



## **Reading**

On the "Night of Power" the prophet Mohammad was forty years old and he had been meditating in a cave on Mount Hira for six months. Tired, he went to sleep for the night. That night a storm came into the desert over the cave where Mohammad was sleeping. He was sleeping or in a trance when he heard a voice that said "Read!" Mohammad answered that he had never learned to read as a boy. Twice more for a total of three times the voice commanded Mohammad to read.

Mohammad again answered that he could not read and finally asked, "What can I read?" The Voice boomed, "Read in the name of your Lord, the Creator, Who created man from a clot of blood! Read! Your Lord is most merciful, For he has taught men by the pen And revealed the mysteries to them!"\* Then Mohammad was given a scroll that he opened and read. When he awoke in the morning he remembered the words that were written on the scroll even though he had never been able to read before. The words said "as though written upon his heart".

Mohammad was terrified. He ran out of the cave into the morning desert. He thought that he might be possessed. He remembered the vision that he had as a child and still didn't know what that meant. He even thought about killing himself. Then he heard a voice that seemed to come from all directions at once. It said "O Mohammad! You are Allah's messenger, and I am Gabriel!" He looked up and saw an angel in the sky. He tried to turn away but he saw the angel wherever he looked. Finally the angel disappeared and he ran back to Mecca to tell his wife what had happened. He was now the prophet of Islam. After telling the whole story to his wife Khadija she assured him that he was not going mad and that all was well.

(\* <http://www.angelfire.com/ca/beekeeper/Islam.html>)

## **Sermon**

This week was our monthly board meeting, and we began the meeting with a deep discussion about what we're here for. This is a really important thing for us to hold in front of us as we discern the next steps for our future. We are quickly running out of room in this facility. In fact, we frequently run out of parking, which is as bad as running out of seats in the sanctuary, which we actually thought would happen first. So it's really important to know why we want to relocate. If it's simply about facts and figures, it's not enough. You don't grow simply for the sake of growth. You grow because you really stand for something, for the transformation that is possible in this faith tradition. As we explore Islam today, I want us to hold onto that. What are we here for? What is our special offering to the world?

When Mohammad came to after the Night of Power, he was filled with revulsion. This was not his first experience of being overtaken. When he was five years old, he fell to the ground and received this vision: two angels descended onto him, cut open his stomach and stirred up his insides. When his foster parents found out, they got scared and took him back to his mother. It wasn't a happy reunion. Her husband had died while she was pregnant with Mohammad, then she became ill and couldn't care for him, so she sent him away to foster parents. His mother advised them not to pay attention when these convulsions happened, they were harmless, but the foster parents weren't convinced. They left Muhammad with his mother, who died. Then he went to his grandfather, who also died. Finally, he ended up with an uncle. Clearly, his vision had cost him plenty. It wasn't until he married his wife that he truly had a home that he felt he could never lose, until it happened to him again, on the Night of Power.

In his world, early 600s Arabia, those who possessed by spirits were not trusted. They were the lowest of the low, bearers of bad news and bad luck. So, when he had his second vision, he feared that all would be lost - his family, his reputation, his self-esteem. As he quaked in the desert, wondering what had happened to him, he even considered suicide. Instead, he crept home to his wife Khadija and threw himself onto her lap, begging her to protect him. This is what Khadija said, "Muhammad, you are kind and considerate towards your people. You help the poor and forlorn and bear their burdens. You honor the guest and go to the assistance of those in distress. This cannot be a curse, but let's make sure. Let's go visit my cousin and see what he has to say."

This was no ordinary cousin. This was Waraqa ibn Nawfal, a Christian who was learned in the Scriptures, and when Muhammad told him his story, the cousin declared that this was no possession by evil spirits. Muhammad had been visited by the angel Gabriel, the messenger of the God that had come down to Moses on Mount Sinai, the messenger of the God that sent Jesus to bring a new revelation. Muhammad had been chosen to bring the completion of God's revelation to the world.

Today's sermon is the next step in our exploration of world religions. We started with Judaism, exploring how the creation of the Torah was connected to the Jewish people's need to rebuild themselves after years in exile. Then we looked at how the early followers of Jesus understood his teachings as the fulfillment of what had been promised in the Jewish Scriptures. Today we look at Islam, which sees itself as the fulfillment of both Judaism and Christianity, and I need to tell you that this has been by far the most challenging sermon in this series to write because it is very difficult to speak of Islam in any kind of neutral way in this time and this place. First of all, I like humor in sermons, but I found any attempt at humor strained and awkward. There isn't a lot of humor around Islam, and besides, most of the jokes I found online were from non-Islamic people ridiculing the tradition.

A few weeks ago I saw a question posted on one of my friend's Facebook pages. The question seemed open minded. "Can Islam be a religion of peace?" Instead, it became a venue for misinformation and judgment. A lot of people had no qualms about answering no, and pointing to examples of human rights abuses perpetrated by Muslims, seeing in those examples a deeper truth about Islam as a whole. I felt uncomfortable with the generalizations that followed. A whole religion was being defined by its most extreme edge.

Then, I had the hardest time finding a reading, nothing seemed right or sufficient. I posted to my ministers list serve what I wanted to do. I was doing a sermon on Islam for my world religions series, telling the story of Muhammad's first moment of revelation, and coming up empty handed. Could someone help me? It became clear that few of us were familiar with Islamic literature, beyond the poet Rumi and a few verses from the Quran. One colleague even told me that the term "world religions" was a western concept that could be seen as simplistic and oppressive by non-western people. Talk about a crisis of confidence! Did I even have the right to do a sermon on Islam?

