

FIVE FAITHS PROJECT



Islam

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Introduction to Islam

In the beginning, Allah

What God grants to people out of His mercy, no one can withhold, and what He withholds no one can grant apart from him. And He is the Powerful, the Wise.

Qur'an 35:2

According to Islamic teachings about the nature of God recorded in the sacred text, the Qur'an, Allah literally means The God, not a god, not one of many gods, but the one and only God. Allah created all that exists, heaven and earth. Allah created human beings, the first man, Adam, and the first woman, Eve. According to the teachings of Islam, Adam was not only the first human, but also the first of Allah's prophets. From time immemorial, Allah has spoken through his prophets, also referred to as messengers, reinforcing, renewing and refining the same basic message to all humankind. Allah is and has always been the source of all things, and peace is achieved through surrender to Allah.

According to sacred texts, one of the descendants of Adam was a man named Abraham. In Islam, he is one of the prophets of God. Abraham was faithful to Allah. Allah promised him that he would be the progenitor of a great nation. Abraham had two sons. His first son he named Ishmael. Ishmael was the child of Hagar. His second son, the child of Sarah, was named Isaac. Sarah demanded that Hagar and Ishmael leave Abraham's household. Ishmael went to the place later called Makkah (sometimes transliterated as Mecca). The descendants of Ishmael, directly connected to Abraham and Hagar, became Arabs. From the line of Isaac, Sarah's son, came the Hebrew people, later called the Jews.

The life of Muhammad

Centuries later, in Makkah, the prophet Muhammad was born in 570 CE. His name means "the praised one." The world into which Muhammad was born was filled with difficulty. Within days of his birth, Muhammad's father died. His mother died when he was only six. For the next two years, his grandfather cared for him, but he also died when Muhammad was only eight. He went to live with the family of his uncle. He had to work hard in his new family in order that they might all survive the harshness of life in the desert. He tended his uncle's flocks and grew up in a world filled with conflicts between tribes and cities filled with strife and thievery. When Muhammad reached adulthood, having married and established his own household, he began to search for answers to the problems of humanity and the purpose of life.

On a night commemorated as The Night of Power, while Muhammad was engaged in worship in the cave named Hira, his usual mountain retreat, all of creation grew very still. Amid the stillness, a voice spoke to Muhammad and told him he was the appointed one, the one who would bring Allah's message to the world.

The angel Gabriel spoke to him, saying, "Read." Muhammad answered that he did not know how to read. The angel embraced him, holding him tight. When he released him, the angel said again, "Read." Again, Muhammad answered that he could not read and again the

angel held him tight. Finally, on the third exchange, Muhammad began to recite the first revelation of the Qur'an. He rushed home to tell his wife, Khadijah. Muhammad's life was forever changed. God had commanded that he preach the message to a world in need of the instruction. The recorded events of Muhammad's life say that he did all that he was commanded to do.

The teachings that God gave to Muhammad were recorded in Arabic, in a collection called the Qur'an. The Qur'an contains the divine words revealed to Muhammad through the angel Gabriel. Within the Qur'an are the stories of the faith, stories of 25 of the many prophets who went before Muhammad and the stories of the life of Muhammad, the last of Allah's prophets. Muslims believe that the Qur'an faithfully and perfectly records all the words which God spoke to Muhammad. The Qur'an is written in Arabic. While the meaning of the Qur'an has been rewritten into languages other than Arabic, it can never be accurately translated because it contains the exact words of God. The words themselves are divine and unalterable. Arabic is the language through which these sacred truths were and will always be communicated.

On the opening pages of this sacred text, Muslims find the first truths of Islam and the text bears the seal and blessing of God. This guarantees to Muslims that the text is complete, accurate and true. Muslims believe that the Qur'an constitutes the one true and complete guide for Muslims, and the revelation of the life of Islam.

The Meaning and Purpose of Islam

Literally, Islam means "peace achieved through surrender to God," and a Muslim is one who strives to surrender in that way. The ultimate goal of all Muslims is to live a life of absolute and complete devotion to the will of God, following in the teachings of his prophet, Muhammad. In order to become a Muslim, one must make a true and heartfelt profession of faith, preferably in the presence of another faithful Muslim. This profession is more than the saying of the words but is seen as the living expression of deeply held beliefs. The profession says "'La ilaha illallah, Muhammadur rasool Allah" – "There is no deity except God, Muhammad is the Messenger of God.'" To make this profession is to affirm and accept the Islamic belief that there is only one God, only one Creator, Ruler and Supreme Authority. It is important to be very clear that Muslims believe that Allah is not a specific tribal god, but rather, is the One God, whose name in Arabic and in the Qur'an is Allah. Islamic tradition acknowledges that Allah is the same God recognized by all the prophets and followers of monotheistic traditions.

In order to understand how to surrender to the will of Allah, Muslims look to his messengers. Islam affirms the role of the prophets who came before Muhammad: Abraham, Moses, Isaiah and Jesus. Muhammad delivered the final message of God's will: All of life must be lived with an understanding of the will of Allah. To do so will bring understanding, dignity, compassion and meaning to human life in this world, and salvation in the Hereafter. In addition to devotion to Allah, Muslims also hold an abiding regard for the human community. In Islam, all faithful actions honor Allah and support the common life of human beings.

The Five Pillars of Islam: Declaration of Faith, Prayer, Fasting, Charity and Pilgrimage

The core beliefs and practices of Islam are called the Five Pillars. These five pillars support the whole of Islam. Each pillar expresses an aspect of the nature of Allah and the individual's necessary response. Allah is the Ultimate Reality, unknown to finite minds, but explained in the revealed words of the prophets. The prophets teach that God created human beings as the one creature gifted with a mind capable of thinking, reasoning, remembering and teaching ideas to others. In addition, human beings are uniquely gifted with a feeling heart and are the recipients of free will. By that, Muslims mean that human beings are not limited to instinctual behaviors, but rather are free to choose a path rooted in the spiritual truths held in the Qur'an. The Five Pillars are given in the Qur'an. Sunnah, the other sacred text for Muslims, is the collected sayings, called Hadith, actions and approvals of the Prophet Muhammad. The Sunnah offers Muslims necessary instructions for the practice of Islam. For example, the Qur'an says that all Muslims are to pray five times a day and a Hadith instructs in how one should pray.

- The First Pillar (SHAHADAH) is the declaration of faith: "There is no deity except God, Muhammad is the Messenger of God." All Muslims make this statement with a believing heart. This declaration establishes the core truth of Islam. The remaining four pillars offer a way of life by which all Muslims may honor Allah.
- The Second Pillar (SALAH) is Prayer. Five times a day, Muslims stop their regular activities to turn their attentions directly to Allah. Islamic prayer is distinct from other traditions in that it is a multifaceted activity, including bodily postures, standing, bowing, lying on the ground and sitting, each repeated during the prayer. Muslims face Makkah during times of prayer. Prayers include recitations from the Qur'an. Praise and petitions are also included within Salah. This rhythm of prayer helps all Muslims to maintain their awareness of Allah, their devoted commitment to live their lives according to his commandments. Just before sunrise, at noon, in the late afternoon, at sunset and in the evening, Muslim's reach out to Allah in prayer. So important to the faithful life is this discipline of prayer, that it is practiced even in times of great difficulty or illness. Special accommodations are made for those for whom bowing, for example, might be physically impossible. Salah is a regular expression of each individual's commitment to Allah and dependence on Allah's mercy. On Fridays, Muslims gather for community prayers at the mosque, the sacred gathering place.
- The Third Pillar (SAWM) is Fasting. One of the strengths of Islam lies in its willingness to understand and honor human needs. All people have need of food and water. Married couples have a need for sexual intimacy. But none of these needs must guide the life of a Muslim. Even our most basic human desires must come under the discipline of Allah. To that end, fasting is a part of Islam. During the month of Ramadan, the ninth month of the lunar Islamic calendar, Muslims are asked to go without food or drink, even water, and sexual relations from dawn to sunset. The final ten days and nights of Ramadan are filled with rigorous prayers and devotions, including the commemoration of the Night of Power. Throughout the month, Muslims, by their fasting, are given the chance to deepen their awareness and heighten their devotion to Allah. By turning away from the satisfaction of human, physical needs, Muslims connect more deeply with the community. In the fasting,

Muslims remember again the needs of others, the hunger of the world and the longing of the human heart for Allah. While Muslims value generosity at all times during the year, they also strive to practice greater generosity in the month of Ramadan.

