

“It’s Within Reach: On Devotion to the Kingdom”
Lent 2C (March 17, 2019)
Rev. Dr. David A. Kaden

>>Put a hand on our shoulder and point us in the right direction. Put our hand on someone’s shoulder and let it matter, Amen.<<

In his book *What is Islam?*, Harvard researcher, the late Shahab Ahmed, begins by telling two stories that illustrate the diversity of the Islamic faith.¹ The first story took place at Princeton. “Some years ago,” writes Ahmed, “I attended a dinner at Princeton University where I witnessed a revealing exchange between an eminent European philosopher who was visiting from Cambridge, and a Muslim scholar who was seated next to him. The Muslim colleague was indulging in a glass of wine [alcohol is said to be forbidden in Islamic law]. Evidently troubled by this, the distinguished don [from England] eventually asked his dining companion if he might be so bold as to venture a personal question. ‘Do you consider yourself a Muslim?’” he asked. “‘Yes,’ came the reply. ‘How come, then, you are drinking wine?’ The Muslim colleague smiled gently. ‘My family have been Muslims for a thousand years,’ he said, ‘during which time we have *always* been drinking wine.’ An expression of distress appeared on the learned logician’s pale [face]” Seeing that the British philosopher was puzzled, the Muslim scholar continued, “‘You see,’” he said, “‘we are *Muslim* wine-drinkers.’”

Ahmed’s second story is about an international phone call.² “An Arab friend of mine,” he writes, was engaged to be married to a South Asian man. “The prospective fathers-in-law, who had never met, had to speak to each other by means of an international telephone call to formalize the [marriage]. Neither spoke the other’s native language, both spoke some English - but not especially well - and neither was familiar with the other’s culture. The Arab gentleman was a self-declared agnostic, while the South Asian practiced a semi-observant sort of traditional piety characterized by the expression ‘He says his prayers just often enough to keep his [mother] happy!’ Needless to say,” Ahmed continues, “given this state of mutual foreignness, my friend [who was engaged to be married] was more than a little apprehensive as to how the conversation would unfold. ‘What happened?’ she asked her father as soon as [the phone call] was over, ‘Did you understand each other?’ ‘Of course we understood each other,’ [said her father,] ‘We are both Muslims.’”

After Shahab Ahmed - the teller of these stories - passed away suddenly in 2015, his friend Noah Feldman, Professor of Law at Harvard, penned a remembrance of Ahmed in *The Chicago Tribune*, where he called his friend “the most brilliant and creative scholar of Islam in his generation.”³ Ahmed, he writes, was a “master of ... 15 languages,” and affable enough to be as “comfortable chatting with mujahedeen in Afghanistan (where he [once] played soccer with a pre-terrorist Osama bin Laden) and madrassa teachers in rural Pakistan as he was in the seminar rooms of Princeton and Harvard.” He was educated in a “British boarding school” where he was bullied “for [being] the only Muslim boy,” and then worked his way through some of the world’s most prestigious schools to become a Professor of Islamic Studies at Harvard before dying suddenly. His 600-page magnum opus, *What is Islam?* was published posthumously. In that book, Ahmed probes Islamic history to reveal a

¹ Shahab Ahmed, *What is Islam?: The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 3.

² Ahmed, *What is Islam?*, 4.

³ <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/sns-wp-blm-news-bc-ahmed-appreciate21-20150921-story.html>

rich and diverse religious culture that has evolved over centuries. Like Christianity, Islam is, says Ahmed, a blend of oneness and diversity - of core principles and diverse expressions - as complicated and as beautiful and as multi-colored as the people are who call themselves "Muslims."

