

SERMON – 10/25/09

CHRISTIANITY & WORLD RELIGIONS – Islam

September 11, 2001, is a day that will forever be remembered by Americans...

- Along with the tragedies in New York City, Pennsylvania, and at the Pentagon... it was also the day that ISLAM was thrust into the consciousness of mainstream America...
 - “Radical Muslim extremists” we were told, perpetrated these atrocities...
 - And for many Americans, Islam was suddenly equated with terrorism.
- The reality, my brothers and sisters... is that Islam has often been misunderstood, misinterpreted, and misused by small extremist groups from time to time...
 - Just like Christianity has!
 - Plenty has been done over the years “in the name of Jesus,” that we shudder about today... The Crusades, the Spanish Inquisition, Nazi Germany, etc.
 - Recognizing that in no way do those incidents & events exemplify true Christianity!
- On that fateful Tuesday morning in September, 2001... with news of mosques on the mainland being attacked & vandalized...
 - Members of the Oahu Islamic Association were met at their mosque in Manoa by countless numbers of people...
 - But these people of Hawaii hadn’t come to protest that morning...
 - They came to show their support & solidarity...
 - People who were not Islamic... but nevertheless came to ask, “What can we do to help?”
 - Two days later, on Sept. 13th, the Japanese American Citizens League... whose experience during WWII (and the US “internment”

camps) made them especially aware of injustice... issued a statement of support for the Muslims in Hawaii...

- And on Friday, Sept. 14th, in an interfaith prayer service at the State Capitol, Muslim leaders prayed for healing & reconciliation...
- It was the only prayer that was met with applause.
- "We knew right then," said Hakim _____ (Islamic Association President), "that we were going to be okay."

Welcome to the 3rd week in our current sermon series entitled, "CHRISTIANITY & WORLD RELIGIONS"...

- The goal of this series is not to "prove" why Christianity is "right" and everything else is "wrong"...
 - But instead, to better understand where others are coming from...
 - Because there is way too much ignorance & misinformation out there....
 - Especially when it comes to something as deep & meaningful as people's religious beliefs.
- Therefore, I believe today's topic: ISLAM... might very well be one of the most crucial topics for us in this entire series!
 - I need to start like I do every week... and confess that there's no way I could possibly cover every aspect of Islam in the short amount of time we have this morning...
 - This will just be an introduction to this important faith tradition...
 - But I hope (& pray) that God will use it to somehow touch your heart in a new & powerful way today...
 - Let's begin...

Our discussion begins with a man named Mohammed... who lived about 600 years after Jesus...

- He was born & spent much of his life in and around the city of Mecca (which is located in what now is Saudi Arabia)...
 - Mohammad’s early life was cradled in tragedy...
 - His father died a few days before he was born...
 - His mother died when he was six...
 - And his grandfather, who cared for him after his mother’s death, died when he was eight.
 - Thereafter, he was adopted into his uncle’s home.
- Mohammad was a deeply spiritual person... and was influenced early on by the Jews & Christians who lived in his vicinity.
 - In the midst of sleep... during a period of intense prayer... Mohammed began to experience powerful dreams or visions...
 - In them, he was visited by a spiritual being he would later come to know as the angel Gabriel...
 - Mohammad believed that the angel was telling him the direct words of God.
 - We don’t have time to go into the details, but over the course of time, Mohammad gained followers & disciples... and became the people’s political, military & religious leader...
- Mohammed believed in one Supreme Being, referred to in his language as *Allah*...
 - Literally, Allah means “the God.”
 - Not “A” god... for there is only one. THE God.
 - As Rev. Adam Hamilton puts it, this is simply another name of the God of Abraham... the same God Christians & Jews serve.
 - Mohammad taught the people to worship Allah alone... and established the first Islamic state.
 - The word ‘*Islam*’ and the word *Muslim* both have the root meaning of “surrender” or “submission”...
 - In this case, submission/surrender to the Supreme Being... Allah.