The believer is not the one who eats his fill when his neighbor beside him is hungry.

The Prophet Muhammad

- The Fourth Pillar (ZAKAAT) prescribes the acts of charity which are essential in Islam. Zakaat has no true equivalent in the English language. It may be understood as purification, but it has more to do with charity, with remembering the poor and giving them their due than the word purification might imply at first reading. The Fourth Pillar constitutes the free giving of a percentage of one's assets to the poor, to the sick and needy and to the causes of God for the construction of mosques, schools and hospitals. While the percentage is established at 2.5 percent, each Muslim must annually assess his holdings and property. Zakaat is paid only on holdings above and beyond that which is needed for basic survival. Zakaat is paid after debts and other financial obligations. In other words, Zakaat is never to be seen as an excuse not to care for one's household, nor is it to be an excuse to default on other financial responsibilities. Rather, it is a reminder that all wealth belongs to Allah. Muslims believe that in giving away a mere 2.5 percent, the remaining possessions and assets receive Allah's blessing. This giving aids in the care of all Muslims and others. Zakaat does not constitute the whole of Muslim charity. Being responsive to human need, seeing one's wealth as a gift from Allah and sharing what one has with others are central practices in Islam.
- The Fifth Pillar of Islam (HAJJ) is Pilgrimage. At least once in the life of every adult Muslim who is financially, physically and emotionally able to make the journey, a pilgrimage to Makkah is required. The journey is carefully prescribed. Hajj is made during the month of Dhul-Hijjah in the Islamic lunar calendar, between the seventh and tenth days of that month. At each step of the journey, prayers are said, and rites performed which express the devotion of the Muslim. Men wear special garments made out of unstitched white cloth. Women can wear any dress that meets the Islamic guidelines of modesty. Pilgrims refrain from intercourse with their spouses, do not adorn themselves with perfume and are instructed never to quarrel or be obscene in any way while they make this pilgrimage. Upon arrival in Makkah, after finding housing and food, pilgrims visit the Kabah, the Sacred House. Originally, Abraham and Ishmael built the structure as the first site of worship to Allah. The building, which is in Makkah, has been rebuilt many times, but at least one stone remains from that original building. It is called the Black Stone and believed to have come from Paradise. Some say that the stone is part of a meteorite. As the pilgrim circles the Kabah, special prayers are spoken in the manner described by Muhammad. While touching the stone is not a requirement, many pilgrims hope to do so as a reminder of the love the pilgrim feels for Allah. After circling seven times, the hajj continues with other actions. Washing in the underground well spring of Zamzam, and hastening between two nearby hills, each and every action reminds the Muslim of the loving nature of God, their voluntary rejection of evil and idolatry and their devotion to the teachings of Allah. By shared participation in common rituals, the hajj serves as a reminder of the vastness of the Muslim community and deepens the individual's sense of belonging, of being part of a single, whole community spread throughout the world.

The all-encompassing nature of the teachings of Allah

But Islam is not limited to these five pillars, for part of its strength lies in the all-encompassing nature of the teachings. Every aspect of human discourse is discussed. Every concern addressed. Muslims believe that Islam is a religion, yes, but it is also a complete way of life. The sacred texts contain a strong love of learning, encouraging Muslims to study. Highly developed systems of mathematics, geometry and medicine all emerged in Islamic culture far in advance of the rest of the civilized world. While Muslims regard Muhammad as the true messenger of Allah, he is never seen as the center of the faith. Muslims look to the suras (passages comparable to chapters) in the Qur'an and the Sunnah for divinely inspired instructions for every aspect of Islamic life.

Islamic teaching establishes the Qur'an as the collected recitations of Allah and the one true miracle of Islam. Therefore, whenever the Qur'an is read, Muslims hear Allah speaking. According to one source:

Mystics have chanted and sung, meditated upon, and esoterically interpreted the Qur'an; grammarians have based rules for Arabic on it; legists and theologians have formulated guidelines for all of life in light of it; artists have embellished almost all Islamic buildings and artifacts with its words in elaborate calligraphy; conservators of the status quo have claimed it as their authority; reformers have built movements around a return to its preaching; and ordinary people have patterned their lives as well as their speech after its words.

In the Islamic tradition, the Qur'an is understood to cover every aspect of Muslim life, and to do so without error.

Two streams of Islam: Sunnis and Shi'ites

*Our confidence, O Lord, is in you and your unlimited mercy and compassion.
from Prayer for Istesquaa, a prayer for rain*

Since the coming of the Qur'an and the teachings of the Muhammad, over time, Islam divided into two main streams, Sunnis, or Traditionalists, and Shi'ites, or Partisans. The Traditionalists comprise the overwhelming majority of Muslims in the world today. While there is some divergence, both hold to the significance of the Five Pillars and other major teachings. Islam also has a mystical tradition, known as Sufism. Sufis find a great wealth of experience available by drawing a distinction between the inner and outer worlds, between the Ultimate Reality of Allah and the present reality of this world. They pursue the mysteries of love, ecstasy and intuition. Each of these mysteries offers new ways to understand the mystery and love of Allah. Sufism expresses itself in remarkable love poetry, understanding all loves between human beings to be mere shadows of the love of Allah. In ecstatic states, trances and other deep meditations, Sufis experience transcendence, journeying outside the normal world and into the spiritual realm. They consider this to be in keeping with Muhammad's Night Flight, when all the layers of heaven were revealed to him. Sufis do not claim to see what he saw, but rather to approach it. In intuition, Sufis give attention to eyes of the heart, acknowledging that the whole world is God in disguise.

Sufism sees all aspects of devotion as important and necessary but also contends that the compliance with all these aspects is symbolic of the self's deepest spiritual need to remove all obstacles and barriers which exist between one and God. By continual invocations and recitations, the heart is polished and made ever more beautiful. Nevertheless, Islam is a religion of moderation, maintaining that spiritual exercises should not be cultivated at the expense of moderation in sleeping, eating, praying or any communal activities for religious purposes. While there has been and remains a certain level of conflict between the traditions of Islam, there is agreement that there is no God but Allah and the Qur'an is the revealed word of Allah.

Growth of Islam

Historically located in the lands surrounding Makkah and comprising Arabia, Islam is now present in virtually every country on earth. One in five or six people alive today are practicing Muslims. Whether by conversion or by birthright, they choose to live according to the guidance of the Qur'an. Were there time in this text to study the historical impact of Islam, it would not take long to note that while most of Europe lay dormant during the Dark Ages, Muslim philosophers and scientists, artists and architects were busy, moving thought, mathematics, and architecture forward. Their influence is seen in our modern medicine, architecture and literature.

