

## **A Christian Response to Islamic Extremism**

**Romans 12:14-21**

**4/24/2016**

We're in the midst of a sermon series on the issues that divide us. Again I am using resources from Pastor Adam Hamilton of Church of the Resurrection United Methodist Church in Leawood Kansas.

In today's message the principle issue is one that unites us. We are bound together as Americans; both the left and the right, conservatives and liberals, Republican and Democrat in recognizing that ISIS is a bad player on the world scene. That Islamic extremists have done some horrible things and they need to be defeated in one way or another. Where we disagree is exactly how to do that. The strategies that we want to use to address Islamic extremism are different even though we agree that this needs to be defeated somehow.

So what I'd like to do is suggest some ways how you might defeat Islamic extremism here on American soil. And that that is in keeping with your Christian faith. In fact, it is in living out your Christian faith that you stand the greatest chance of defeating any hopes that ISIS might have or Islamic extremists might, have on American soil.

But we need to learn a bit of history. I'd like to spend a few minutes touching what Muslims believe before focusing on Islamic extremism and what a Christian response to Islamic extremism might be.

### **Map of Mecca & Medina**

Mohammed was born in Mecca in AD 570, which is in the Arab Peninsula, so 570 years after the birth of Jesus. Mohammed lost both his parents by the age of 6, and was raised by his uncle. As a teen he began his work in commercial trade, and quickly gained a reputation for honesty and trustworthiness. As a young man he was influenced by a Christian monk, and by other Christians and Jews he knew, including some who were family members. Much of Islam's faith is adapted from the Bible.

At the age of 40 Mohammed began going just outside of Mecca to **pray in a cave, called Hira**. While praying in Hira Mohammed had a vision of the angel Gabriel who began revealing a message that would ultimately

become the Quran. It's thought perhaps that Mohammed didn't read or write so he memorized what the angel Gabriel told him. So these sayings from the Angel Gabriel are what are contained in the Quran. Remember this is the story from an Islamic perspective. These are some of the basic things Mohammed is taught by the angel Gabriel: to preach that there is only one God, that there is a resurrection of the dead and that paradise awaits the righteous and hell the damned. He was told to preach the forgiveness of sins, the need to pray regularly, to help those in need, repentance of sin and to call the people of Mecca to turn away from the pagan idols they worshipped.

As Mohammed began to denounce the practice of idolatry and the worship of pagan idols so prevalent in Mecca, he began to experience persecution. At the age of 52, he and his followers left Mecca and moved to 200 miles north to the city we now know as Medina. This migration is known as the Hegira. In Medina, Mohammed became the leading figure of the city, and Islam quickly became the dominant faith. That event is so important that Muslims mark time from it, so that for them time is marked from before or after the Hegira.

For the last nine years of Mohammed's life he and his followers from Medina were regularly engaged in war with Mecca and with other neighboring tribes. His followers ultimately subdued and united most of the Arabian Peninsula. Most of the about 109 passages that speak of fighting or war in the Quran are from this period in which Mohammed and his followers were at war. In these passages Mohammed claims that God offered rules for engagement in battle.

So I want to pause here just a minute because you hear people talk about what a violent religion Islam is and we see examples of that in Islamic extremism, and yet we hear ordinary Muslims say, "we are a religion of peace." So which is it, is it peace or is it not? And then you find these 109 passages about fighting or violence and when you ask Muslims about those verses, most Muslims understand the context of passages about war and fighting were about a specific time and situation. That they are not about how Muslims are to live in today's world. Muslim Extremists look at these violent passages and say, "this is the way we can live out our lives and act out our faith today."

To give you some comparison this is the same way we as Christians read the stories in found in the books of Joshua and Judges in our own Bible. The Israelites were at war with the Canaanites and God commands the Israelites to slaughter the residents, every man, woman and child in the 34 various city-states in Canaan. But no Jew or Christian reads these passages as calling for the killing of people today. We wrestle with what those passages mean, but we understand they meant something different in their time and don't mean the same thing today. The same is true for most Muslims. They understand the verses about fighting and war were given in the context of battle as rules of engagement. Extremists, on the other hand, see in them permission for their violent activities.

At age 62 Mohammed died and there was a power struggle over who was to succeed him now that he was gone. Some believed he had anointed his son-in-law Ali to lead and others believed it should be put to a vote and that group elected Abu Bakar, Mohammed's father-in-law to be the leader. This marked the primary division in Islam and the development of two Islamic groups the Sunni and the Shia. The Shia believed Mohammed's son-in-law and those that came after him should be the leader of the movement. And the Sunnis believe that a tribal council might decide who that leader would be. About 10% of the world's Muslims are Shia and 85 – 90% of the world's Muslims are Sunni.

### **Muslim distribution map**

So I wanted to show you a map of where Muslims are located in our world today. You can see that Sunni Islam, represented by the light green color is in Northern Africa, parts of the Middle East extending into the Far East, India and Indonesia which has the largest population of Muslims in the world. And you can see that Shia Muslims represented by the dark green are centered in Iran and Iraq. So there is conflict say between Saudia Arabia and Iran because of their different ways of viewing their faith.

