

Two White Walls of Worship

5th Sunday of Lent
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Our Lenten journey moves forward toward Jerusalem with Holy Week in sight and Easter just a two-week walk away. We move forward as the people of God encouraged and called to renewal of our baptism and confirmation by the candidates of our own community and their stories of how God has graciously led them.

This has been a most unusual Lent for me because right in the middle of it I was on a pilgrimage with 85 people from Seattle to Abu Dhabi and Dubai of the United Arab Emirates on the Arabian Peninsula, in the heart of the Islamic world. For ten days of this Lent I was immersed, plunged, into Islam and its bonded community, its morning call to prayer, its customs, dress, gracious hospitality and fellowship, and its mosques. I was one person in a Roman Catholic collar and black suit among millions of Muslims, some of them our beloved alumni. On that journey and ever since then I have seen and felt our scriptures differently because of the ancient Middle Eastern bedouin and semitic culture, context, and way of life out of which those scriptures came and which Jesus our brother chose to know and to live.

So when I read today of God's promise of a covenant, of placing his law in the hearts of people, of he being their God and they his people, I click to Muslims with their vibrant sense of being God's people, of submitting to God, of obeying the law of God in their hearts, and of doing all of this together as a community bonded by faith in the one Creator. When I hear Jesus saying, "When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw everyone to myself... and will be the source of salvation for all who obey me", I am back among the Muslims thronging to prayer and lining up in rows of obedient worship and I know they are part of the "everyone" Jesus claims for himself and I wonder how he is, in fact, the source of salvation for them in their faithful living of submission to God.

I am helped and I hope you too will be helped to understand both Islam and more deeply understand your own Christian faith, in which we seek to be renewed in this Lent, if I speak of what I call "Two White Walls of Worship".

The first wall is in the brand new Sheik Zayyed Mosque—also known as The White Mosque—in Abu Dhabi. It has been built over the past five years and is nearly complete. It is the third largest mosque in the world only because the holy sites in Mecca and Medina are not allowed to be surpassed in size within the Islamic world. My experience was that it was simply the most beautiful religious edifice ever constructed in the world, bar none. Constructed of gleaming, pure white marble from Greece, with inlaid floral patterns of precious stones in thousands of columns, with massive Arabic arches opening onto pure blue sky, and flanked everywhere by unique tile designs and fountains, it made me cry for its beauty.

At its heart, at the place of prayer, pointing toward Mecca, I came to my first “white wall of worship”. The pure white wall seems to be half the size of a football field and on it incised at the center is the name “Allah”. Surrounding the name and covering the whole wall are etched the 99 names of Allah, filled in with gold. In front of this white wall of worship hangs a \$20 million chandelier of precious stones of all colors refracting the light of Allah in a million ways, and the world’s largest carpet in marvelous patterns, hand sewn, and with the long, straight ridges sewn directly into it for the people to know where to line up for prayer. The people of Islam are like teeth on a comb before Allah, God the Creator, who is so wonderful and of such fullness that 99 names only begin to name God.

Standing in awe before this wall of the Most Powerful, Most Compassionate, Most Loving, Most Forgiving, Most Wise, Most Beautiful, Most Full, Most Bountiful, Most Gracious, I knew my God, our God, was being called on and named. Islam does not see itself as a new religion, another religion, an additional religion, but as the original, given, natural, ur-religion of all people in the truth of their relationship of submission to the Creator. Could you worship at this white wall of the 99 names of God in the great White Mosque in Abu Dhabi? Is it part of your faith?

The second white wall of worship I propose to you today is the white wall which faces all of us in this very Chapel of St Ignatius. This whole chapel is one white wall of worship with no names carved in it but simply troweled with a texture which creates a free and inviting field for prayer. On this white wall, instead of 99 names of God, there is one huge, stark, dominant image of the crucifix, of Jesus on the cross. There is only one image on the white walls by which we are surrounded. The barrenness and whiteness all around makes this one image of Jesus hanging over us in death, in love, all the more unmistakable, unavoidable.

You might say Jesus on the cross is the 99 names of God, the name of God dying for love of us, taking us with him through death to life, and shouting to us: “Look on me: this is your God; this is his compassion, this his grace, this his forgiveness, this his beauty, this his love.” We do have an image of the unimaginable God, an image of what God is like, and that image is before us, for our worship of God and our obedience to and submission to God.

As Christians we believe the veil of God has been pierced by the one who fully submitted to God and that we have access to that God through him, through the opening, the aperture, he has made in himself to the reality of God evoked by the 99 names but beyond all names. Our way to God is not by names for the reality of God—however much they bear truth and call to worship and fill us with awe—but our way is a person, the person of Jesus. Our truth about God is our relationship with Jesus, not something we hold in our minds or even in our feelings and hearts. Our truth about God is our being held and taken to and presented to God by Jesus through the veil, through all walls.

Our Lenten journey is to this wall and to the piercing of this wall in the loving death and joyful resurrection of Jesus as we accept to become one with him, to be taken along by him into that mystery. What an incredible pilgrimage for all of us! No wonder it needs to be renewed for all of us each year and carefully, step by step, initiated and accompanied for our candidates. I just know that my beloved Muslim friends—who have so helped me on this most peculiar Lenten journey—are on the same pilgrimage, urge us forward to the God of 99 names, and are in fact themselves being given eternal life joyfully by the one we believe in who is beyond all names. Let us run to him for our own sakes as well as for theirs.