Muslims United in Prayer

By turning to prayer, Muslims all over experience their unity. Muslims pray as a regular reminder and expression of their relationship to Allah and to the community of faith. They may gather in mosques, or pause alone during the business of the day, listen to the call to prayer from a nearby minaret, or to the radio broadcasts of prayers. They may be in the privacy of their homes. Following specific prayer and worship forms, they call out to Allah for mercy, for grace, for courage. They praise Allah for compassion and generosity. They give thanks for Muhammad and his devotion to Allah. So great is their appreciation of the Prophet Muhammad that every mention of his name, either orally or in writing, is followed by the words "May God's peace and blessings be on him." At any time of the day or night, somewhere on earth a Muslim is saying prayers. The times of prayer circumnavigate the earth just as the path of the sun covers the earth. As they pray, close to a billion people, each, in their way, determines anew to live within the intricate life code of Islam in order to express full devotion to Allah. Each is hearing a passage and remembering the words of the Qur'an. One such passage illuminates the Muslim love for Allah:

God! There is no deity except Him, the Living, the Eternal. No slumber can over power Him, nor sleep. His are all things in the heavens and on earth. Who is there who can intercede in His presence except as He permits? He knows what is before them and what is hidden from them, and they cannot comprehend anything of His knowledge except what He will. His kingdom spreads over the heavens and the earth, and the guarding of them does not weary Him, and He is the Exalted, the Almighty.

(Qur'an 2:255)

Further Research & Points for Discussion

- The Qur'an, the sacred text of Islam, is maintained in Arabic. It is understood that Arabic contains within it the teachings and precepts of Allah. Any translation will lose meaning. Ask students to consider what words are in common usage in America which would not easily translate into other languages. Can they think of words which have been wholesale transplanted into American speech from other languages? Why might a religion want to keep its original language?
- Locate Makkah (Mecca) on a world map. Using travel agents and other resources, ask students to plan a trip to Mecca. How would they get there? What could they expect that this trip might cost? What are the climate and the terrain of this part of the world? What would they have to pack for such a journey? Remind students that no one is encouraged to make the pilgrimage to Makkah unless their family's needs are met.
- Ask students to consider the Muslim practice of Zakah. Make a list of all your possessions and your assets, including money in your savings account and in your pocket. Attach a fair monetary value to your possessions. Add all the figures to find your net worth. Determine what constitutes 2 1/2 percent of your net worth. Put the findings on a piece of paper. Do not include your name. Gather all the amounts and determine how much your classroom would be able to give if you were to give these 2 1/2 percent to the poor. Remind students that someone who has only enough to meet their own and their family needs is not required to give the 2 1/2 percent. Ask students to consider how this practice, one of the Five Pillars of Islam, may be a just way to distribute to the needs of the poor.
- The Muslim calendar is based on the cycles of the moon. Ask students to research the moon's cycles and the Muslim calendar. Using the library and the Internet, as well as other resources, determine what month the class is currently in according to the Muslim calendar. And also, what year is it?
- Because Ramadan is a month-long season, which requires day long fasting, based on the lunar calendar, how many hours of fasting would an American Muslim fast if Ramadan fell in the summer? In the winter? Even without knowing all of the religious reasons for fasting, ask students to consider what benefits they can imagine from regular fasting. Some students may wish to consider the difference between being "hungry" and "not being full." How often do Americans eat just because they are bored or because it is time to eat? Students may wish to ask family members and friends if they have ever fasted. For what reasons? What was it like? Teachers may wish to caution students about the problems of fasting. The goal of Ramadan is not to injure anyone, by denying them food or water, but rather to increase devotion and awareness of the needs of others.
- The Muslim code of behavior is based on the belief that Allah is interested in all aspects of human life. Decisions made about how to spend one's time, money and energy are all informed by the love of Allah. Ask students to consider how families and individuals determine how to spend their resources. In American society what codes of behavior are we expected to honor? Why?

- Muslim artisans were skilled in calligraphy and tile making. Many buildings in the Muslim world are highly decorated with mosaics. Students may wish to design a mosaic pattern which is consistent with Islamic traditions (see Strategies for Viewing Islamic Art) or with their own beliefs and traditions. Mosaic tiles are available in art supply stores. Students might also use colored paper cut into tiny squares to complete the project.

Contemporary Research Options

- There are more than a billion Muslims worldwide. What are the countries in which Islam is the dominant religion? Where is it growing? Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world today. How many Muslims live in America today? Are there Muslims in your community? Where is the nearest Mosque?
- Given that Islam offers followers a way of organizing their whole lives in devotion to Allah, what problems might a Muslim family face in contemporary American society. Remember that in some Muslim families, dress codes are a normal part of life. Students may also wish to consider the difficulties a Muslim student might face at noontime, when prayers are normally spoken. How would you feel if you wanted to stop for prayer during a school lunch? What might make that difficult for you? Would you do it anyway?

Panel of Calligraphy, n.d.**Attributed to Shamsuddin Asaf Jahi (Indian, Deccan, Hyderabad: Katabahu, active 1724-1748)****Paper appliqué and white opaque watercolor on dark blue paper; 5 3/8 x 9 3/16 in**

Because Arabic is the language in which the angel Gabriel spoke to Muhammad, revealing the message of Allah, the letterforms of Arabic play a significant role in Islamic art. The letterforms themselves are considered to be uniquely able to contain Allah's teachings, and have the capacity to communicate sacred truths.

For Muslims, merely looking at the forms, is an act of devotion. Speaking the words, even without full understanding, may also be employed as a religious practice and discipline.

In this piece, the letterforms have been placed on a background of flowers and vines. The garden imagery is considered to be a symbol of paradise. While Islamic art does not contain images of God or of the prophet Muhammad, because idolatry is forbidden, it is common to see the names of Allah and the name of the prophet. The calligraphy says:

"God bless Muhammad, and the family of Muhammad"



Attributed to Shamsuddin Asaf Jahi (Indian, Deccan, Hyderabad: Katabahu, active 1724-1748); Panel of Calligraphy, n.d.; Paper appliqué and white opaque watercolor on dark blue paper; 5 3/8 x 9 3/16 in.; Ackland Art Museum, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Gift of Charles Millard, 91.75

Devotional Book, 1769**North African, Algiers****Paper, gold leaf, ink, watercolor; leather binding, 6 5/8 x 4 1/2 in**

The illuminated pages in this image come from a Muslim prayer book. Prayer is a regular discipline in Muslim life. Five times a day, Muslims pause from their daily activities in order to face in the direction of Makkah and pray. In this work, students may see two buildings surrounded by courtyards. The page on the right depicts the mosque surrounding the Ka'ba in Makkah, which plays a central role in the ritual life of Muslims. Built by the Prophet Abraham as the first shrine for the worship of God, the Ka'ba orients Muslims in their daily prayers and is the focus of their hajj (pilgrimage). The page on the left depicts Muhammad's tomb and mosque in Medina.

In contemporary Makkah, the Ka'ba still stands, along with a Grand Mosque. During the annual pilgrimage to Makkah, more than two million Muslims gather at this place.

Islamic law prohibits images of Allah and discourages images of the Muhammad. Illustrations of centers of worship are not uncommon. The artist has included suggestions of the surrounding terrain.



In 605, the Ka'ba was rebuilt by several tribes in Makkah. When it came time to replace the cornerstone, the rock thought to be made from a meteorite, the tribes could not agree on who should be the one to replace it. When Muhammad arrived, he offered a new suggestion which allowed them all to replace the stone. He called for his cloak, placed the stone in the center, and a representative from each tribe lifted the edge. Together they replaced the stone. In this way, Muhammad is said to have encouraged unity among groups of people who had long been in conflict with one another.