- Mohammad taught his followers the content of his visions...
- After his death, these visions were carefully recorded in a book called the *Quran*.
- The word Quran means “reading” or “recitation”...
- (more about that in a moment!)
- In his book, *The World’s Religions*, Huston Smith records this about Mohammad...
 - “(Muslims) see Mohammad as a man who experienced life in exceptional range. Not only was he a shepherd, merchant, hermit, exile, soldier, lawmaker, prophet-priest-king, and mystic... he was also an orphan, for many years the husband of one wife much older than himself, a many times bereaved father, a widower, and finally the husband of many wives, some much younger than himself. In all of these roles he was exemplary. Even so, they never mistake him for the earthly center of their faith. That place is reserved for the bible of Islam, the Quran.”
 - Whenever Muslims speak his name, out of reverence & respect, they always follow by saying, “Peace Be Upon Him.”

Which brings us back to the **Quran**...

- Just 4/5 of the length of the New Testament... the Quran is divided into 114 chapters (or *surahs*)... arranged largely in order of decreasing length.
 - The words of the Quran are in the first-person voice... as though God is speaking & giving instruction directly to the human race.
 - Because the Quran is believed to contain God’s actual words, it is considered to be the final & absolute authority for Islam.
- Muslims believe that the Quran continues the Old & New Testaments... God’s earlier revelations... and presents itself as their culmination:

- “We made a covenant of old with the Children of Israel (and) you have nothing of guidance until you observe the Torah and the Gospel” (Quran 5:70, 68).
- The Quran contains many stories that are identical or similar to stories in the Bible...
- And many of the persons from the Bible are mentioned frequently in the Quran.
- All three Semitic faiths: Christianity, Judaism & Islam... all trace their heritage back to Abraham...
 - Our Jewish brothers & sisters follow the line of Abraham’s son, Isaac...
 - While our Islamic brothers & sisters follow the line of Abraham’s son, Ishmael (which we read earlier today)!
- You might even be surprised to find out that Muslims acknowledge Jesus as a very important prophet, and the Jewish Messiah... even his virgin birth!
 - Whenever they speak the name of Jesus, they also add “Peace Be Upon Him,” just like they do with Mohammed...
 - However, Muslims do not believe Jesus to be the Son of God, nor that he rose from the dead.
- The Quran contains stories of war & violence... just as the Old Testament contains stories of warfare & violence...

In addition to the Quran, Islam is built on **FIVE PILLARS...**

- First... is the belief & confession of faith that there is but **one God**, Allah... and that **Mohammed** is his servant & prophet.
- Second... is the practice of **5 daily prayers**, said at certain intervals each day by every devout Muslim...
 - *Salah* (prayer) is the distinctive mark of a Muslim believer...
 - It gives one at least 5 chances every day to renew one’s covenant with God... as well as to seek God’s guidance over & over...

- I think we have a lot to learn from our Muslim brothers & sisters about persistence in prayer!
- I read a wonderful story this week about one of Mohammed’s crucial events in his life – his renowned “Night Journey to Heaven”...
 - On a certain night in the month of Ramadan, Mohammed was spirited on a wondrous white steed with wings to Jerusalem... and upward through the Seven Heavens... to the very presence of God... who instructed him that Muslims were to pray 50x/day!
 - On his way back to earth, he stopped in the 6th heaven, where he reported the instruction to Moses, who was incredulous.
 - “Fifty times a day?!? You’ve got to be kidding! That will never work. Go back and negotiate.”
 - Mohammad did, and returned with the number reduced to 40, but Moses was not satisfied.
 - “I know these people,” he said. “Go back.”
 - This routine was repeated 4 more times, with the number reduced successively to 30, 20, 10, and then 5. Even this last figure struck Moses as excessive.
 - “Your people are not capable of observing 5 daily prayers,” he said. “I have tested men before your time and have labored most earnestly to prevail over the (sons of) Israel, so go back to your Lord and ask Him to make things lighter for your people.”
 - This time, however, Mohammad refused. “I have asked my Lord till I am ashamed, but now I am satisfied and I submit.”
 - The number remained fixed at five.
- Pillar Three... is the observance of the **required fast** from dawn to sunset throughout the entire month of Ramadan...
- Fourth... is **charity** & the giving of alms...
 - Islam directs 2.5% of one’s income & property should be distributed each year to the poor!