The closer I came to today, the more uncertainty I felt. I wanted to represent Islam in a truthful way, in a respectful way. I wanted to affirm that there isn't only one way to be Muslim. I didn't want to pretend to be an authority on Islam. But as a Unitarian Universalist, I believe that there is truth and wisdom in every faith tradition, and what I've been trying to hold onto is that the tension I'm feeling is not without meaning. There is growth in that tension. There is truth in the tension. Theories of human development have shown us that it is the things we struggle with that have a wisdom we are in need of and may be resisting. This country is struggling with how to understand Islam and I think that struggle is more about us than about a faith tradition that most of us are pretty ignorant about.

So I want to tell you what I've been drawn to in my struggle to figure out what to bring you this morning. What do we need in this time and this place from the story of a man who 1500 years ago believed that the angel Gabriel came to him and told him he was the Prophet of the one God?

Let me tell you what was going on in Muhammad's world. His world was becoming unglued. For as long as anyone could remember, the center of life had been the tribe. Life in the desert was brutal, and everyone depended on each other for survival. The tribe had to come before the individual, or the survival of the whole tribe was threatened. In Muhammad's lifetime, this was coming to an end. Trade had come to his part of the world. His tribe, the Quraysh, had left nomadic life for the trading business. They shifted from subsistence living in the desert to a settled life in the city of Mecca. To put it bluntly, they got rich. The Quraysh began to

see themselves as masters of their own fate and developed a cult of self-sufficiency where each person saw themselves as self-made and not needing anyone else. This change caused a lot of anxiety. What would happen when people put themselves in the center rather than the tribe? Who was going to take care of the poor? Who was going to take care of the elderly and the children and the widows? Muhammad saw his tribe putting wealth and material possessions ahead of relationships and family. They were making their success into God. They were making themselves into God.

Does this sound familiar?

There were many who said that the answer was to go back to living in the desert. Give up the city, give up trade, give up the wealth, and go back to those old tribal values. But as we know all too well, you can't go backwards. You can't stop change. It would take more than the old values to bring people back from the greed and self-centeredness that was tearing Mecca apart because the old values reflected a way of life that didn't exist anymore. It would take something bigger to respond to the cult of selfishness.

When Muhammad stumbled into Khadija's arms, she was the first to understand that he had been chosen to bear the message that their changing world needed. The message was remarkably simple. You can never be the center. Wealth and success and material possessions can never be the center. Your pride can never be the center. Enter into jihad, which is the inner holy war with your selfishness and pride, which can feel like an angel stirring up your insides, but in that struggle is freedom, joy and unity with all that is.

Even the way that Muhammad was brought into prophethood challenged the cult of self as center. Muhammad was never asked if he wanted to be a prophet. In the Jewish book of Exodus, when God came to Moses in the burning bush and said he was going to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, Moses argued with God and God actually modified his plan to address Moses' insecurities. Muhammad was not given this option. The revelations that came to him over the next 23 years happened at any time and he had no control over what was said. He was purely the vessel and he could either fight against his fate or accept it, but that fate would not change. This was a profound challenge to the individualism emerging in Mecca. You better not have any sense of attachment to your life or the things you own or your status, because they meant nothing. Are you taking care of the weak and the hungry? You stand with Allah by submitting your whole being to the truth that you are a vessel for mercy, compassion and generosity.

As Unitarian Universalists we have many understandings of the divine, and for some of us, the concept of a divine presence has no meaning at all. But there is truth here for us. There is a tremendous challenge for us in

Islam because we have often made individualism and self-actualization into our religion. We've taken our first principle, "the inherent worth and dignity of every person" and made it into a creed rather than a guiding principle that must be balanced with all the others.

It is not just terrorism that has made the western world distrustful of Islam. Islamic theology is a challenge to western values that idolize individual freedom. We are just beginning to see what the idolatry of the individual has cost us. Americans are the loneliest people in the world. We have the highest poverty rates, illiteracy rates, and infant mortality rates in the west. We are fundamentally out of balance. Look at the social tension in our society - isolated pockets of angry dislocated people pushing against each other trying to feel like they matter. There is just as much spiritual and physical danger in idolizing ourselves as there is in erasing ourselves for the whole. Islamic theology says this is what happens when your tribe becomes so small that the only one left in it is you.

I keep thinking about Muhammad crawling into his wife's arms, terrified that he was lost. I think that's what we fear will happen if we are no longer the center, that we will be erased, that our lives will have no meaning, that there's a knife in our stomach. But Muhammad wasn't lost. He found himself in a deeper way than he could have imagined, brought back into compassion and life through the loving arms of a wife and the God he came to believe in and dedicate his life to.

Every faith tradition, in its truest form, engages this journey. Every faith tradition, including ours, is about internalizing the truth that we find ourselves by losing ourselves. Transformation is about abandoning ourselves to compassion, mercy, and joy, and this I think is what we hold on to as we discuss our future. Unitarian Universalism is a vessel through which we show that you are not lost when you live a life of service, when you dedicate your whole being to a tribe that is bigger than we can imagine. In fact, that is when we find ourselves in the transforming arms of compassion and mercy and joy.

May it be so. Amen.