

## End Times

This year's Advent dinner at our church with our Muslim friends was especially poignant. Right now, the air is so thick in our country you can cut it with a knife; not knowing exactly where our enemy lurks is inviting both fear and confusion. This year's dinner was the largest ever - 35 Muslims and 35 Christians joyfully huddled in the Fireside Room of our church. We told them we love them, and they said the same to us. We are both realizing that it has never been more important for Christians and Muslims to be friends. Having a Muslim friend is a game changer, especially now for the future of our country and world. At the end of our dinner, as we do every year, we sang Christmas carols together. This year, I looked around the room and saw what seemed like a multitude of Muslims singing loudly and boldly, "Joy to the world, the Lord is come, let earth receive her King..."



This past year with our Muslim friends has been incredible. We now not only serve food together regularly at inner-city soup kitchens; but on certain nights of the year, our Muslim friends come to our church to help us give a home to the homeless for an evening. Twice a month, we gather to study our Holy Books together. We are fascinated with what each tradition says about such common figures as Adam, Noah, Abraham, and Moses. Every time we are with our Muslim friends, God shows up and surprises us with new insights and wisdom. We sense the Lord's encouragement all the time. We have come to understand that when Muslims and Christians avoid each other and don't pursue friendship, the devil has a field day. In this kind of environment, Christians and Muslims can easily demonize each other, and dangerously guess falsely what the other believes.

During one of our Holy Book discussion sessions this fall, a most interesting interchange took place among the members. For the past eight years, all of our meetings have been co-ed. Yet, occasionally the Christian and Muslim women in our group have gotten together to meet in each others' homes, cook meals, and socialize in most wonderful ways. At this particular study session, however, one of the Christian women spoke up and asked me and the Imam if it would be okay for the Christian and Muslim women to form their own group and meet periodically to talk about matters particular to women. It was certainly fine with me, but I could sense that the Imam was hesitant about saying yes to this specific request. So, I

asked if he had a concern with the women meeting periodically on their own in addition to meeting in our co-ed group.

Imam Senad cleared his throat and said, "No, not really, but I must say that the request does give me pause because the Quran mentions that one of the signs of the end times is women assuming more leadership positions." Well, you could hear a pin drop in the room at this point. We all waited for what Imam Senad would say next. Eventually, he smiled, and said, "Whether we are beginning to experience the end times or not, I give these women my approval. They have such joy together; I would never want to get in their way." It was another leap forward in our miraculous friendship.

That was the first time I had heard my Muslim friends talk about the end times. But, the subject came up again during our Advent dinner. Our Muslim friends are largely of Bosnian and of Sufi orientation. They are sympathetic to the Turkish and Ottoman persuasion of Islam. They are generally very critical of fundamentalist Arab Sunni Islam, especially as expressed by the Wahhabists in Saudi Arabia. I love these Advent dinners because everyone is generally looser, loving, and more vocal about their opinions. Towards the end of the evening, I found myself in conversation with my friends Ennis and Mersad. I was telling them about my recent trip to the United Arab Emirates, how my group and I had ascended the tallest building in the world, the 2,717 feet tall Burj Khalifa. I asked if they had heard that Saudi Arabia just announced plans to build an even taller building?



Burj Khalifa

Ennis and Mersad hung their heads low, shaking them in disgust. They asked me if I knew what the Hadith, the companion to the Quran, says about tall buildings on the Arabian Peninsula. I said, "No I don't." They then told me the Hadith specifically warns Muslims not to build structures which have more than two floors. Muhammad taught that tall buildings run the risk of making people too enthralled with themselves and their capabilities. Ennis said there were no buildings over two stories built on the Arabian Peninsula from the 7th Century until the middle of the 20th Century. However, now things were flying out of control. According to my Muslim friends, the oil wealth was making people crazy on the Arabian Peninsula, causing many to turn away from Allah, becoming slaves to money, and tempted by hardened, militant fundamentalism - all at the same time.

I told them that in our Bible we have the same kind of story called the Tower of Babel. God eventually thwarted the plans of those building the Tower of Babel once

it became evident why the people were constructing it. Listen to the story: "Then the people said, 'Come, let's build a great city for ourselves with a tower that reaches into the sky. This will make us famous'"(Genesis 11:4a). At that point, God could see how intoxicated people had become with their own prowess. Therefore, he scattered the people throughout the earth, causing them to speak different languages, in order for them not to unite and become too powerful for their own good. Ennis and Mersad loved the story.



Tower of Babel

We followers of Jesus are told in our Bible not to try and predict the end times when Jesus will return to rule over a new heaven and new earth. We are told simply to be ready, not to predict. However, many Biblical scholars believe that one of the biggest clues we might have from Scripture concerning when Jesus will return can be found in Matthew, chapter 24, verse 14. In this setting towards the end of Jesus' earthly ministry, when his disciples pressed Jesus to tell them when the end of time would come, he said, "And the Good News about the Kingdom will be preached throughout the whole world, so that all the nations will hear it; and then the end will come." For this reason, Christians have been highly motivated for the past 2000 years to spread the Good News to the ends of the earth. It certainly explains why I do what I do with my frontier mission work.

Christmas is all about celebrating Jesus' first coming. It is the biggest, most important miracle of all. Yes, most of us wrestle with it. Did God really become incarnate in order to live among us, get as close as possible to us - to give us comfort, counsel and love? Could it really be true - God is with us now in our hearts, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Immanuel? What Towers of Babel are being built in the world today, and how might they be causing pride, hatred, and division amongst us? The call of Christmas is a call to humility. Jesus was not born in a fancy downtown building; he was born in a lowly manger, close to the earth. He is calling all of us to be humble in spirit, generous with our possessions, and helpful to our neighbors. Let us all join in the final verse of the song we sang with our Muslim friends that night; "He rules the world with truth and grace, and makes the nations prove. The glories of his righteousness, and wonders of his love, and wonders of his love, and wonders, wonders of his love."



From our family to yours, a blessed Merry Christmas.