- Known in Arabic as *Zakah*... this is a manifestation of faith that affirms God is the sole owner of everything in the universe... and all we have is just loaned to us by God to be used!
- The final pillar... directs that once during every Muslim's lifetime, as s/he is able... to make a **pilgrimage to Mecca**... in remembrance of Abraham, Ishmael & Hagar.

Two Fridays ago, I had the pleasure of visiting the Muslim Association of Hawaii mosque in Manoa... for their holy day prayer service.

- Friday, by the way, is when Muslims primarily gather for corporate worship.
- This organization was founded by Muslim students over 30 years ago...
 - And currently has about 300-400 worshippers who gather together every Friday...
 - Representing some 30-50 different nationalities from all over the world!
- It is, by the way, the only mosque (house of worship) on the island of Oahu...
 - I was invited to attend the Friday prayer service by the Imam... or spiritual leader of this Muslim community...
 - Dr. Ismail Elshikh has been leading this group since 2003...
 - Though his calling from God began quite young...
 - At age 10, he had memorized the Quran...
 - And has been serving officially as an Imam for 22 years now!
- As I mentioned earlier, all Muslims are required to pray 5x/day...
 - If possible, they are encouraged to come and pray at the mosque... so they can gather together & support one another in the faith...
 - But if that's not possible, they are to pray wherever they can...
 - But every Friday, at 1pm... the community of faith is required to attend services here.
- The outside of the mosque looks just like an older plantation style house...
 - One comes up the front steps... and is invited to take off their shoes...

- (A combination of being in Hawaii, and the “holy ground” of the house of worship, I’m sure!)
- The main worship space is a large open room used for prayer...
- The carpet pattern that you see is an Islamic design... that actually helps the worshippers space apart during prayer...
- (By the way, you’re only seeing a little less than half of the total size of this room here...)
- On one of the side walls, there are some helpful aids for prayer...
 - The first is an analog system of clocks... that show the worshippers which times during that day they are called to prayer...
 - Right next to that, is a digital timepiece... that has not only the date & current time...
 - But also the digital times of each of the 5 prayer moments for that day.
- The actual prayer service itself lasted about 40 minutes...
 - Half of which was the message by the Imam (that day, the topic was “Companionship”)...
 - It ended with a communal prayer... where everyone lined up in rows facing the front, and prayed a series of prayers together...
 - Led by the Imam... but with moments of corporate response, as well...
 - (This picture was taken afterwards... there were over 200 men in this room during the prayer service that day!)
 - Muslims pray standing, bowing & kneeling prostrate...
- Following the service, I had the privilege to spend some time talking with the Imam... and Mr. Hakim Ouansafi, the President of the Muslim Association of Hawaii.
 - They were both so kind & gracious to me... I am grateful for their hospitality.
 - One of the insights they impressed upon me... was that for a Muslim, “worship” is a comprehensive definition that includes almost everything in any individual’s activities!

- Everything one does is worship!

In my research on Islam... I was interested in some of the “human rights” issues that often get talked about when it comes to Islam...