Let me share one more story with you about Islam. It pertains to "The Recitation" - the Quran, Islam's sacred text. Its 114 Surahs, or chapters, writes one commentator, "give the impression of human language crushed and splintered under the divine impact." And its words are so beautiful that there are stories in Islamic history of people converting on the spot after hearing the Quran recited aloud. One such story is about Umar ibn al-Khattab. Umar was an expert in Arabic poetry, and had been skeptical of Muhammad until the day he heard the prophet reciting the Quran. Muhammad was not a man of letters; he would, it was said, receive divine words from the angel Gabriel and then dictate them to scribes who would write them down. Muhammad knew the recitation by heart. And so, one day as Muhammad was reciting, Umar crept up in secret to listen. The power of the words worked on Umar's heart; he had never heard anything like in Arabic before. He later said, "'When I heard the Quran, my heart was softened and I wept and Islam entered me.'"⁴

An antidote to hate and white supremacy in our day - not just the hate that percolates in the darkest corners of the internet, but the hate discourses being mainstreamed by elected officials across Europe, Australia, and North America (elected officials who use the language of "invasion" when speaking about immigrants - the same language the shooter in Christchurch used) - an antidote to hate and white supremacy is to turn "others" into human beings: to tell stories about flesh-and-blood Muslims, Muslims with names and families, Muslims who have powerful conversion stories and a deep reverence for their traditions. And as progressive Christians, to gain appreciation for different forms of religious expression in our world, to celebrate the diverse ways in which God's spirit works in our world. To recognize common heritage.

Today's reading from Genesis is part of a cycle of stories at the fountainhead of three monotheistic traditions - Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Our common heritage. Today's story is about Abram, which means in Hebrew "exalted father" before God changed his name to "Abraham," which means "father of a multitude." (Today we'll just call him Abraham.) In Genesis 15, Abraham questions God about the future. "O Lord God," says Abraham, "what will you give me, since I am childless?" The backstory of this question is that earlier in Genesis God made an extraordinary promise to Abraham, promising him that through his descendants all the families of the earth would be blessed. And yet, Abraham and his wife Sarah - now getting on in years - remained childless, calling into question this promised future. How could Abraham and Sarah's descendants bless the families of the earth if they had no biological descendants? There are many features of this story that are remarkable, but one that sticks out for me is the personalization of God. God is having a chat with Abraham, listening to and then patiently answering Abraham's questions, as one friend would with another over coffee. And during this chat, God doubles-down on the promise - that all the families of the earth would be blessed through Abraham's descendants - and God does this by giving Abraham an astronomy lesson. Leading Abraham outside to gaze up at the night sky, God says, "Look toward the heavens, and try to number the stars. That's how many

⁴ Recounted in many places; here taken from Karen Armstrong, *A History of God: The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993), 145-146.

descendants you shall have.” And to further reinforce the certainty of the promise, God caused Abraham to fall into a deep sleep; and, while dreaming, Abraham gathers a bunch of animals and cuts them in two - snout to tail - laying them open like a book. There’s a cultural background to this imagery: in the ancient near east, covenants between two parties would be sealed by cutting animals in this way; and then the parties to the agreement would walk between the parts, symbolically saying to each other, “Make me like these animals if I fail to keep my side of this agreement.” (The Hebrew phrase throughout the Bible for “make a covenant” is literally “to cut a covenant.”) In the Genesis story, it’s God’s spirit - symbolized by smoke and fire - that passes between the animal pieces; it’s God’s way of saying to Abraham in dramatic fashion, “Make me like these animals if I fail to keep my promises to you.”

The stories that immediately follow this one in Genesis are about Abraham fathering two sons - Isaac and Ishmael. Isaac becomes the biological father of Jews and the spiritual father of Christians. Ishmael is remembered in the Quran (19:54) as being both a messenger and a prophet, who brought Abrahamic monotheism to Arabia, and became the father of Islam. God says to Hagar, Ishmael’s mother in Genesis, “I will so greatly multiply your descendants that they cannot be numbered.” Abraham, then, is the father of us all. And in spite of our religious differences, both in practice and belief, Jews, Christians, and Muslims share a common heritage, a common ancestry as part of the Abrahamic family of faith. The Quran even accords a special privilege to Jews and Christians by calling them “People of the Book.”

