

“Questions People Ask: Islam” Genesis 21:9-20

We are in our fourth week of this sermon series: Christianity and our World Religions. So far we've explored Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism and this week we take a look at Islam.

Islam has been at the center of our religious as well as political conversations for a variety of reasons. As we begin, I acknowledge the deep tensions that exist in our world around Islamic fundamentalists between Palestinians & Israel. And I am horrified by the fanatical acts of hatred poured out to others in the world by “terrorists”....

BUT – I also have faith and belief in Peace and a peaceful world... I believe that our Islamic brothers and sisters have been cast into a stereotypical mold, that we can't (or don't) truly understand the centrality of their faith. Like all religions (Christians included), there are always radical minority groups on the fringes who project misguided images of the entire faith – and project extreme hatred....and create death and destruction. So, I believe before we do anything else – that it's important for us to learn about the truth of the faith of our Islamic friends and come to understand all our

world religions for our own benefit and growth as Christians – and certainly we need to understand Islam better because of the implications with terrorism, world events, and the cultural clashes between our two faiths.

In today's message I want to touch at a high level the origins of Islam and some of their beliefs and values. I want to talk about where we as Christians see some similarities and then conclude this message by talking about where we differ and disagree.

First, a clearer definition of the term that most of us have become accustomed to hearing with our Islamic brothers and sisters... The term Jihad has been misused by many in the Islamic community and misunderstood by many of us in the Western Christian Culture...

The Quran does call for "jihad" as a military struggle on behalf of Islam. But the Quran also refers to jihad as an internal, individual, spiritual struggle toward self-improvement, moral cleansing and intellectual effort. It is said that Prophet Muhammad considered the armed-struggle version of holy war "the little jihad," but considered the spiritual, individual version of holy war--the war within oneself--as "the great jihad."

Islam is the youngest of the five major world religions. The word Islam derives from **salam** which means primarily peace, but it also means surrender. In its full connotation it is the peace that comes from surrendering one's life to God. At the core of the Islamic faith is PEACE. Those who adhere to Islam are known as Muslims.

When we are asked how Islam came about, the outsider looks to the socio-religious events of Mohammed's day in Arabia for the answer, but the Muslim's answer begins, not with sixth century Arabia, but with God. "In the beginning God..." our Bible tells us. The Qur'an agrees while using the word *Allah*, which means literally, "the God". Not a god, for there is only one. The God.

God created the world and humanity. The name of the first man was Adam. Through the descendants of Adam and Eve came Noah, who had a son named Shem from which the word Semite is derived.

The descendants of Shem led to Abraham who married Sarah. Sarah had no son and she urged Abraham to take Hagar, one of their slaves, and have a son together. Hagar gave Abraham a son, whom he named

Ishmael. But in time Sarah grew pregnant and had a son as well – as had been promised to Sarah and Abraham by God. This boy was named Isaac. Sarah, after she had her son, then urged Abraham to banish Ishmael and Hagar from the tribe.

Now, up to this point the Qur'an follows the Bible, but here we begin to see a divergence of the two descendants of Abraham. According to the Qur'an, Ishmael went to the place where Mecca was to rise up. His descendants, flourishing in Arabia, became known as Muslims – followers of Mohammed – whereas the descendants of Isaac, who remained in Palestine, gave rise to the Hebrews who were later called Jews.

Following Ishmael's line in Arabia we eventually come to the sixth century AD and Mohammed. Mohammed lived from AD 570 to 632 (62 years) and was born in Mecca and is the founder of the Islamic faith.

Mohammed's early life was one of tragedy. His father died just before his birth and his mother died when he was six years old. His grandfather died shortly after Mohammed came live with him and he ended up being

raised by an uncle. His family was respected and respectable, but poor. Mohammed never learned to read or write. As he grew up he learned the trading business with traders who came into Mecca – the very center of commerce in that day. Great caravans would cross the Arabian Desert to end up in Mecca.

Not only was Mecca a center of commerce, but it was also the center of pagan worship. There was a shrine in the center of the city called the **Ka' bah** where over 360 deities were worshiped. Muslims believe that Abraham built the shrine. The Ka' bah is a cube roughly 40 feet high by 40 feet wide and 30 feet deep.

Tribal polytheism was the dominant religion in Mecca, however there were two groups of people who lived a life set apart from this: Christians and Jews. This was a very small number of Mecca's population. Mohammed found himself drawn to these people. He was attracted to their scripture and stories and the kind of faith they professed. For them, there was no other god, only the one God – called Allah in Arabic.

Mohammed was a man of deep spirituality, an honest man who kept his word. Many of those in the trading business came to trust him and held him in high esteem. He married at the age of 25 to a woman fifteen years older – Khadija. Together they had six children – four girls and two boys. The two boys would die in infancy.

Like the Jews and Christians Mohammed came to believe there was only one true God. He was troubled by the polytheism and many idols in Mecca and he began to retreat to a cave on the mountainside for prayer and meditation. Around the age of forty, while in this cave, he fell asleep during prayer time and had a dream. He dreamed an angel of God appeared before him – an angel he would later know as Gabriel – who would command him to “Proclaim” Mohammed would protest saying he wasn’t a proclaimer, but the angel persisted.

