

“MASSACRE AT KARBALA: THE BIRTH OF SHIA ISLAM”

A Sermon offered by Rev. Tim Kutzmark

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Unitarian Universalist Church of Reading

*I hear a distant song: it fills the air.
I hear it, deep and strong, rise up in prayer:
O Life, we are many; help us to be one.*
—Rutter, adapted

MASSACRE IN KARBALA – A SERMON IN EIGHT PARTS

Part One: The Beginning

His name was Muhammad. He was born in the year 571 in the region we now call Saudi Arabia. Muhammad was soon an orphan. His father died before his birth; his mother died when he was six years old. Muhammad’s uncle took him in, and he worked as a shepherd boy to earn his keep. As a teenager he was restless. He longed to travel; he longed for the wealth he did not know as a child. He became an apprentice in the caravan business, traveling throughout the Arab world. He learned the trade well. At twenty-five years of age, a wealthy older widow from Mecca named Khadija hired him. Khadija was pleased with his work. Muhammad soon became her husband.

But Muhammad was more than a businessman. He possessed a deep social conscience that saw violence, corruption, abuse, and injustice all around him. Arab tribes continually fought with each other in endless cycles of revenge and retribution. The wealthy ignored the poor and vulnerable. Orphans, widows, and immigrants were left to fend for themselves. Fathers and husbands treated women like property. Daughters had no inheritance rights. Infant girls were often buried alive, with no value given to their life.

Part Two: The Miracle

Disheartened, Muhammad would often flee the corrupt city of Mecca, climbing up Mt Hira, two miles away, to hide in a small cave. There he would lose himself in his spiritual life, praying to the creator god of his tribe, whose name was al Llah. As religious historian Huston Smith recounts: “Peering into the mysteries of good and evil, unable to accept the crudeness, superstition, and fratricide that were accepted as normal, [Muhammad’s] fiery heart, seething, simmering like a great furnace of thought, was reaching out for God.” (*The World’s Religions*, Huston Smith, p. 225)

Al Llah reached back. As this 39-year-old Arab businessman “lay on the floor of the cave, his mind locked in deepest contemplation” he believed the Angel Gabriel appeared to him in a blazing vision. (Smith, p. 225) The Angel told him he had been sent by the one true God, Allah. He then commanded Muhammad to: “Proclaim in the name of your Lord who created! Proclaim: Allah is the Most Generous!” (Smith, p. 226) “Proclaim:

Allah Akbar!” God is Great! Then, in exquisite ecstasy, chanted verse poured into the heart and mind of Muhammad, the first of twenty-three years of ongoing revelations from Allah. These revelations would eventually become the sacred scripture known as the Qur’an. These revelations, Muhammad believed, could be a new unifying and purifying truth for the tribes of Arabia. These revelations, he believed, could usher in a new world order, one that joined “faith to politics, religion to society” (Smith, p. 249) and society to God.

Part Three: The Message

The religion Muhammad believed he was called to proclaim began with the concept of *muruwah*—the Arab behavior code of devotion, loyalty and submission to the tribe. But Muhammad took tribal *muruwah* and transferred it to Allah. The center of life was no longer the individual tribe; the center of life was now Allah, the great chief of the one true tribe: Islam. Tribes that previously fought were now joined in a shared submission before the greater Truth. Islam *demand*s submission: submission to the word and will of God. But Islam is also derived from the Semitic word, *salem*, which means peace. Muhammad believed that submission to Allah would bring peace to the land.

The foundational practices Muhammad taught all worked to create unity. There was a common creed that eliminated warring theologies. It proclaimed: “There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is the prophet of Allah.” Creed may have joined the tribes, but practice cemented their unity. They shared prayer five times daily: at dawn, midday, late afternoon, sunset and bedtime, thus repeatedly unifying everyone in allegiance to the greater Power. With everybody getting together for so much prayer, there wouldn’t be time for fighting.

Muhammad also required that the faithful reach out to each other. Financial support for the needy, debtors, slaves, travelers, or beggars was not an option but a religious requirement.

To further cement their union, for one entire month each year, the faithful shared a time of fasting, with food and drink consumed only after the sun has set. This unified everyone in renunciation of worldly ways. This is the month of Ramadan. All followers of this new religion were also required to make a pilgrimage to the Holy city of Mecca. There, all pilgrims, rich or poor, educated or illiterate, young or old, dress in the same simple white garment and prostrate together, all equal before Allah.

Part Four: The Society

But Islam’s religious law reached beyond these practices. Muhammad’s revelation stressed racial equality. It forbade any caste systems that categorized people’s worth or status. All were equal before Allah; all had inherent worth and dignity. There was also a religious law for economics that insisted that competition and consumerism be balanced by ethical business practices and accountability. For Muhammad, money must flow through society and not be hoarded by a few.

Under Islamic law, women were now given the right to inherit wealth and property, something denied them prior to Muhammad. The killing of infant girls was forbidden. Women were given the right of consent or refusal regarding marriage. Muhammad's Islam gave women a status higher than they had ever known before in the Arab world.