ISIS' vision of the world and Islam are extreme. So let's figure out what that means. Within any movement, be it Christianity, Judaism and Islam within the Republican and Democratic parties in almost any philosophy you have a variety of places you might stand. So you have liberals, moderates, conservatives, fundamentalists and extremists. The vast majority of Muslims in America fall are liberal, moderate or conservative. They want to live in

peace, seek good relations with their neighbors, and practice their faith. They came to America because of our religious freedoms and opportunity. Fundamentalists tend to see the world in black and white, and interpret their scriptures literally, with little room for context. Extremism goes a step farther. It often advocates the killing of any who disagree with them. It advocates the elimination of those with whom they disagree.

Church of the Resurrection hosted a forum on Islamic extremism to try to better understand ISIS. They learned from experts at the forum that while America is an enemy of ISIS, we are not their primary enemy. Their primary enemies are most of their fellow Muslims. ISIS believes all moderate Sunni are renouncers of the faith, as are all Shia. Their narrative comes from a very literal reading of teachings about the end times found not within the Quran, but the writings after Mohammed's death but which claim to report things he said (called the Haddiths)...There we read that at the end of times the nations will gather against God's people, against Muslims....the true people of God will be nearly defeated in this massive battle. You may recognize this as similar to the Battle of Armageddon in the book of Revelation. For extremist Muslims, this battle takes place at Dabiq in northern Syria.

**Dabiq is the name of ISIS' magazine.**

Lt. Colonel Brian Steed spent 8 years as a foreign service officer in the Army serving in the Middle East was at the Forum. He has written a number of books on ISIS and Islam and militant Islam. He currently is an assistant professor in military history at the Army College in Leavenworth Kansas. He noted that it is important for us to understand that ISIS believes what they are saying. They believe they are the one, true, right, version of Islam and those who are not true believers should be corrected or eliminated.

Another thing to understand about them is that they are fighting a different kind of war than we are used to. They don't expect to be able to defeat us but are trying to get all of these world armies gathered at Dabiq for this final battle in which their writings tell them they will win. They are fighting a narrative war, a public relations war in which through telling their story they win the hearts and minds of potential followers, while striking fear in the hearts of others. They use the way they execute their enemies to bring attention to themselves. If they can slit one person's throat and get that all over the internet they are going to have all the nations of the world paying attention

with just one person dying. The allies might kill 100 in one air strike, but that doesn't get much attention. But with one death that they can televise, ISIS can make the world afraid. Their goals are to get attention and make us afraid. They are painting themselves as the David waging a just war against the evil Goliath of worldly empires of apostates and infidels, and winning!

I'm not clear on what the military solution is to ISIS, but suspect it must include winning not just the military war, but the narrative war as well. So we can either live into their narrative and prove them to be right about how bad we are by our reactions to and treatment of non-extremist Muslims or we can disprove them by our actions.

On American soil, our aim must be to see that the very small number of Muslims who might be drawn to ISIS' extreme views see a better way from that 70% of us who claim to be followers of Jesus Christ in this country. Now when we talk about most Muslims who live here we are not talking about ISIS, we're talking about conservative, moderate, even progressive Muslims, they disavow what ISIS is doing. But if ISIS makes us afraid of our Muslim neighbors and then we end up treating them as second class citizens, or with suspicion or we gossip about them then make them feel like they don't fit. Not only are we giving into the darkness that ISIS claims we really are, then we are moving people farther away from the Islam they wish to practice. There are not a lot of Muslims who would embrace what we see in ISIS, but there are those who feel like they are disenfranchised, like they don't fit or don't connect that with enough suspicion and being treated like a second class citizens that can move them to find a community where they are not being treated that way.

Paul writes a letter to the tiny Christian community in Rome. They are a minority population surrounded by pagans, the Christians were not always treated well and within 10 years Paul himself will be beheaded in this city and the Christians will be burned at the stake by Emperor Nero. In the midst of this Paul writes these words in **Romans 12**, "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them...do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly...Do not repay anyone evil for evil...Beloved, never avenge yourselves...if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink." I love this last line, let's read the last verse, Romans 12:21 together "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."

This is the Christian strategy for winning, this is the strategy for defeating evil, not giving into the evil, not becoming the evil itself, but overcoming the evil with good. This was Paul's strategy, this was Jesus' strategy.

Fighting ISIS at home means actually showing what it means to be Christians. It means to love our neighbor. It means to go out of our way to express hospitality, care and welcome to the Muslim. It means to seek to bless them. It includes assuming the best and not the worst of them. When we do these things ISIS is defeated by our actions.

So here is my challenge for us, and my challenge to you: Let's go out of our way to meet our Muslim neighbors. Let's treat them with respect, compassion and love. Let's bless them and find ways to have meaningful relationships with them, and if they are harassed, to stand by them. Let's not be who ISIS says we are, but instead to be the Christians Christ calls us to be.

Hear these words from Paul from Philipppians 2. Paul is writing from his prison cell and is about to be executed and he says, "We (meaning Christians) are to shine like stars in the world." **In doing so we live those famous words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.**, "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. And hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that."

I believe we push back the darkness of ISIS and make it unlikely that others will be drawn to their distorted vision when we are practicing the love that Jesus calls us to. That is my hope and prayer for us, alleluia, amen.



In his letter to the church in Rome, Paul instructs this congregation in their interactions with others. This passage has the heading, "marks of a true Christian."

## **Romans 12:14-21**

### **New Revised Standard Version**

Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Live in harmony with one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly; do not claim to be wiser than you are. Do not repay anyone evil for evil, but take thought for what is noble in the sight of all. If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave room for the wrath of God; for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." No, "if your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them something to drink; for by doing this you will heap burning coals on their heads." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.