



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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## “Radical Prophet of Mecca”

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### Centering Thoughts

*Say, I am only a mortal the like of you; it is revealed to me that your God is one God.  
So let him who hopes for the encounter with his Lord work righteousness. Qur'an 18.110*

*Muhammad is the Messenger of God and Seal of Prophets. Qur'an 33.40*

*O Prophet, we have sent you as a witness, and good tidings to bear and  
warning, calling unto God by His leave, and as a light-giving lamp. Qur'an 33.45-46*

*What actions are most excellent? To gladden the heart of a human being,  
to feed the hungry, to help the afflicted, to lighten the sorrow of the sorrowful,  
and to remove the wrongs of the injured. Prophet Muhammad, Hadith of al-Bukhârî*

### Sermon

One of the Prophet's verses in the Qur'an says God made us into tribes and nations that we may know each other, not that we may despise each other. With that in mind and on yesterday's anniversary of Muhammad's birth, I think we should get to know Muhammad better.

Muhammad was born about 570 in Mecca, now part of Saudi Arabia. His father died before Muhammad was born. This tragedy put Muhammad in a precarious position for without a father he had no inheritance or protection. Soon after his birth his mother fostered him with a Bedouin family who agreed to protect and rear him in exchange for the meager payment she offered. With or without a father this was a common practice. Mecca was a dirty, polluted city and many believed it healthier for children to grow up in the fresh desert air. They also believed the nomadic Bedouin were the faithful keepers of true Arabic culture and that by living with them, Mecca's city children would learn their stories and traditions.

But when Muhammad was six years old his mother died. He was returned to Mecca and his grandfather offered Muhammad his protection. This grandfather was a prominent chief, the leader of the Quraysh tribe, Mecca's most powerful. Muhammad became a favorite companion of his grandfather. Though still a child he was taken to tribal councils and observed how fairly his

grandfather managed tribal conflict. Muhammad admired his grandfather and these experiences contributed greatly to his own development into an honest, trustworthy adult.

When Muhammad's grandfather died, his uncle, a successful Quraysh merchant, became his next guardian and taught Muhammad the merchant trade.

Mecca was at an economic and cultural crossroads. Caravans brought in people, ideas, and goods and Muhammad learned from them. As he grew older, Muhammad traveled beyond Mecca on his uncle's business and became well-respected by the merchants and traders he encountered. But because he brought nothing into his uncle's business, he owned nothing. He was still an orphan, if no longer a boy.

At age 25 he met Khadija, a widow who ran her own successful business in Mecca. She trusted Muhammad to carry her goods along the trade routes. When she asked him through an intermediary why he had not yet married, he claimed he had nothing to support a family. She replied that if he was willing to be her partner, she would marry him. He agreed.

Khadija was 15 years older than Muhammad. She was educated and though Muhammad was illiterate, he was an able partner. For twenty years they had a happy, monogamous marriage blessed by six children, though only four girls survived childhood. Only after Khadija's death did Muhammad marry again. Although he maintained intimate relations with all his wives, his marriages were made mostly for political gain or to offer protection to widows. Throughout his life, Muhammad treated women as partners, not property. He received much criticism from men for listening to the opinions of his wives, playing with children, and even repairing his own clothes.

Muhammad's childhood circumstances as an orphan without home or property made him sensitive to the needs of the poor and marginalized. It is not surprising that Muhammad would make charity (to help the poor) and fasting (to feel hunger and deprivation) pillars of a Muslim's faith.

As a child Muhammad had been curious about the natural world and asked many questions of his elders. As an adult he continued to wonder and be awed by the beauty and grandeur of the natural world. A thoughtful child, he began questioning the violence in the world around him. He frequently withdrew to a cave on the nearby summit of Mount Hira to be alone with his thoughts, to fast, and to pray to the one God he believed in. He ignored the many deities being worshiped at Mecca's Kaaba, a holy site considered ancient even in Muhammad's day.

Surrounding the Kaaba sat 360 statues or idols of different gods—it was a temple for all, no matter whom you worshiped. Legend says the Kaaba was built by Abraham at God's direction. Although different tribes now came to honor the different gods at the Kaaba, they still held a remote, underlying belief in the one supreme God of Abraham.

In 610, when Muhammad was 40 years old his life abruptly changed. While Muhammad was in the cave, a devastating presence in a blaze of glory overpowered him. He described this presence pressing down on his chest, squeezing him so he could barely breathe. This figure commanded Muhammad, shouting "Read!" Stunned, Muhammad protested, "How? I can't read."

But the divine figure would not be denied. “Proclaim in the name of your Lord.” (Read, proclaim, and recite were all meant by the same Arabic word used.)

Muhammad didn’t understand what was happening. He was terrified. He fled home to tell Khadija. He questioned his own sanity – but she did not. Because Muhammad was such an honest, trustworthy person, she found it easier to believe a divine had visited her husband than he had either made up the story or was crazy. For two years Muhammad reported to his wife and cousin his encounters with the angel Gabriel before letting any others know. In 612 Muhammad could stay quiet no longer. He began preaching what was revealed to him and continued to be revealed for the rest of his life, a life turned upside down.

I called this service about Muhammad, “Radical Prophet of Mecca.” Like so many prophets his message challenged Arab culture. Let me summarize what was so radical.

