

A Hajj, Rev. Linda, Oct 16, 2022

Sometimes, when Masjid al Bahir or Mosque of the Ocean meets in the Remembrance Garden in the summer, I join them. I listen to the teaching Dr. Qureshi, or Abrar as I call him, gives, and try to settle in. One sunny summer day this year that seems already years ago, Abrar talked about the meaning of the Hajj, or the sacred pilgrimage that happens every year in Mecca. This is a most holy of times for Muslims.

In Islam, there are Five Pillars: the first is faith, believing in God and that Muhammed, accepted as a man, is his last messenger; the second is prayer, which happens 5 times a day facing Mecca, the place of the Hajj or pilgrimage; the third is charity, if able, one is required to spend a portion of one's income on those less fortunate. Interest is also considered usury in Islamic countries. It is the personal responsibility of each Muslim to ease the economic hardship of others and to strive towards eliminating inequality; the fourth is fasting during Ramadan which brings one into a closer relationship with the poor and with god, and then the fifth is the Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca.

The *Hajj* is a pilgrimage that occurs during the Islamic month of Dhu al-Hijjah to the holy city of Mecca. This year that happened in June. Every able-bodied Muslim who has the financial means and ability is obliged to make the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in their lifetime. Everyone dresses in clothing which consists of two white sheets. Everyone who approaches Mecca and therefore God, looks the same, rich and poor.

The main rituals of the Hajj include walking seven times around the Kaaba, a building at the center of Islam's most holy mosque, traveling on foot seven times between Mount Safa and Mount Marwa, which adds up to a trip of about 2 miles, and symbolically throwing stones at the devil in the city of Mina.

Islamic teachers say that before such a pilgrimage, one should become self-aware, and undergo a kind of purification. In Islam, this has a specific process but how would you prepare if you were going on a sacred pilgrimage? And sometimes I wonder if we made a conscious effort to bring ourselves into a state of pure, open heartedness, could even a simple journey become sacred? Maybe we should try to walk into stop n shop this way?

The first thing that Muslims are asked to do before a hajj is clear their conscience, to ask forgiveness of others they have harmed or transgressed. This reminds me much of the Jewish ritual of Yom Kippur which just finished on October 5<sup>th</sup>.

Who do you need to ask forgiveness of? Who have you trespassed against? Who has trespassed against you that you need to forgive—for this too is part of purification: forgiveness asking and forgiveness granting must go hand in hand. And what else is there? What else must we look at more carefully in ourselves? Arrogance, greed, pride, wrath...only we can take our own inventory; and we must my friends. These times are too tempting to point fingers, some of which need to be pointed, but pointing can make us lazy too, pointing can keep up from holding up our own mirrors.

There is a story in the Bible that initiated the Hajj, a story that both the Jews, Muslims and Christians share, a time that dates back to Abraham who is said to have lived in the 1800s BCE. According to the Bible story, Sarah, Abraham's wife, grew jealous of the Egyptian slave Hagar who was brought to give them a son because Sarah was barren and this son Hagar had was named Ishmael.

But Yaweh had promised a son to Sarah and she was granted this son, Isaac, when she was 90 years old. Sarah wanted Ishmael away, worried that this first birth would change Isaac's inheritance.

With heavy heart, Abraham took Hagar and baby Ishmael into the desert with only one small satchel of food and water and left them there promising that god would protect them and that from their son would come a great nation.

Hagar walked and walked with Ishmael strapped to her back. And when the food and water ran out, and her son became ill from hunger and thirst, Hagar placed him under a bush so that he would be shaded from the harsh desert sun and in her suffering for her son's pain she just started to run from what would become the two hills of Safa and Marwa. Seven times she ran between these hills that are about 1500 feet apart, so 7 trips would be about 2 miles. She ran and wailed and ran and wailed praying for water, praying and wailing and praying.

God saw Hagar and the place beside where Ishmael lay crying from thirst and hunger sprang into a spring. To this place came a nomadic tribe that saw the birds encircling, and from this tribe came Islam. Ishmael is said to be an ancestor of Muhammad.

These 2 hills are now in Mecca in Saudi Arabia and pilgrims on the Hajj must run 7 times between them, to experience in their bodies what the feeling of having no control of the fate of our lives or the lives of our loved ones feels like, to experience what wailing to God to go on, to live, to be spared feels like in the body, in the feet, in the breath. They scream during this run, Help me God. Help me.

I wish I could experience this. I wish I could go hungry and thirsty and hear the wails of Hagar resonating in my pulse, the wails as she ran between these 2 hills while watching her son die of thirst and hunger while believing that god could save them both. That kind of surrender, that kind of belief that expending oneself so completely, of surrendering so fully and asking with no ego or even rage. And then to be answered.

I think I wish this more lately, in these times of such political, environmental, and pandemic unrest. And now I add the uncertainty of Gary and I leaving to your plate and to mine. Yes, a barefoot, desert wail sounds just about perfect right now!

I imagine all of this desire to know, to be answered, to be saved really, to have some relief and some hope as a collective wail. I think so many of us are longing to give voice to this wail and to believe that somewhere on the other side of it is mercy and hope.

Do you hear and feel it too? What would it be if we were to go out screaming out together, en masse, while running on the beach and pleading: Help me! Help my child, my earth, my brother, my sister, my mother, my father, my home, my soul. Help me. We are dying of thirst. Here I am.

Here I am. That is the refrain of Abraham, the Jewish father of Islam through Ishmael and Christianity through Isaac. Here I am, he answers again and again to god, no matter what god asks of him. Here I am.

What would it be for you to say those words to the next person that greets you, needs you, is suffering near you? We all so long to be seen, to have our cries answered with love, but do we remember that to be seen and to have love we must first see and love?

Learning how to listen, to be still, to be together, to be alone, naming as sacred something, anything: a time, a place, an hour, a day, a journey, can be a way to begin to sort out what we need and how we need it, to untangle what we belong to and how we belong to it, to consider how to express our despair and how to lean into the despair of others so that we can be of use.

Those questions that the Hajj asks and that Yom Kippur asks too: to whom must I ask forgiveness, to whom must I grant forgiveness, what do I need to let go of, where is love, hope, care, beauty, compassion needed in my own or someone else's life?

How might we say: Here I am, really say it. Here I am!!

Let's take a Hajj, I'll meet you, wrapped in what is most easy to put on, most simple and true, with an open heart, open to the collective love we share, lifted up and asking: what is needed now and how can I be present to it, asking: please forgive me for the ways I've erred, promising: Here I Am and then looking up and beginning to recognize where here is and who we are here with.

Amen.