Unidentified Artist, North African, Algiers; Devotional Book, 1769; paper, gold leaf, ink, watercolor with leather binding; 6 5/8 x 4 1/2 in.; Ackland Art Museum, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Ackland Fund, 96.4.2

Watch and Compass, late 19th century**Indian/Swiss made****Brass, enamel, silver overlay, and glass; 2 11/16 x 1 7/8 in.**

Islamic artisans often employ intricate patterns as fundamental elements in their work. Suggestions of gardens filled with flowering vines abound within this tradition. The star is also present in much of Islamic art. Some regard it as a symbol for Allah.

Attention to detail and beauty often are often used to decorate or otherwise enhance utilitarian items in Muslim culture. (Refer to the works on the poster.) Prayer books as well as oil lamps, ritual objects and architectural embellishments are made more visually engaging and beautiful by the use of color and pattern. Scholars suggest that this is due in part to the belief that all aspects of Muslim life must reflect the nature of Allah. By enhancing the appearance of everyday utilitarian objects, Muslims may be reminded of their devotion to Allah as it infuses even the most mundane task.

This pocket watch and compass (seen from the back) is a good example. The watch is necessary to Muslim life as it helps to establish times of prayer and the compass allows the Muslim to face the direction of Mecca/Makkah.



- The intricate and symmetrical designs in the back of the watch reflect the Islamic world view. Allah created an intricate and ordered universe. Devotion to Allah is expressed in a life lived according to Allah's instructions.
- In addition, the three concentric circles, red, green, and blue surrounding the central star, may indicate or symbolize the Islamic world, expanding out and across the globe from its center in Mecca. Each band is decorated in like fashion perhaps as an indication of the unity of Islam.
- A tiny compass is placed in the top pin of the watch. This allows the user to identify the direction of Mecca in order that they might be properly oriented in times of prayer.
- The watch was manufactured in Switzerland; however, the surface was then decorated with intricate invocations and prayers by artisans in India.
- The watch is made of brass, enamel, silver overlay and glass.
- On the face of the watch is an inscription which reads: "There is no god but God, and Muhammad is his prophet." The name of the original owner also appears on the face.



Unidentified Artist, Indian, Swiss; *Watch and Compass*, late 19th century; Brass, enamel, silver overlay, and glass; 2 11/16 x 1 7/8 in.; Ackland Art Museum, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Ackland Fund, 96.3.2

Voices of Faith

Bismilla

Summary

Bismilla is the first and longest letter in the Qur'an. It means: I do my deeds in the name of Allah almighty. In this story, the teller recounts a folk tale concerning a husband and wife and their devotion to Allah.

Research Option

Folk tales often reinforce certain values within a culture. Ask students to find other folk tales from America and other parts of the world. What values do the tales reinforce?

Discussion Questions

- If folk tales reinforce values, what values does this story reinforce?
- How does the story prove Allah's faithfulness?
- Why might this be an important story for husbands and wives?

Transcript of recorded story: Bismilla

Hi. My name is Metin Mercan. I'm from Turkey, and so is my story. I live in Carrboro (North Carolina), and my story lives in the heart of story lovers. I sure wish you will take my story into your heart and cherish it there and tell it to a friend or two. Well this is a story of Bismillah er-rahman er-rahim. The shorter version is Bismillah. It has half of the powers, so you need to repeat it more often. Bismillah is the first and the longest letter in the Koran. It translates to "I do my deeds in the name of Allah Almighty." If you recite the words long enough - often that is - your intentions will fall upon the right course of action, and you will certainly do the right thing. Allah guarantees it.

Once upon a time there lived a merchant by the name of Ahmet Efendi, the wise man, and his wife Sabira, patience. They lived in an adobe, in a mud house in the middle of a beautiful garden. In the middle of the garden there was a water well which Sabira tirelessly drew water from to give life to the plants in the garden. They were pious people, and they prayed five times a day. That's exactly how many times Ahmet Efendi prayed, but his wife, Sabira, prayed much more than that. She prayed in the garden, prayed in the house, prayed every step of the way. She said "Bismillah," all the time. Ahmet Efendi, he had it with his wife saying Bismillah all the time, so he had intentions to teach her a lesson about overdoing the Bismillah. He often said to her, "Five times is perfect, that's what prophets, that's what Allah, that's what everybody decides upon. So let's have some time for idle talk please." But it was ingrained in her to say Bismillah every step of the way.

So, one day, Ahmet Efendi comes home from work, and he's happy. He says "Wife, Sabira, come, come look. Look at this gold I made today. Everybody who owes me money for a long time, they showed up, and they paid their dues. We're rich." And he pulled the gold and silver coins out of the bag, and he put them on the table. They looked at the gold and silver, they thanked Allah, they made plans, they admired it, and they talked about their heart's desires, what to do with the money. They were very happy for a while. And then Ahmet Efendi put all the silver and gold coins back into the bag and handed it to her. And he said, "Wife, you're much better at hiding places than I." She said "Bismillah" and took the bag and walked to the next room. She said "Bismillah" every step of the way, and she came before a forest-green closet that was hand-painted with golden leaves and flowers, and she said "Bismillah" before she opened it. And she said "Bismillah" and kneeled down. And she said "Bismillah," and she started working on a good hiding, a good camouflage. And when she was done, she said "Bismillah" and closed the door and recited a short prayer before she left.

All that time he was watching her from the door. While she was still busy with her prayers he left for the next room and awaited her. Before long she came, and she said, "Ahmet Efendi, the gold, the money, it is in good hands. Allah will take good care of it. So, until then please don't worry. Keep your heart free of worries and fear. And when you need the money please let me know, I'll get it for you." And after that, they had a good dinner, and after the dinner, they did their night prayers before they retired.

In the middle of the night Ahmet Efendi got up and went to the bathroom. While he was up, he also went before the green closet and opened the doors and looked for the gold. After some struggle he admitted that his wife is really good at this hiding. Nevertheless, he found the bag of gold, and he walked out of the house with it, and he came before the water well. And he looked around to make sure nobody was around. When he was sure, he dropped the bag of gold into the water. SPLASH! It was a big bag, a big splash. And he went back to the house and slept the night.

In the morning, they woke up to the prayers from a nearby mosque, and they did their morning prayers. After the prayers they had a good breakfast. They believed a good breakfast was a good start for a good day. A good rich breakfast - feta cheese, butter, milk, honey, home-baked bread - you name it they had it. And chai.

After the breakfast he was preparing his horse to mind the store. He was a cloth merchant. He rode his horse back and forth. When his horse was ready, he called for his wife as the second part of his plan. He said, "Wife, I'm sorry, I almost forgot, I had to make a payment today so I really need the gold, so will you please go get the gold?" She smiled and said "Bismillah" and walked to the house, and she said "Bismillah" every step of the way. And when she came before the forest-green closet that was handpainted with gold flowers and leaves, she recited a short prayer before she opened the doors of the closet.

In the meantime, Ahmet Efendi, outside, remembered that he truly needs to make a payment today. How could he forget? But he did. So, he decided to keep busy. So, he went before the well, and he picked the triple hook that was attached to a rope, and he threw it into the well and started fishing for the bag of gold. It is as child's play to fish dropped items from the well with the help of the triple hook. So, he tried once, he tried again. There was no sign of any bag of gold. He tried three times. Four times. Five. Six. Seven. Eight. Nine. He was really worried about his gold. What if somebody in the night saw him throwing the bag into the well and pulled it out while he was asleep? He was really truly worried about his gold.