Mohammed woke up from this dream and went running back to the city where he found his wife and said, I’ve either seen a demon or I’ve seen an angel, or I’m losing my mind. I don’t know which!”

Over the next twenty-three years Mohammed would continue to have these dreams and he began to “proclaim” speaking to the people of Mecca telling them, *“A law says, there is no other God. Stop worshipping the pagan idols. Turn to God and repent of your ways or else you’ll face the judgment.”*

At first Mohammed had a small following. He would come down from the mountain and proclaim what he had learned in his visions and the believers would write down these words. Eventually, these writings became what we know of today as the Qur’an.

The Meccans – the people of Mecca – grew not to like Mohammed because of his preaching against idol worship and their lifestyle. A city two hundred miles to the north contacted Mohammed and asked him to come there – they had heard about his leadership skills and wanted him to become one of their rulers. In the summer of 622 Mohammed and his followers left Mecca and moved to Medina. Jerusalem -

Mohammed established himself there and became a judge for the city, a political ruler, and he led a small army as well. The visions for

Mohammed changed a bit as Gabriel began to tell him how God wanted society ordered, what constituted right from wrong, and how inheritances should be ordered. In time Mohammed would go back and defeat the army in Mecca and would consolidate power between the two cities.

When he returned to Mecca he destroyed the idols at the Ka'bah and consecrated the ancient shrine to the worship of Allah. Three years later, at the age of 62, Mohammed died.

His followers combined all the sayings he had spoken into the book we know of as the Qur'an. From that time on Islam began to spread. I recently read on the CNN website that the Islam population 20 years ago was at 1.1 billion of the world's population. It is estimated that 20 years from now the Islam population will double in size.

Some of the basic beliefs Islam has are the same as our beliefs as Christians.

Both Christians and Islamists believe in and serve One God. *Allah* is the word used in Arabic, similar to the word *Dios* used by the Spanish people. Mohammed was looking at the God of Abraham, the same God

Christians and Jews serve. When we look at the Qur'an (29:46) we hear these words:

[29:46] Do not argue with the people of the scripture (Jews, Christians, and Muslims) except in the nicest possible manner - unless they transgress - and say, "We believe in what was revealed to us and in what was revealed to you, and our god and your god is one and the same; to Him we are submitters."

Now he speaks of the Revelation that comes down to us and in Islam it is believed that the words which constitute this Qur'an, this book of recitations, are the very words of God spoken to Mohammed by the Angel Gabriel.

Everything that Muslims believe springs from this book. The Qur'an is to Islam what Jesus is to Christianity: It is thought to be God's definite and final revelation. The difference between the Qur'an and the Bible however are this. The Qur'an is written in first person – as if God were speaking directly to Mohammed or all of humanity.

The Bible is, as Christians believe, written by those who were inspired by God. The Bible contains stories, words, poems, and letters about God.

When you lay the two books down side-by-side you'll see similar stories of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jonah, Jesus and John. One entire chapter of the Qur'an tells of Mary the mother of Jesus. Where the two differ a Muslim will say that the Qur'an is correct. For them the Qur'an is God's definitive word.

Within the belief and faith of Islam is what is known as the Five Pillars of Faith. These are not only teachings, but are the cornerstone of being a Muslim.

Belief: Confessing ones faith is perhaps the one most single important part of being a Muslim. There is a saying which professes this faith and you might hear a Muslim saying this at anytime throughout the day, "There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is his prophet."

Prayer: Five times a day Muslims kneel and face Mecca to pray.

Fasting: Once a year during Ramadan, Muslims fast for an entire month dawn to dusk.

Charity: Muslims pay 2.5% of all they own once each year. This goes directly to the poor or to charities.

Pilgrimage: Muslim men are required at least once in their life time to make a pilgrimage to Mecca where they visit the Ka'bah in remembrance of Abraham, Ishmael and Hagar.

There are many areas that show similarity between our faiths. We share some of the same deep convictions. We find the Muslim lives and faith can serve as inspiration to us... **The very name Islam means peace and submission to God;** they pray daily; and give to the poor; nevertheless there are significant differences between our faiths. I want to mention the biggest difference I've noticed here.

The biggest difference deals with the authority of the Qur'an and how Jesus is viewed. Muslims view the Qur'an as the actual words of God. In some places we find the Qur'an and our Bible in agreement and in others we disagree. The Qur'an teaches that Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary, was a miracle worker and was the Jewish Messiah, but that Jesus was never crucified. He was taken directly to heaven while another man was crucified in his place. The Qur'an states Jesus was a prophet, but not the

son of God – he was not divine. He was not resurrected to give us hope and life. He was only a prophet and teacher. This is quite different from what our scripture tells us. Even though we remember that Mohammed received his visions hundreds of years after Jesus, we take the New Testament as our gospel – we know of God through Jesus Christ and what does not agree with the New Testament we set aside.

There is much we can learn from our Islam brothers and sisters – especially from the practice of their faith in the Five Pillars of Faith. Their prayer life is phenomenal, their giving to the poor is wonderful. Their commitment to God is great. And while the difference for us centers around Jesus the Christ – I do wonder at times how we would share our faith with a Muslim family? Would we argue or judge or avoid them altogether? Or would we reach out and welcome all in love and compassion? The Apostle Paul reminds us, “*We are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us.*”

What kind of ambassadors will we be?