- Let’s begin with **WOMEN**... according to the {www.whyislam.org} brochure, as creations of God, women are accorded spiritual equity with men...
 - They are rewarded for prayer & charitable acts... and likewise held accountable for their actions on earth (good or bad!).
 - Under the laws of Islam, women have the right to own property & business... engage in financial transactions... vote... receive inheritance... obtain an education... and participate in legal/political affairs.
 - The brochure continues, “The fact that Muslim societies do not always accord women all these rights is an example of how human beings can fall short of fully implementing the Divine Will.”
 - At the Friday prayer service, the Imam told me they have two rooms set aside just for women... this is primarily for modesty’s sake... & privacy...
 - So when the “sisters” are bowing & kneeling prostrate, the men aren’t tempted to look at them inappropriately.
- Second, contrary to popular misconceptions... a genuine Islamic state is obligated to not only permit & respect **religious diversity**... but non-Muslims in such a state are allowed to worship in accordance with their own religion.
- Then comes the issue of **LIFE & DEATH**... of killing & murder in Islam...
 - Muslims believe the most basic right of a human being is the right to LIVE!
 - Islam’s position on life is that it is a sacred trust from God.

- No human being is permitted to take the life of another... unless it is for justice, administered by a competent court following due process of law.
- *Jihad* is a word used quite a bit... usually in the context of a justifying the killing of others by radical Muslims.
- But the definition of the word is quite the opposite.
- Jihad means that people are to exercise a degree of excellence so as to achieve the best in all aspects of life.
- It means to struggle against one's evil desires... in attempts to live according to God's ways.
- Then there's the term *infidel*, which also gets tossed around in the media...
 - Usually referring to non-Muslims...
 - But the definition is actually shaded more toward "one who lacks thankfulness" ...
 - (Which puts a different spin on things, don't you think?!)
- Speaking of which, did you know that part of the root of the world ISLAM comes from the word for **peace!**
 - Islam has the reputation in the eyes of many... or at least the God of Islam has... as being violent, full of wrath & ruthless.
 - Huston Smith notes this is a clear misreading...
 - God's compassion & mercy are cited 192 times in the Quran... as against a mere 17 references to his wrath & vengeance.
 - Ali, in his book *Spirit of Islam*, writes that God is "the Holy, the Peaceful, the Faithful, the Guardian over His servants, the Shelterer of the orphan, the Guide of the erring, the Deliverer from every affliction, the Friend of the bereaved, the Consoler of the afflicted; in His hand is good, and He is the generous Lord, the gracious, the Hearer, the Near-at-Hand, the Compassionate, the Merciful, the Very-forgiving, whose love for man is more tender than that of the mother-bird for her young."

Before we close, I should mention a few of the main differences between Christianity & Islam...

- For the Muslim, the Quran is the final authority... the ultimate revelation of God...
 - For the Christian, we believe that Jesus Christ is the final authority... the ultimate revelation of God... God's Living Word.
- For the Muslim, Jesus is a very important prophet...
 - For the Christian, however, we believe Jesus is the Christ... the Son of God... the Savior of the World...
 - Who was crucified, buried... and rose from the dead.
- For the Muslim, the Supreme Being *spoke* to human beings through the Quran...
 - For the Christian, we believe that God *speaks* to human beings through a variety of ways... in God's continuing self-revelation.

In the end, however, committed Muslims are persons who are striving to lead moral lives, in accordance to the will of the Supreme Being...

- Unfortunately, due to both longstanding historical conflicts & world events in contemporary times... Muslims as a group are sometimes distrusted, avoided, & in some cases persecuted for their faith...
 - This is not consistent with the will of God.
- When I was about to leave my visit at the mosque last Friday... I asked the same question I've asked every religious leader in this series...
 - "What is most misunderstood about your faith by those of us outside?"
 - Hakim said quite simply, "The unfairness of associating September 11th with Islam. There is no connection at all. Yes, there were a few Muslims involved... 19 out of the 1.5 billion Muslims in the world."
 - But then he said this, "And all other Muslims in the world consider those 19 as non-Muslim."

- Friends... I believe there's a lot of distance to cover between us and our Islamic brothers & sisters...
 - May God empower, encourage & embolden us to reach out in a spirit of love, grace & peace to them...
 - For that is how Jesus would want us to act, isn't it?
 - Thanks be to God. AMEN.