

Respecting Ramadan
Genesis 15:1-6, 16:1-15
September 23, 2007

If you are a newcomer to our congregation or if you've been away the past few Sundays, you are probably wondering why a Christian church is offering a message titled, "Respecting Ramadan." This month marks a rare convergence of sacred holidays in several major world religions. For Jews it is the month of Tishri when they celebrate four major festivals. Muslims mark the month of Ramadan. Roman Catholic Christians will celebrate the Feast of St. Francis on October 4 and Protestant Christians will celebrate World Communion Sunday on October 7. This season is called the Holy Convergence. The timing of all these events at the same time will not happen again for another thirty-some years. That is why I seized this time to lift up the religious traditions of some of our cousins, for Jews, Christians, and Muslims all trace our spiritual ancestry to Abraham.

We do this in the spirit of our Christian Lord, Jesus, who in the Sermon on the Mount, offers what is known as the Golden Rule: "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets." My hope is that others would study the Christian faith and tradition before making judgments. Likewise, I must study the faith and traditions of others, seeking to understand whence they come, before I cast judgment. Of course, there are other approaches to the various religious traditions.

In a *Peanuts* comic strip, Linus listens intently as his big sister Lucy boasts about her religious faith and her potential as an evangelist. Lucy says to Linus, "I could be a terrific evangelist. Do you know that kid who sits behind me in school? I convinced him that my religion is better than his religion."

Linus asks: "How did you do that?"

Lucy replies: "I hit him with my lunch box."

As Lucy illustrates, much conflict, war, and violence in our world is perpetuated by religious differences and misunderstandings. As Christians we are called to be peace makers. In biblical terms, peace is not simply the absence of violence and war, but rather a state of shalom, justice, and well-being. As followers of Jesus, we are called to make peace with one another. I believe that an important step in this effort is learning about other religions, understanding their history, their traditions, their key teachings, and respecting the truth that is revealed through them. It is a way that we can create greater harmony and peace in our community. It is in the spirit of creating peace that I share these messages.

I do not claim to be an expert in this area. Many of you know more about world religions than I; many of you have lived and traveled in countries where Islam is the predominant faith. I share with you mostly from what I have read, and out of personal experience with a Muslim family who lived in our neighborhood in Merced. We had several conversations following the Sept. 11 attacks and their imam spoke to our congregation. There is much more than can be covered in 15-20 minutes. I offer a brief overview of Islam and information about the month of Ramadan which the Muslims are now observing.

The word "Islam" comes from the Arabic language and means "submission to God" or "total commitment to the authority and power of God." A Muslim is a person

who belongs to the religion of Islam. The word Muslim means “one who is submitted to God, wholly committed to the divine power and authority.” Within both words is the Arabic root *s-l-m*, which means “peace.” In its fullness the word Islam refers to “the peace that comes when one fully submits to God.”

Islam began in the large Arabian city of Mecca, near the Red Sea. The Arabs worshiped many gods and Mecca was the site of one of their most revered sanctuaries called the Ka’ba. Muhammad was born in Mecca about the year 570 CE. Around the age of forty, he experienced revelations in the form of a voice and a vision. He shared the short messages of these revelations with his family and close friends. The Prophet proclaimed Allah, the Arabic name for God, as the Creator, the source of life. The proper human attitude toward Allah is to be constant gratitude for all of the good things of life. One way to demonstrate faith and gratitude to God is to give of one’s resources to help the needy. As Jesus experienced, Muhammad’s call to socially responsible behavior based on faith in a living, Creator God clashed with the priorities of the dominant culture.

In the year 622 CE the center of Muslim activity moved from Mecca to the city later known as Medina. By 631 much of the Arabian peninsula had been united under Islam. The man known to Muslims as the last and greatest of the Prophets of God, Muhammad, died in 632 at the age of 62.

The Qur’an is the book containing the messages recited by Muhammad to his followers. The word literally means “recitation.” Muslims feel that the essence of the Qur’an can only be expressed in Arabic; no translation is adequate. The book is divided into 114 chapters called suras. Every sura except Sura 9 begins with the prayer of invocation printed on our program: “In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate.”

Muslims tend to focus on the duties and believers and creating a good life for the community more than on doctrinal discussion. The duties of worship are known as the five pillars of Islam. The first pillar is confession of faith, which includes confession of belief in God and the messenger of God, Muhammad. This direct statement strongly rejects false gods and affirms the exclusive place of the one God. The statement known as “The Witness” is recited like this: “I witness that there is no deity except God, and I witness that Muhammad is the messenger of God.” Faithful Muslims repeat this testimony several times each day of their lives. It provides a stabilizing orientation for all their activities.

The second pillar of Islam is prayer. The religious law sets five times each day when they should devote a few minutes to the praise and adoration of God. Believers prepare thoughtfully prepare themselves for prayer through ceremonial washing of the face and limbs. It is essential to be clean, both outwardly and inwardly, before going to God in prayer. The call to prayer is often heard from the mosque in areas heavily populated by Muslims. The words may vary, but generally the call to prayer contains phrases such as, “God is great!” “I witness that there is no deity except God.” “Come to prayer.” “Come to the good life.” “Prayer is better than sleep.” In addition to the individual daily prayer, Muslims gather on Fridays at the mosque during the noon prayer time for communal worship and a sermon.

