.

Perhaps this is what Christians like us—mainline Protestants in America—can learn from our Muslim brothers and sisters—spiritual disciplines are a rich way of practicing our faith and allowing us to draw closer to God. I invite you to join me this week in thinking about how you might re-orient your life more around a spiritual discipline. I'll be diving deep—this week I will be doing a spiritual formation retreat based on the Benedictine pattern of daily prayer, morning and evening worship, and keeping a Great Silence from night prayers until morning prayers. I'll let you know how it goes next week—I'm both excited for the time with God and a little anxious. So, if I'm going all out, surely you can take a moment to think about deepening a small part of your spiritual discipline. Perhaps you can make a commitment to being in worship weekly, or to reading one Psalm each day, or to give \$10 more a week to the church. But let us learn this from our Muslim brothers and sisters: the way we order our lives as people of faith matters. Christianity is not something we do on the side, like the Rotary Club or our Book Club—it is a way of life to which we commit ourselves. And Christ is always inviting us to deepen our commitment to being a part of his body, the church.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.