First, Muhammad proclaimed one God and only one God existed. He told the people who came to worship at the Kaaba that their idols were false gods. Everything they and their ancestors had worshiped meant nothing. It’s no surprise that these worshipers didn’t care for his challenge to their gods or their ancestor’s beliefs and traditions.

Neither were the Quraysh merchants happy with this message. The Kaaba brought pilgrims from many lands to Mecca. Their presence supported commerce. If the people didn’t need to come to the shrine anymore because of what Muhammad told them, then their livelihoods would be threatened. Mecca’s merchants needed pilgrims.

Second, Muhammad told the people that there was an afterlife in which they would be judged for their earthly behavior. The Arabs thought this idea was ludicrous. They believed this life was the only life that existed. They believed the gods judged you by whether they let you live or die. This belief allowed them to kill without fear of eternal consequences. It supported the people’s willingness to exact vengeance upon anyone who they believed had dishonored or harmed them in some way.

These attitudes were also why Muhammad needed a protector after his father’s death. When his grandfather and uncle claimed him, they placed the power and might of the entire Quraysh tribe at Muhammad’s side. Anyone without the protection of a tribe or clan was vulnerable to abuse or being killed. At one point in Muhammad’s life, the Quraysh merchants were so unhappy with Muhammad they asked his uncle to withdraw his protection. If his uncle had done so, the men could assassinate Muhammad without fear of reprisal. But with that protection, they could only kill him if they were ready to start a war. His uncle refused to withdraw his protection.

Third, Muhammad demanded they protect the vulnerable, the weak and the poor. He required believers to give alms out of their own wealth to support the needy. Giving charity became one of the five pillars or requirements of Islam. It also didn’t make the wealthy happy with Muhammad.

Muhammad also extended protection to other tribes. He also made agreements not to fight one another, or support anyone who fought against fellow believers. In doing this he gathered the

tribes together through mutual peace treaties. This was unprecedented cooperation which threatened the old ways of warfare and conquest.

Fourth, Muhammad proclaimed that God's pleasure lay only with the faithful. Wealth meant nothing and everyone was equal in the eyes of God. Quraysh merchants again weren't pleased to hear that everything they had worked hard for meant nothing.

Like other prophets and reformers, Muhammad didn't intend to start a new religion. He worked tirelessly to bring the Arabs back to belief in one God. He worked to align the Arabs with the rest of the more sophisticated, monotheistic religious world. Mostly, Muhammad wanted peace and unity among the tribes. Belief in one God was the way to reach that goal. He believed only a grand ideology could trump petty tribal loyalties.

At first the poor and marginalized responded to Muhammad's message. Then others tired by the violence and vendettas responded to him. As more joined, families broke apart. Sons or daughters, husbands or wives left their families to surrender to Allah, the meaning of Islam's submission.

Muhammad eventually was run out of Mecca by his enemies. He found refuge in Medina and continued to gather more people to his way. Eventually, to survive the believers raised swords against the Meccan non-believers and their allies. Though fighting for his life and his fellow believers, Muhammad preached that force should not be used to convert. The Qur'an says, "There is no compulsion in religion" (2:256) and "To you your religion, to me mine." (109:6)

Although I've reduced Muhammad's life and message to its bare essentials, I think we can hear echoes of Unitarian Universalism. We, too, proclaim the unity of all people and the oneness of God, even as we understand that concept in many different ways.

The Qur'an instructs Muslims to accept other religions and not use force for conversion, just as we do. It also shares our concern for the poor and marginalized, affirming equality among people and demanding respect for all. We share many ideals. There is much to admire in the Qur'an and in Muhammad, even as we distance them from the abuses of modern terrorists who manipulate Islam for their own ends. It is clear to me that modern terrorists do not follow The Qur'an.

When I learn of a new violent act done in the name of Islam, I feel some despair. I don't want to accept that people can corrupt a message of peace so that it supports such atrocities. Knowing more about Muhammad and his dream for a peaceful world gives me hope that someday all Muslims will return to his basic message.

I know any religion, like most any conviction, can and will be abused by fallible, imperfect humans. But at its core, religious values offer hope and beauty, not despair and violence. I have to believe that religion is a force for good, even though it is corruptible. Each one of us must be mindful of how easy it is to stray, we must be mindful of our own actions. It is up to each of us to follow our ideals as closely as we can, and to be called to task when we act contrary to them.

We will break our promises, our resolutions, and even our principles and values. But we can ‘come, yet again, come’. We must return and begin again. A New Year is such a time.

May we continue to try, and try together, supporting each other in our efforts to live up to our high ideals.

*Salaam alaykum.* Peace be upon you.

### **Questions for Reflection or Discussion**

1. In what ways might Muhammad’s life inspire you? How is he a source of wisdom for you?
2. Does the God of your own understanding or a Spirit communicate with you? Please share.
3. God also taught Muhammad through nature. What do you learn from ‘everyday’ miracles?

### **Further Reading**

1. Armstrong, Karen, *Islam: A Short History*. New York: Modern Library Edition, Random House, Inc., 2000.
2. Brown, Jonathan A.C., *Muhammad: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
3. Conover, Sarah, *Muhammad: The Story of a Prophet and Reformer*. Boston: Skinner House Books, 2013.
4. Ruthven, Malise, *Islam: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.