In that moment he heard his wife, Sabira, "Ahmet Efendi, Ahmet Efendi," she said, "I can't understand this. Look at this. This thing is soaking wet." And he looked at her. Sabira had the bag of gold in her hands, and the water was dripping all over. He couldn't believe his eyes. But he was relieved, as she had it. It's better her than a thief. So, he slowly walked to her and, as he came close, he took the bag from her into his hands and said the word "Bismillah." And he never bothered his wife again. And he said the word for the rest of his life. "Bismillah. I do my deeds in the name of Allah, Almighty." With this experience, Ahmet Efendi, the wise man, became even more experienced, wiser thanks to his wife's patience. So please, never underestimate the power of Bismillah.

Voices of Faith

The Story of My Name

Summary

The storyteller tells the ancient story of Hagar, the mother of Ishmael. The storyteller is named for this matriarch of Islam. This story explains the origins of the Arab people who were the ancestors of Muhammad.

Research Option

Find the region of the world in which this story takes place. What clues are in the text? What climate and terrain surround the River Jordan? In the Muslim pilgrimage, called, hajj, the pilgrims reenact Hagar's run between the mountains. Students may be able to find images of these mountains and the fountain of water in texts on Islam. Refer to the small watercolors on the Islam poster. The image on the right is of Mecca and the surrounding mountains. Remind students that this place is still maintained as "the sanctuary of the desert people."

Discussion Questions

- How does obedience to God play into this story?
- What examples of faithfulness can be found within the story?

Transcript of recorded story: The Story of My Name

My name is Hagar El Hadidi, and I am from Egypt. I am forty-one years old, and I am the mother of a fourteen-year-old girl, Nunte. And we live in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. I've been in Chapel Hill for five years, and I'm doing a Ph.D. in Anthropology at UNC-CH. I'm very happy to be telling you the story of my name.

A long, long time ago, in a land between two rivers, in a town called Or, there was a boy named Abraham. And in our language his name was Ibrahim. He was very, very special, and God had chosen him to be his companion and prophet. At a very young age, Ibrahim was able to communicate with God through his dreams. As he grew older and older, he became closer and closer with God. And he was speaking to God all the time.

When he was eighteen, he married his cousin, Sarah, and they settled in a nice little house in the town of Or. They lived happily in that place. Only one thing made them unhappy: they could not have children. As years passed in their marriage and there was no baby to show for it, Sarah became more and more unhappy, and she was praying to God every night that he would give her a child.

Twenty years had passed in their marriage, and God had ordered Ibrahim to move away to the land of Palestine. As they moved to Palestine and settled there and met new friends and new neighbors there, Sarah was hoping that she would still conceive, but there was no hope.

One day a very hard drought came to the land of Palestine. There was no rain, the crops all failed, and there was no fodder to feed the animals. There was a very difficult famine, and people could not find food to eat. The only land that had food at the time was the land of Egypt, irrigated by the river Nile. So everybody was running away from Palestine to the land of Egypt looking for food. So Ibrahim and Sarah decided that they too had to try their luck in Egypt. And so they took the last provisions that they had and left to go to Egypt.

On the border they found a big army of men preventing anybody from coming in. The only people who could come in were the young maidens, beautiful girls who could be part of the pharaoh's harem. As for the other people they were out of luck. So Sarah, as she learned about this, she went and told Ibrahim, "Listen, the only way that we're going to be saved from this calamity is to go and say that I'm a virgin so that I can join the pharaoh's harem. And you are my brother, and so you would be let in." And so Ibrahim did not feel very comfortable about lying, but he trusted her instincts, and he said, "Well, Ok, if that's our only choice."

Sarah, although she was over forty, she was a very beautiful woman, and nobody could tell she was forty. She was as if she was eighteen, gorgeous with very long hair and gorgeous eyes, and so when she went to talk to the pharaoh's agent she said "Well, I am a virgin, and I would like to join the pharaoh's harem, but, on one condition, if my brother would come with me." The agent of the pharaoh was very happy because she was so gorgeous, and he was sure he was going to get a prize for having recruited such a gorgeous woman. And so Ibrahim and Sarah joined the pharaoh's agent and settled after that in the city of Memphis, the capital of Egypt at the time.

She settled in the harem, and months had passed, and she almost forgot about the harem and what was going to happen. The day she was afraid of happened, and they told her that tomorrow would be her day, and she had to prepare herself to meet with the pharaoh. She turned white immediately, and she did not know what to do. She went to talk to Ibrahim and told him, "What am I going to do? I can't keep on lying. I will be discovered." So Ibrahim told her, "Trust yourself and be honest as you always are, and everything will be fine." Sarah did not sleep very well that night, but she really thought it through, and she decided that she was going to tell the pharaoh the truth. She dressed beautifully, and she was gorgeous, and when he called for her, after sunset, she came in and started crying very gently. The pharaoh looked at her and was amazed and said to her, "Why are you crying?" She said, "I have to confess to you that I am not really a maiden. I am married to a man that I love very much. And I

had to lie about my age because that was the only hope in front of us. We were suffering from a famine in Palestine, and your soldiers wouldn't let us in."

So he told her not to worry and made her sit down and continue her story. She told him that they came down from Or to Palestine and that all her life she wanted a baby and that she had no luck, and she still is barren. So the pharaoh was very curious to meet that wise man that had Sarah as a wife. So he told her to bring him in, and he asked for a big, sumptuous dinner to be set on the table. So Ibrahim came, and they had a gorgeous dinner, and they talked and laughed and told stories, and at the end of the night the pharaoh said, "Now that you've told me your story I would like you to take a big gift of food to your friends and neighbors in Palestine. Of course you can stay here as much as you want, but if you feel that maybe your people will need more food please take everything to your people. He also said to Sarah, "I have a special gift for you. This is a very special girl that was raised in my palace. Her name is Hagar, and she will be your slave to help you."

Ibrahim, Sarah, and Hagar and the twenty boxes - enormous, big, big boxes of food - were put on the caravan of camels. They went back to Palestine. Everybody came, and everybody was happy that they could eat some food. As people were feasting and having fun the first rain came, and the drought was over, and so there were no more problems.

That night, in the rejoicing about the end of famine, Sarah told Ibrahim that she would like him to have Hagar as his consort because maybe he could have a child with her. That would make her happy - if he is happy. So, from that day Ibrahim would divide his time between Hagar and Sarah. Three months had passed, and the signs of pregnancy began to show on Hagar.

The news made everybody in the camp rejoice, except Sarah. She really was very, very, very unhappy. She really wanted to be generous, and she wanted to be good, but she couldn't. It made her very unhappy that Ibrahim would have a child from somebody else. She began to lose weight and to show unhappiness on her face. Ibrahim began to notice and started pressuring her to know what's going on. And, at the end, she had to tell him that she was feeling very unhappy because Hagar was pregnant. Ibrahim felt all her pain, and he told her, "I can feel how you feel, and you were very generous with me." So he told her that he could not bear her unhappiness and that he would take Hagar and her son away. She told him, "But she's still pregnant. How can you take her away? Don't take her away now. Let her stay until forty days have passed from the birth."

Hagar, a few months later, gave birth to a beautiful baby boy, and they named him Ishmael. He was a gorgeous, lovely baby. When forty days had passed on the birth of the child, it was time for Ibrahim to take Hagar to her destiny. He did not know where he was going to take her but, as usual, he took his guidance from God, and every

night, when he slept a message would come in his dreams, and he would know what to do. God told him to prepare a caravan so that they would be going south, and that's all that he knew. He did not know where they were going, he did not know anything else, but his trust in God made him do whatever he had to do.