As I think about this common heritage - as I gain an even greater appreciation of differences across the spectrum of religious expression - it’s just been crushing this week and over the past few years to see how many people there are in our world and in our country who still seem to be so filled with rage, so afraid of difference that they will kill other human beings, or enact policies driven by hate, or marinate themselves in alternate, hate-filled realities. And I want to ask, “Why are you so afraid? Why are you so angry?” Maybe these are some key questions of our time as power relationships shift across the world. But maybe right now is not a time to ask such questions. Maybe now is a time for quiet lament and quiet hope. Lament, like those Psalmists of old who cried out to God “How long?” How long will you look on and seem to do nothing? Lament, like old Jeremiah in the biblical book called “Lamentations,” who sees desolation around him in the wake of extreme violence, and says, “My eyes are spent with weeping; my soul is churning; my heart is poured out in grief.” Lament, and quiet hope. Hope that one day, someday, as the writer of Revelation says, “the kingdoms of this world - the kingdoms of rage and hate and fear of difference - the kingdoms of this world will become the kingdom of God.” A Kingdom, a reign, as writers Brian McLaren and Gareth Higgins wrote this week in their daily Lenten devotional titled, “The End of Violence,” - a kingdom that is, they say, “within reach.” Or, as Jesus puts it in today’s gospel reading, “the kingdom of God is among you - it’s within you.” It’s a kingdom free of hate and violence, a kingdom of peace. A kingdom, a reign of God, that starts small, says Jesus, like a mustard seed, but grows in unexpected ways.

Unexpected ways, like those described by Molly Pascal in an op-ed in this week’s *Washington Post*. Pascal is a member of Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, the site of a hate-filled shooting back in October. She wrote this week after the news in Christchurch.⁵

5

https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/muslims-embraced-us-jews-when-we-were-slain-at-worship-now-we-must-support-them/2019/03/15/f8bc612c-4749-11e9-8aab-95b8d80a1e4f_story.html?utm_term=.e2270dcebb87

“When I saw the news from New Zealand Friday, the cracks in my heart widened. Another act of terrorism. Another act of hate. I know something of what the Christchurch community is going through because less than five months ago, my community went through something similar. . . . On Friday, within hours of waking up, the staff at Tree of Life in Pittsburgh convened. Congregants began calling and emailing each other. We needed to organize. We needed to do something, and not merely to help people in New Zealand, but to counter Islamophobia at home . . . , to reach out not only to the injured communities, but to [our] Islamic neighbors as well. From our own experience,” she continues, “we know that the hours and days that follow will bring intense bewilderment and grief. Yet, after our shooting, there was something that gave us strength. In that time of pain and fear, another story emerged, one of hope and love. [The day after the shooting,] I attended a hastily organized memorial service At one point, the clergy leaders - Muslim, Jewish, Protestant, Catholic, Presbyterian, Hindu - crowded on the stage together. It was a powerful sight of unity. One speech stood out for me more than all the others. Wasiullah Mohamed, the executive director of the Islamic Center of Pittsburgh, took the stage. He announced that the center had begun raising money to pay for funeral expenses for the victims. [They ended up raising hundreds of thousands of dollars.] . . . Mohamed also made a vow: he pledged that the Pittsburgh Muslim community would stand with the Pittsburgh Jewish community. He and members of his community offered to personally stand guard at the doors of local synagogues, if necessary, to allow Jews safe passage to our places of worship and to accompany us if we felt unsafe running our daily errands. I cannot emphasize enough the importance of these words,” writes Pascal. “Muslims offering to protect Jews? To me, there could be no greater olive branch, no more profound promise of peace. Six days later,” she concludes, “on a Friday evening, the Tree of Life congregation gathered privately in . . . a nearby synagogue, for the first service of Shabbat. As I waited for the service to begin, people I didn’t know filed in. Soon, the row behind me held a half-dozen strangers, the women in traditional abaya and hijab. I looked around and saw many Muslim families like them joining the crowd. When our congregation rose to speak the mourner’s Kaddish, they rose with us. Afterward, we thanked them. They offered us their condolences and invited us to attend a service at the Islamic Center. Salaam, I said. Shalom, they said. . . . We [the Tree of Life synagogue] promise,” she writes, that “we will continue to work with [our Muslim siblings in faith] in our common fight for the right of people of any faith to worship peacefully.”

. . . In the midst of our laments and bewilderment, I think a story such as this can offer quiet hope: that the kingdom Jesus talked about - the kingdom he said was among us and within us - maybe such a story is about how the kingdom of peace is within reach. Amen.