All this change and unity didn't happen overnight. For a time, it was only Muhammad alone in his cave, receiving message after message. Then, for a time, it was only Muhammad and his small band of reviled religious revolutionaries. But over time—24 years to be exact—and through many battles and conversions, the individual Arab tribes eventually submitted themselves to the unity of Allah.

Muhammad did all of that. But he forgot one thing. He forgot to have a succession plan.

Part Five: The Mistake

Author Lesley Hazelton writes: “Muhammad was [now] sixty-three years old . . . a long life for his time . . . His fever had begun innocuously enough, along with mild aches and pains. Nothing unusual, except that it did not pass. . . Soon blinding headaches and wrenching muscle pain weakened him so much that he could no longer stand . . . His wives wrapped his head in cloths soaked in cold water, hoping to . . . reduce the fever . . . Outside, in the courtyard . . . people were camped out, keeping vigil . . . and hovering in the air, on everyone's mind but on nobody's lips, at least in public, was the one question never asked out loud. If the impossible happened, if Muhammad died, who would succeed him? It might have been simple enough if Muhammad had had sons. Even one son . . . Muhammad, however, had neither sons nor [had he named] a designated heir.” (After the Prophet, p. 7-10) Or had he? Some whispered that Muhammad had quietly designated Ali, his cousin, his first disciple, his closest advisor, and his son-in-law, for this role. Some claimed Muhammad had put his arm around Ali's shoulders and said “This is my brother, my trustee, and my successor among you, so listen and obey.”

Part Six: The Aftermath

Muhammad died on June 8 of the year 632. Quickly, Muhammad's inner circle of followers broke into two groups. One group, led by Ali, said that Muhammad's successor must come from his family and possess deep spiritual piety. Islam, they said, must have hereditary spiritual leadership. Ali—said this group—was the obvious successor, for he was Muhammad's cousin, was married to Muhammad's daughter Fatima, and was father to Muhammad's grandsons (Hasan and Hussein). Ali was, after all, Muhammad's favored advisor, his right hand man. Those who supported Ali called themselves “the followers of Ali,” or in Arabic, *Shiat Ali*—Shia for short (Hazelton, p. 32). The other group, led by Muhammad's powerful and favorite wife, Aisha and her father Abu Bakr, said that the successor should come from among *all* of Muhammad's followers. Aisha, Abu Bakr and the others in this group said that spiritual lineage didn't matter. They wanted to follow “the tribal tradition [whereby] a council of elders would choose the most senior and respected elder to become the head of the community.” (The Shia Revival by Vali Nasr, p. 35) That was why, they said, Muhammad hadn't publicly named a successor. Muhammad trusted the wisdom of the *umma*, the community. This

group wanted the leader chosen from the community were called the *Sunni*, which means “of the people.”

The discord between the two groups was great. They even had different versions of Muhammad’s death. The Shia said Muhammad died leaning against the shoulder of Ali, while the Sunni said that he died resting upon the breast of Aisha. [But] In the end, those favoring the successor being chosen from among all the people won the day. Abu Bakr, Aisha’s father, was chosen as caliph (Muhammad’s successor). Ali submitted and swore allegiance to him.

But when Abu Bakr was assassinated two years later, Ali was *again* passed over and Umar was voted the new caliph. Umar proved an able leader, and the Muslims conquered Palestine, Iraq, Syria, Egypt and eventually the entire Persian Empire. But when Umar was assassinated, Ali was *again* passed over and Uthman was elected caliph. But by that time, some Muslims began to feel that the Sunni leadership had become corrupt and unjust, no longer ruling according to the principles originally set forth by Muhammad. Caliph Uthman’s own soldiers assassinated him and then acclaimed Ali as the new caliph. Finally, at long last, Ali was the leader of Islam. But not everyone accepted his rule. Those Sunni opposing Ali included Aisha, who, you remember, had been Muhammad’s favorite wife and was part of the group that worked to make her father Muhammad’s immediate successor. Aisha rallied her supporters and, with other Sunni forces, marched against Ali. Ten thousand people were killed in a fierce battle, known as the Battle of the Camel: the first time Muslims fought Muslims. In an attempt to stop the bloodshed and restore unity, the rival factions agreed to arbitration. The result was Ali being deposed as caliph and someone new being acclaimed the leader of the Muslims. To get him out of the way once and for all, Ali was murdered. When the new caliph died, his son, Yazid, became the caliph. But the Shia had had enough and rose up again in rebellion. They proclaimed Hussein, the son of Ali and grandson of Muhammad, as the true leader of Islam.