He prepared a caravan so that he would take Hagar and Ishmael south. As they crossed the river Jordan they saw this vast, vast desert. All they could see was desert. Days had passed, and all that they could see was desert. There were no wells. There was nothing in their path. Every four or five days they might find a well, then the animals of the caravan might drink some water, and then they would continue their journey. And every night when Ibrahim goes to sleep he really is worried, where he can leave them in this desert. But God would reassure Ibrahim in a dream that everything would be all right. Days and days have passed on their journey in that desert until that night Ibrahim dreamt that he should leave Hagar and Ishmael between seven mountains that he would see the next day.

When he woke up he told Hagar that this is the last day of their journey and that God gave him a message and that he should leave them between two mountains, the Safa and the Marwa. Hagar was a little bit worried but not that much because she knew that God would take care of them. As Ibrahim left Hagar and Ishmael, his heart was very, very heavy. He was very sad that he had to leave his baby son and his mother in the desert, but what can he do? That's God's order, and he has to follow. So Ibrahim told Hagar, as he was leaving her, that he will come back when God orders him to do so. He left them with enough provisions for a few months: water and food, dates, olives, bread and some wheat. Hagar and Ishmael stayed together in the shade. At that time Hagar would eat from that food he left her and the water and then breast-feed Ishmael.

Days and days had passed, and the provisions began to dwindle until there was no more food or water. Hagar had not eaten for two or three days when her milk totally dried and she could no longer feed her baby son. She did not know what to do. She was in a real panic, but she knew, in her heart, that God would always help them. So she put Ishmael in a shady place and went wandering, looking for food, roads or plants or a source of water.

As the day passes, she panics more and more. She's running between the two hills, the Safa and the Marwa, looking for anything, even an ant, even an insect, even an animal, anything she could eat so that she could feed her baby. And so she was running between this hill and that hill and running back between that hill and talking to God, "God please help me. Please, my son is going to die, I don't know what to do. Please God, send us something, send us some food so that we can survive. We are your faithful. Please God, please help us."

But the day has passed, and all that she did was to run between those two mountains and nothing came. As the sun was setting, she went back to her son to look for him and to see if he's okay. And as she's coming closer and closer she sees Ishmael, who had scratched the ground with his little finger, and a beautiful spring of fragrant cold water had come from the ground flowing and flowing and flowing. She ran to the fountain and picked up her son and drank some water and started breast feeding her son, and her milk was flowing and flowing. This well, this fountain, they called it Zamzam.

Days passed and caravans and people from all over the desert came to see this miracle, this fountain that came out of nowhere. Every day, they would see there's one more palm tree next to one olive tree. And, little by little, all of the people who were living in the desert would be coming and getting water from this well of Zamzam and sit there and talk and drink and pray to God. A year or two and this whole well has created a community around it. The whole space between the mountains became a lush oasis that would feed the passers-by and would give them shelter and sanctuary. This became Mecca and that became the sanctuary for the desert people.

Voices of Faith

A Story of Muhammad

Summary

This is the story of Muhammad and his wife Hadidya and their four children. When faced with the death of his only son, Muhammad grows very sad. The angel Gabriel comes to assure Muhammad that even in his sorrow he could be assured that Allah was in control of all things.

Research Option

There are many stories of the life of the prophet. In each, Muhammad is shown to be faithful to Allah. Students may wish to find additional stories of the prophet, and to examine the ways in which these stories demonstrate and support a life of faith.

Discussion Questions

- It is important that the Prophet Muhammad experienced many of the same challenges that other people face. How does this story reinforce the listeners' understanding of the devotion of Muhammad?
- What other events in a person's life might challenge faith? Why do sacred texts often include such stories?

Transcript of recorded story: A Story of Muhammad

My name is Zeba. I am a Muslim, born and raised in Pakistan. I moved to Canada with my husband where we had four beautiful children, three of them boys and a daughter. It was my responsibility to give the religious education to my children, and I taught them Arabic, which was the religious language the Qur'an was revealed in. I took them to a Muslim school. We learned how to pray. After that we moved to North Carolina, and I still struggle to teach my younger two things about Islam. And we attend a Muslim school here in North Carolina, and we study about our religion.

Once, in the holy city of Mecca, situated in the Arabian Peninsula, lived a prophet Muhammad and his wife Khadija. Khadija was a very noble and beautiful lady. She had a radiant complexion, raven black hair and eyes that were wide and shining. They had four beautiful daughters - the eldest was Zaynab, after Zaynab was Ruqayya, Umm Kulthum was next, and the youngest was Fatima.

After Fatima, Khadija was blessed with a little boy whose name was Al-Qasim. Al-Qasim was the apple of everybody's eye. He was loved by the whole family and brought a lot of joy to the prophet's life and Khadija's. The sisters adored him. They would play with him and hold him. Then, one day, something very tragic happened. Just before Al-Qasim's second birthday he became very sick. Shortly after, he died.

This was an extremely tragic moment in the life of the family, and the prophet was greatly saddened by the loss of his only son.

Khadija was a very strong lady who stood by him and encouraged him and, gradually, they came to terms with this loss. This was a period in the Arabian Peninsula that was marked with the age of ignorance. People thought girls were a dishonor to society, and they believed it was important to have a son to carry on the name - the family name. As the news of the death of Al-Qasim reached the enemies of the prophet, peace be upon him, his greatest enemy Abu Jahl said unkind words and mocked the prophet. He said, "Oh you Muhammad, if you are indeed the chosen one of your Allah, why then should he bestow you with such ill fate? And now he has taken your only son."

This saddened the prophet and whenever he was sad, in his moments of sadness, he would retreat to a cave in the mountains. That night, as he sat there in the darkness in the cave, he saw a tiny speck of light. That light gradually became brighter and brighter until the whole cave lit up and, lo, there stood the angel Gabriel. The prophet was very surprised to see him. He started to tremble. And Gabriel spoke. He brought good tidings for the prophet Muhammad from Allah (in Arabic); "And, lo, Muhammad, we have promised you the fountain of Al-Kausar, the fountain of milk and honey. So, offer prayer and due sacrifice. Indeed, it is your enemy who shall be forgotten."

With these encouraging words, which were repeated by the angel Gabriel, Muhammad, peace be upon him, got the strength from Allah to accept the will of Allah. Therefore, in all times of sadness, we should follow the example of the prophet, peace be upon him, and do exactly as he did. We should totally submit ourselves to the will of Allah because he indeed is alone the all-knowing and the wise.

Voices of Faith

Muhammad Ascends to Heaven

Summary

This story tells of the Night Flight of Muhammad. It is a story of Muhammad's need for comfort and encouragement, and Allah's provision for his need. In addition, Allah instructs Muhammad to teach his people to pray five times a day.

Research Option

Locate the countries named by the storyteller: Pakistan, Lebanon, North Yemen and Saudi Arabia. Tradition places this story at the spot where the Dome of the Rock, a large mosque, now stands. Find images of the Dome of the Rock. Define any unfamiliar terms used in the story.

Discussion Questions

- In this story, Muhammad takes a journey which no man has ever taken before or since. He travels to heaven and meets the ancestors and the prophets who had gone before him. What lessons does he learn while he is in heaven? Who does he meet?
- What words of encouragement do they offer? Why might these words have been so great a comfort to him?
- Students may wish to explore with whom they would wish to speak when they are in times of stress and strain. Are they family members? Ancestors? Prophets? Particularly in times of difficulty, how might praying five times a day be a comfort?

