

Matthew Jason Deen
Centre Congregational Church, UCC
Delivered on Sunday, June 20, 2022

Our Shared Journey of Covenantal Entanglement

About 11 years ago, I took my first job in NYC working for an after-school program in Harlem. This was a pretty heady time in my life. I had just moved to New York from Georgia, which was my first experience living outside of the Southeast and certainly my first time living anywhere as diverse as New York City. At the time, I was beginning to rediscover my Christian faith and immersing myself more and more in theological texts and, in particular, books on Christology. I can scarcely imagine a more exciting context than Harlem in which to have been on this journey of rediscovery. Most of the students I encountered at the office were fascinating in a million ways but as far as I could tell, none of them seemed even remotely religious, none of them but one, a particularly precocious middle schooler named Yusef. Yusef was a young Muslim man who by all accounts took his faith quite seriously, and this was clear to me from the start. But one afternoon in particular, he made his most lasting impression on me when he entered the office where I was working donning a t-shirt that says, “Jesus was a Muslim.” Full stop. That was the entirety of the message. No image, just plain white text on a black shirt. I was so struck by this that my eyes lingered a bit longer on his shirt than I meant them to. When my eyes looked up to meet his, I noticed he had an uncharacteristically wry smile on his face. He made an impression, and he knew it.

To be clear, Yusef’s shirt did not unsettle or alarm me. On the contrary, I was intrigued, almost exhilarated, filled with a deep and burning curiosity as I encountered a name and character more familiar to me than any other; yet now Jesus was somehow made strange, made new. A lifetime worth of assumptions and claims about Jesus began to fade, and once again, for the first time since high school, Jesus became mysterious. Obviously I could have quibbled over the wording, but the anachronism was far less interesting to me than the mystery lurking beneath it. “Who is this Jesus?,” I wondered, and how can I find him? This is

Matthew Jason Deen
Centre Congregational Church, UCC
Delivered on Sunday, June 20, 2022

actually just one of the many profound gifts of interreligious engagement, and it's one of the reasons I'm so delighted that we're undertaking this sermon series. Last week, of course, Scott launched this series with a discussion of one of the most important theological "resonances" Christianity shares with Islam: monotheism. (You'll recall we're saying resonances instead of similarities because there are important differences, too.) Today's passage calls attention to another powerful resonance with Islam, our shared sacred history, or story.

As Christians, we have a deeply covenantal understanding of our sacred history. Some have called covenants the "backbone of our Bible," because they function as "the skeletons upon which our entire redemptive story is built."¹ We understand our sacred story unfolding through a succession of covenants between God and humankind, culminating in the ultimate, climactic covenant, through which God enters into an entirely new relationship with the world through the person of Jesus. Today's text centers on the final piece of a covenant God enters into with Abraham, beginning in chapter 12, with its promise of offspring, developing through chapter 15, with its promise of land, and culminating, finally, in chapter 17, with its promise of a universal blessing God will extend to all of humanity through Abraham's lineage.

It may surprise some of you to know that this same covenantal lineage from Abraham is affirmed in the Qur'an. Like the prophets before him and, indeed, like Jesus, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) did not claim to begin a new religion; rather, he set out to reform the polytheistic beliefs and cultural practices pervasive in his time and place, bringing the one Jewish and Christian God to the Arab peoples. As surah 42 verse 13 of the Qur'an puts it: "He [God] has laid down for you people the same commandment that He gave Noah, which We have revealed to you [Muhammad] and which We enjoined on Abraham and Moses

¹ "Covenants: The Backbone of the Bible," The Bible Project (2018), Accessed at: <https://bibleproject.com/blog/covenants-the-backbone-bible/>.