Part Seven: The Massacre

Hussein, proclaimed the true caliph by the *Shiat Ali*, the followers of Ali, set out with a small group of warriors, wives, and children to confront Caliph Yazid in Iraq and demand the leadership role that he believed was due him by birthright. Hussein had been told that thousands of Muslim soldiers were ready to rally to his cause. Hussein believed that he alone stood for the truth, righteousness and the pure Islamic ideal, as taught by his father (Ali) and grandfather (Muhammad). Hussein believed the current caliph, Yazid, represented corruption and decay. *Only he*, Hussein believed, could “restore the soul of Islam.” (Hazelton, p. 173). As his small group drew closer and closer to Iraq, messengers began appearing, warning Hussein to turn back. Yazid’s army was strong, and those who had said they would support Hussein had been intimidated into submission. There would be no help awaiting him. Hussein responded: “Man journeys in darkness, and his destiny journeys toward him.” He marched on. (Hazelton, p. 177)

The question that has haunted Islam for fourteen hundred years is this: Why didn’t he turn back? Why did Hussein lead himself, his warriors, and their families into guaranteed

annihilation? Later generations of Shia Muslims would understand “Hussein’s journey to Iraq [as] the ultimate act of courage, the most noble self-sacrifice . . . Hussein would take the only way left him to expose the corruption and [injustice] of the current regime. He would shock all Muslims out of their complacency . . . Divinely guided, he would sacrifice himself.” (Hazelton, p. 179) “If he cannot defeat the enemy, he can at least disgrace them . . . If he cannot conquer the ruling power, he can at least condemn it . . . and provide commitment for the oppressed . . . For him martyrdom is not a loss, but a choice.” (Hazelton, p. 182)

Near Karbala, Iraq, an army of thousands surrounded Hussein, his seventy-three warriors, and their wives and children, cutting off any access to water. They were left for days to be weakened by thirst under the hot sun. Legend says that Hussein held up his own three-week infant son, so dehydrated it could not cry, and begged the army to allow all the children access to water. The answer was an arrow shot through the infant’s neck. Finally, the day of the Massacre arrived. Hussein took off his armor and put on “a simple white seamless robe,” a burial shroud. (p. 187) He mounted his white horse and rode to his death. All seventy-three of Hussein’s men were beheaded. And the women and children were led away in chains.

Part Eight: The Result

From that moment forward, these two paths of Islam—Sunni (those who believed in leadership chosen by the community) and Shia (those who believed in hereditary spiritual leadership through the lineage of Muhammad) were irrevocably split. The vast majority of the Muslim world would become Sunni (85-90%), a small minority carried on the tradition of the Shia (only in Iraq and Iran are Shia the majority). These two paths “understand Islamic history, theology, and law differently . . . each [has] a unique approach to the question of what it means to be a Muslim” (Nasr, p. 34) and what you should believe.

In the ensuing centuries, Sunni and Shia Muslims weren’t always enemies. Over the years, they have lived as neighbors. Even today, in America and throughout the world, they often worship in the same mosques. They intermarry. When I was in Iraq I talked with many Shia and Sunni who told me how they lived next to each other for years and years and were friends. But something happened after the U.S. toppled Saddam Hussein’s rule in Iraq. Sectarian tension was stoked and unleashed as individuals and factions jockeyed for power. For you see, Saddam Hussein had oppressed the Shia in favor of the Sunni. When Saddam was deposed, the new Prime Minister Maliki oppressed the Sunni in favor of the Shia. The subsequent Sunni’s discontent allowed the Sunni extremist group ISIS to gain a foothold in Iraq and begin to wipe out the Shia. Karbala repeats itself again and again. By the time I landed in Bagdad 17 months ago, the city had been carved up into fortified neighborhoods of Sunni and Shia. Cement barricades and armed checkpoints tried to keep opposition car bombers at bay. Posters and banners with the faces of Ali and Hussein claimed markets and streets as Shia only. Green Shia flags flew from rooftops of Shia homes, drawing lines in the proverbial sand. Our Sunni guide and translator muttered under his breath about the ridiculous beliefs of

the Shia. And Sunni and Shia gangs killed each other in the street. How had it come to this?

Tomorrow, as Shia Muslims around the world celebrate Ashura, the Solemn Day that marks the Massacre at Karbala, how can we not ask: "Where do they go from here?" When yesterday the bombings against the Shia traveling to Karbala began, how can we not ask: "Where do they go from here?" Tomorrow, when there will likely be more attacks in Karbala against the Shia, how can we not ask: "Where do they go from here?"

Author Vali Nasr writes: "Sectarian identities in the Middle East stretch back a millennium . . . Future stability must be based not on the [domination] of one sect over another but rather on an inclusive vision of Islam . . . that will recognize the identity and beliefs of both Shia and Sunni . . . As in all wars of religion . . . in the end, peace . . . is a function . . . of recognizing the fact of differences, and only then going beyond them in the pursuit of common goals." (Nasr, p. 253)

That is what Muhammad envisioned when he created his new religion so many years ago. His was a vision that proclaimed:

I hear a distant song: it fills the air.
I hear it, deep and strong, rise up in prayer:
O Life, we are many; help us to be one.
Heal our divisions: let love's will be done.'

May it be so. Blessed Be. Amen.

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