Transcript of recorded story: Muhammad Ascends to Heaven

My name is Ayesha, and I live in Durham, North Carolina. I was born in Pakistan and I'm the third of four kids. I grew up in many countries, including Lebanon, North Yemen, and Saudi Arabia. So, I got a chance to sample the different flavors from different parts of the Muslim world. The story I'm about to share is a story that I heard when I was very little. I remember my mother starting the story - it was the month of Ramadan - and my father chiming in here and there and adding a detail or two. For me, it brings up images of flight and always a warm sense of security, of reassurance. Interestingly enough, this is a story about Muhammad and his need for comfort and security and reassurance at a vulnerable point in his prophet-hood.

Muhammad was now in his thirteenth year of prophet-hood, and for these thirteen years, life had been rough. Here he was, the messenger of Allah, and yet he was ridiculed. His children were stoned at school, his wife's business was going downhill - all in the name of his prophet-hood. His extended family had turned against him - tribe. Muhammad was struggling day after day.

We must remember that Muhammad was quite an intelligent man. He would spend a lot of time meditating and praying. And he would do this in a building that was built by Abraham called the Ka'ba. The Ka'ba is what you see when you see the square cube that you see people walking around, and Muslim people worship towards that. That is the Ka'ba. And it's been there for a long long time. And so, Muhammad's family was quite powerful, and they had the keys to the Ka'ba and Muhammad would often go there and meditate. And one evening as he was meditating, he knew that probably the angel Gabriel, Jabril, would arrive with a message from Allah. And even though things had improved a little bit, his life was still tough, and he was still having to fight and work hard to spread this message. That evening Gabriel arrived and said, "Ah Muhammad! There you are."

Now, for Muhammad this was almost an everyday occurrence that he was in the presence of this angel. But you and I must remember that Gabriel was the magnificent leader of all the angels. His face shown with radiance and serenity. His wings spread out in a large wingspan. He glowed with splendor and awe. And when he spoke his voice was soothing and gentle and happy, all at the same time. And so, Muhammad said to Gabriel, "So, you've come. What's the message?" And Gabriel said, "Well, well, well, let's go. No time to waste over here. We've got to go. We are talking about?" said Muhammad. "Tonight, Muhammad," said Gabriel, "you are coming on a journey on which no man before you have ever gone, and no man after this day will ever go on again." Well, Muhammad was a little taken aback but said, "Ok, let's go."

And when they left the Ka'ba, they went outside the cube, and there they saw that Gabriel had brought with him an animal - but not an animal that Muhammad had seen before. It was kind of a donkey but a little bit smaller, his back Muhammad realized that this animal, called a buraq, was capable of crossing the horizon with just one step. So, they rode on the buraq, with the air going "whoosh," past their ears, and Muhammad looking around, never having seen the earth from above, looked down, gazed at the desert, at the stars and said, "Where are we going Gabriel?" Gabriel said, "Well, we are going to Jerusalem." And Muhammad and Gabriel left the buraq and entered the grand Mosque al-Masjid al-Aqsa.

There before them, much to his surprise, Muhammad found all the previous prophets, Jesus, Moses, and Abraham. All these prophets were gathered there, and Muhammad could not believe this. All these people were gathered here - they were all such great men! And they all turned towards him and motioned for him to lead them in prayer. Muhammad was nervous, but he did it. And after the prayers they all exchanged greetings, and Muhammad and Gabriel went out of the mosque and onto a rock. As Muhammad was standing on the rock, he felt it shift, and he was being lifted up and up and up into the heavens and he said, "Gabriel, what's happening?" Gabriel said, "Don't worry, Muhammad. We're just going up to Heaven. You'll get to meet Him."

"Him?" he said. "Yes, Allah."

And, before he knew it, Gabriel and Muhammad and the rock had reached the first level of Heaven, and there stood Adam, the first man and the first prophet. Surrounding Adam were people of all ages, races, colors. Muhammad, overjoyed at seeing another human being said, "Adam, father of all the prophets, tell me, please, can this really be happening to me? Am I here? What is this? Am I really the messenger of Allah?" And Adam said, "Yes Muhammad, here you are, the messenger of Allah. I am witness to this. And don't worry. Things will go fine."

As Muhammad and Gabriel were about to exit the first level of Heaven, Gabriel came forward, and he had two vessels - cups - in his hand. In the right hand one, there was wine. And in the left hand one, there was milk. And he asked Muhammad to choose one. Muhammad decided he wanted some milk. Gabriel smiled and he said, "Yes, you have chosen milk, and this shows the purity of your soul and of the people who will follow you."

And they were whooshed up quickly to the second level of Heaven. And there they met John the Baptist, Yahweh and Jesus, Esau, son of Miriam. And they said, "Oh, you're here Muhammad. Welcome. Nice to see you. Come on in." And then together the two cousins asked him what life was like on earth and how were his followers and how was he being treated by the others, and Muhammad said, "You know, it's so hard." Jesus looked at him in the eye and said, "I know." "How did you do it?" Muhammad asked. And he said, "Well, God will help you, but it's not easy. So, what are you doing here? What are you going to do now?" And Muhammad said, "Well, I'm here. Gabriel is giving me a tour." And he said, "Well, enjoy the tour. But don't worry. Things will be all right."

So, Muhammad left Jesus and John the Baptist and whooshed up, through the third level where he met Joseph, Yusuf, with his coat of many colors, and he reassured him and blessed him. And they went up to the fourth level and through the next level until, finally, they reached the sixth level of Heaven. There, "Yes I am," said Muhammad, and he was quite excited. "After you meet him, tell me how it goes." "What do you mean?" "I just want to hear what you thought of him." "All right."

So, Muhammad and Gabriel whooshed up farther to the seventh level of Heaven. There Muhammad saw an immense celestial palace shimmering, almost twinkling. Against one of the walls he saw Abraham. "Abraham." And Abraham said, "Well, lead us."

So, Muhammad led the way in, and when he went in he saw thousands of angels, flying, moving, around and around circumambulating in prayers, and they were there all the time. After they left, and after Muhammad had said the prayers, Muhammad was led by Gabriel to a tree. This tree was the most magnificent piece of vegetation Muhammad had ever seen. Its trunk was broad and old and gnarled, and it reached

so high Muhammad could not see the top branches. Its leaves were large, lush, green and as big as elephants' ears. And it had fruit, large golden fruit the size of pitchers from which Muhammad was able to eat one slice. And it was very juicy. And as he looked up, he noticed that this tree was almost moving, and he looked more closely, and he realized that every leaf was covered with iridescent silvery butterflies, each of them flapping its wings gently. And as he gazed at the tree, "So, what are you waiting for?" said Gabriel.

So, Muhammad climbed the tree. Gabriel helped him. A tall tree - it took a while to climb. As they got to the top Muhammad was blinded. The light, the sound - and he knew, he knew he was in the presence of Allah. And his heart was pounding fast. His mouth was dry. His hands were trembling. And he tried to open his eyes, but he couldn't. He just couldn't. He had to squeeze them shut, and he held his head down, and he listened. And he heard Allah's voice come booming through the sky. And Allah said, "Muhammad, you are my messenger. You have come to see me. And now, enjoin your followers to pray fifty times a day."

And then the light went away. The sound went away. And Muhammad looked around. And he could open his eyes, and there was nothing there. It was silence. And he scrambled out from the tree, and he met Gabriel and he said, "Gabriel. I met Allah." Gabriel said, "Yes. And now it's time to go." Muhammad took a deep breath. Slowly he began to go down to the levels of Heaven, through the seventh level. And as he reached the sixth level, well, there was Moses.