Matthew Jason Deen
Centre Congregational Church, UCC
Delivered on Sunday, June 20, 2022

and Jesus: ‘Uphold the faith and do not divide into factions within it.’” It is important to understand this, that the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was not supplanting the Jewish and Christian faiths but rather, in his view, correcting what he believed to be a corruption of both. Muslims believe that God sent his revelation first to the Jews through the Torah of the prophet Moses and then to Christians through the teachings of Jesus, but that along the way these revelations were corrupted by human embellishment. In its own way, Islam thus attempts not to undermine the truth of Judaism and Christianity, but to protect and affirm them. Indeed, nowhere is this protectiveness more evident than in Muslims’ veneration of Jesus.

It is ironic in the extreme that one of Christianity’s greatest points of tension with Islam is also our greatest point resonance, i.e., our shared love of Jesus, as well as our recognition of him as God’s Messiah on Earth. (You heard me right, Muslims recognize Jesus as the Messiah, though the precise implications of this term are different between Muslims and Christians.) I’d go so far to as to say it is impossible read the Qur’an or to discuss Jesus with a Muslim without seeing how indispensable Jesus is within Islam. Indeed, one of the most common sentiments one encounters among Muslims is the statement, “Without Jesus, I could not be Muslim.” Islam affirms some of the salient features of our own sacred story about Jesus —that he was born of a virgin and that he performed many miracles, attesting to the divine mission he bore, among others. There’s even an entire chapter (or “surah”) in the Qur’an dedicated to Mary (Jesus’s mother). This Jesus of Islam is wonderfully familiar to us and, more importantly, wonderfully strange. In my explorations I’ve come across some incredibly powerful images of Jesus emerging from Islam. I’ve relished them all but for the sake of time will just share one. One story, not in the Qur’an, comes to us from an authoritative collection of hadiths of the ninth century compiled by the Persian imam and scholar Muhammad al-Bukhari. As the

Matthew Jason Deen
Centre Congregational Church, UCC
Delivered on Sunday, June 20, 2022

story goes, Jesus once observed a man stealing something and asked him pointedly, “Did you just steal?” The man responded, “No, by God, other than Whom no one has the right to be worshiped.’ To which Jesus replied, “I believe in God and suspect my eyes.” The idea here is that we honor God by giving folks the benefit of the doubt, even when our senses might lead us to suspect them. What a way to live. Here is a value I never knew I always cherished. And who do I find in the center of it all but my very own redeemer and companion, Jesus, known and yet newly mysterious?

Now why does any of this matter? Why take pains to point out these shared features of our shared sacred history? Conventional wisdom suggests that shared experiences or identities offer a solid foundation on which to establish a bond and, in theory anyway, this helps us to get along better with folks with whom we are otherwise likely to find ourselves in conflict. Obviously this is especially important for us in this time and place. According to a report released in January of this year by the Council on American-Islamic Relations, Islamophobia is now officially a billion dollar industry, with 26 groups receiving funding to fuel intolerance toward Muslims.² The lynchpin of their efforts has been and continues to be distorting and amplifying differences between Islam and Judeo-Christian traditions. Learning the contours and intricacies of our shared sacred history is vital to resisting these cynical efforts. But there’s another, equally important reason all this matters, and that is that it deepens our faith, strengthening our own connection to God. Yusef’s provocative t-shirt was for me an invitation to encounter Jesus through a wholly different set of experiences and perspectives. Silly as it may seem, that shirt deepened my curiosity about Christ in ways I could not have anticipated, which in turn strengthened my faith with an indelible sense of the

² “Islamophobia in the Mainstream,” Council on American-Islamic Relations (2021), 1. Accessed at <https://www.cair.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/islamophobiainthemainstream.pdf>.

Matthew Jason Deen
Centre Congregational Church, UCC
Delivered on Sunday, June 20, 2022

mysterious entanglement sourced in that everlasting covenant. In an important sense, our journey forward, together, alongside our Muslim neighbors, is a journey back to the oneness envisioned by that covenant. Thank God for Islam! May we incline ourselves toward greater curiosity, nourishing our common roots, and discovering new depths and dimensions within our faith.

Amen.