The third pillar is contribution to charity. The possession of wealth involves the responsibility to use it unselfishly. Muslims are required to annually contribute about two

and a half percent of the value of their wealth to care for the poor and needy. This is not considered a tax, but rather an act of worship.

The fourth pillar is fasting during the month of Ramadan. Muslims abstain from eating and drinking during the daylight hours of the month. Believers offer additional prayers and participate in special ceremonies at the mosque. The fast is considered pleasing to God. In addition to abstaining from food and drink, they refrain from forbidden words and deeds. The emphasis is on the discipline of character that fasting encourages.

Some Muslims affirm that they never feel better, physically and mentally, than during the month of Ramadan. Others emphasize that it helps a believer to concentrate on the relentless struggle against the baser tendencies of human nature. For some fasting symbolizes the willingness of Muslims to surrender to the will of God. Ramadan is one of the means whereby a Muslim communes with God and enters into the deep meaning of the divine message to humankind.

During Ramadan they typically arise early for a meal before the break of day. At sunset food is taken almost immediately. Later a more bountiful meal is served, often with fellow believers, entertainment and exercises of religious devotion.

During the month two great historical events are commemorated. First is the beginning of the revelation of the Qur'an to Muhammad. The second event was the military victory at Badr, the first great trial of the new community of believers formed in Medina under Muhammad's leadership.

Muslims believe that fasting during Ramadan will insure the pardon of their sins from one year to the next, provided that their act of fasting is done for God alone. There is no concept of needing to do penance for one's sins through suffering or punishment. Fasting is done as an act of devotion to God, who has ordained it.

The day after Ramadan ends is one of the most important holidays in the Muslim calendar. *'Id al-Fitr* means "The Feast of the Breaking of the Fast." Its significance depends on the period of severe discipline to which the community submitted itself in the previous month. It is a festal of victory and faith. It is a time of relaxation, of hope renewed, of strengthened resolution to do what is right, of good will toward all. Special prayers are said at the mosque, new clothes are worn, food is distributed to the poor, culinary delicacies are enjoyed, gifts are given to children, ties of friendship and kinship are renewed, and enemies are extended reconciliation. The joy and gratitude of the celebration lingers for several days.

The fifth final pillar of Islam is that every Muslim make the journey to Mecca at least once in a lifetime, if financially able. The pilgrimage reinforces the Abrahamic roots of their tradition. The pilgrims dress in white garments of ancient style to remind them of the time of Abraham. They do homage at the Ka'ba, the ancient shrine on the spot where they believe that Abraham built the first House of God. They walk seven times between two hills in the city in memory of Hagar, repudiated by Abraham, who is believed to have run back and forth there in search of water for herself and for her son, Ishmael. They draw water from the well of Zamzam, reputed to be the source of water miraculously provided for the mother and son. People from all over the earth representing all classes and conditions of life unite their voices in the famous cry of worship, meaning, "O God, here I am, at your service." Muslims tend to draw three lessons from the example of Abraham: God will answer the prayers of sincere and faithful worshipers; love of parents and

obedience to them bring God's blessing; and faith in the heart of a believer inspires him or her to sacrifice to God that which is most precious.

These are the five pillars or practices of the Islamic faith: confession of faith, prayer, contribution to charity, fasting for the month of Ramadan, and a pilgrimage to Mecca. Many of these practices have similarities with our Christian tradition. There are even ways in which we can enrich our own practice by claiming some of the intentional discipline of other traditions.

Individuals express their faith traditions in various ways. In every religious tradition, there are those who have strayed from the central core and been abusive in the name of faith. There are significant differences and also similarities between Christianity and Islam. There are risks in generalizing, but in concluding I want to lift up three basic truths that Christians and Muslims share in common.

1. There is only one God, almighty and all-merciful, creator of all things and sustainer of life.
2. When human beings learn of God's power and mercy, or grace, they must respond in a three-fold way, by
 - a. a life of commitment to the divine will and authority;
 - b. a life of gratitude for the gifts of God; and
 - c. a life of responsible action, in worship, charity and acts of righteousness.
3. Life's choices are full of significance, because there will be a final reckoning when all people must give an account of the deeds they have done. Justice will be finally realized.¹

In the spirit of committing our lives fully to God, I share this prayer, which was the first prayer of a Muslim converting to Christianity.

*O God, I am Mustafah the tailor and I work at the shop of Muhammad Ali. The whole day long I sit and pull the needle and the thread through the cloth. O God, you are the needle and I am the thread. I am attached to you and I follow you. When the thread tries to slip away from the needle it becomes tangled and must be cut so that it can be put back in the right place. O God, help me to follow you wherever you may lead me. For I am really only Mustafah the tailor, and I work at the shop of Muhammad Ali on the great square.*²

Recommended Resources on Islam

Ernst, Carl W. *Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

Espisito, John L. *What Everyone Needs to Know About Islam* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002).

Peters, F.E. *The Children of Abraham: Judaism, Christianity, Islam* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2004).

Smith, Huston. *The World's Religions* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991).

Speight, R. Marston. *God is One: The Way of Islam* (New York, NY: Friendship Press, 1989).

¹ R. Marston Speight, *God is One: The Way of Islam* (New York, NY: Friendship Press, 1989), p. 132.

² *The Oxford Book of Prayer*, George Appleton, gen. Ed., New York: Oxford University Press, 1985, p. 88.