"Well, how'd it go?" "Well, Moses I couldn't see anything. I was terrified." "Well, did you talk to Allah?" "Yes." "And what did Allah say?" "Well Allah said I am his messenger. I am not crazy. This is true. And he that. Your people are too weak. Nobody will be able to pray fifty times a day. You have to go back." "What?" said Muhammad. "Yes" said Moses. "You have to go back. Ask Allah to change it. That's too much." Muhammad looked uncertainly at Gabriel and said, "Can I do that?" And Gabriel said, "Uh, yeah, if you want."

So, they went back up through the seventh level of Heaven. Muhammad climbed up the tree, and there he said, "Allah, my people are too weak. Please have mercy on them. Fifty prayers is too much." And so, Allah thought about this for a while and said, "Okay, Muhammad, for you I'll make it ten prayers a day."

Muhammad was excited and overjoyed and went down to the sixth level of Heaven and he said, "Moses! He said only ten times. What a big jump. Fifty to ten! This is greeeaaat!" And Moses looked at him and said, "No way. You're gonna have to ask him to change that. That's too much. They can't do it. Ten prayers a day? What are you talking about? You think the children of Israel could have done that? No, no, no, no. This won't do. You must go back and change this." And so Muhammad said, "Oh. All right. I suppose you do know what you're talking about."

So, Muhammad went all the way back up to the seventh level of Heaven and climbed all the way back up the beautiful tree again and beseeched Allah, "Allah. I fear that even ten prayers is too much for my people. Please. Be gentle with them. Be generous with them." And Allah said yes, "I will be more generous with them. They are to pray five times a day." And Muhammad was excited, "Five. Only Five!" And he went back down to the sixth level of Heaven and said, "Moses! He cut it down to five. This is great. He cut it down to five." And Moses said, "Are you crazy? Those people won't be able to pray five times a day. No way. You have to go back. You have to cut that down. You have to cut that down."

As Muhammad was beginning to think about going back up but was still a little too ashamed to go back up again, Allah's voice came down to the sixth level of Heaven and said "Your people have received my generosity. They will pray five times a day. What I decree cannot be changed. That's it." So, Moses said, "I still don't think they can do it." "Well, you never know," said Muhammad, "We'll just have to see." "Well, have a good trip back." "Thanks," Muhammad said, "Nice to meet you." "Come on, Muhammad, let's move it. Let's move it," said Gabriel. "Come on, come on, let's go."

And so, Muhammad put his feet on the rock again, and the rock whooshed all the way down. This time Muhammad could enjoy the journey a lot more. He could marvel at the dark night sky, the twinkling stars, the dew in the air and the atmosphere. He could reach out and touch the clouds, and as he whirled his way down to earth, they landed in Jerusalem. And Muhammad stepped off the rock, back onto the buraq, the mini-donkey with the big wings, and they flapped back home to Mecca. When Muhammad reached home, his heart was exhilarated with joy. He couldn't believe what he had just experienced. Here he was, doubting himself, and finally, after many months of sleepless nights, Muhammad lay down and fell into a deep sleep.

Voices of Faith

A Story of Piety

Summary

The storyteller offers a story which reminds the listener of the importance of charity and devotion in the way of Islam. A man named Abu Becker and his wife sell all their possessions except for a piece of cloth needed for prayers.

Research Option

The storyteller uses the terms piety and exemplifying. Define these and other unfamiliar terms used in this story.

Discussion Questions

- What do the people learn from Abu Becker?
- How does Allah confirm the devotion of Abu Becker?
- Obedience is a recurrent theme in many of the stories of the lives of Muslims. Encourage students to enrich their definition of obedience with the creative actions done by Abu Becker and his wife in this story.

Transcript of recorded story: A Story of Piety

I start in the name of God, the merciful and the compassionate. My name is Jem Williford, and I am a member of the Muslim community of North Carolina. Having grown up in Turkey....these are stories that I grew up with that my grandparents or my uncles or the elders within my community would tell to us. I will start by telling one of the stories of the prophets.

In the early days of Islam, when Islam was still in its infancy, when the prophet was just beginning to spread his message wide, the prophet always emphasized that charity, the giving, the taking care of each other was a central part of this way of life. In fact he is reported to have said, "If your neighbor is hungry and you are full then you are not one of us." So helping poor people was very important and, just like now, in those days it took a lot of money to help people. There came a point when the coffers, the treasury, was empty. Money was needed in order to help the widows, the orphans and all the poor people that would gather around. And the prophet asked all of his congregation to give all that they could.

Abu Bakr, who was one of the closest companions of the prophet, and, in fact, the one who became the first Khalifa, the first one to lead Islam after the prophet passed on, was a very pious man and one who always strove to do what the prophet wanted in the best way possible. And when he heard the prophet's call for more help he ran home. And after speaking with his wife, who was also a very pious woman, they decided that, in fact, the only thing they really needed was one broad piece of cloth

that they could share in order to cover themselves in the appropriate way for their prayers.

Abu Bakr took whatever he had, all of his clothes, all of his jewelry, all of his furnishings, and sold them in the marketplace. He took all of his money, which was a considerable sum. And the only thing that he had left was one piece of cloth that was wide enough to go from his waist to just under his knee and wrap three times. He wrapped this around himself, and he gave the money to the prophet saying "Oh, messenger of God, this is everything that I have."

And so he and his wife shared the same piece of cloth. First one would do his prayers, then the other would do her prayers. Which, as all good Muslims, they did five times a day. And, in fact, to the Friday gathering, which is the holy day which all Muslims gather at the mosque, one week he would go and one week she would go. Well the first week, he had his wife go. And when the prophet looked around and saw that Abu Bakr wasn't there he said, "Where is Abu Bakr?" Nobody knew. So someone was sent to get him.

Now because the prophet had said he must come, he had to come but he didn't have a cloth to wrap around him; he was completely naked. So he thought about it for a brief moment. Then he went out into the back of his house where a date palm was growing, and he climbed this tree and removed from it enough branches that he was able to tie them around his waist in such a fashion that he was covered from his belly to his knees, as is required, in Islam, as a man. As men must be covered from his waist to his knees in order to participate in the prayers.

He went to the mosque and joined the congregation at the very back of the mosque because he was kind of ashamed of how he was dressed. Well, the prophet Muhammad was leading the prayers. Just as he was going to begin the prayers he saw the angel Gabriel, and the angel Gabriel was dressed in such an unusual fashion. For he was naked from the waist up and around his waist coming down to his knees were leaves from a palm tree - from a date tree. And the prophet said, "Gabriel, what is the meaning of this garb, of these clothes that you're wearing?" And Gabriel said, "Messenger of Allah, today, in Paradise, everyone is dressed in this way." And he said, "But why?" And he said, "Oh, in honor of Abu Bakr, who gave everything to you so he had nothing left except one cloth, which he shared with his wife, and since it was his wife's turn to come to the juma, prayers, the congregational prayers, he had nothing to wear. And so when you called him, so as not to disobey you, he dressed himself in this fashion, and he's at the end of the congregation, and he's at the last row of the mosque right now. And we were so illuminated by his example that all the angels in paradise today are dressed in this way."

And when the prophet heard this he was overjoyed at the piety and the beauty that Abu Bakr was, yet again, exemplifying

Glossary

Allah

(Arab: lit. meaning "God") the one and only true God among Muslims and other Arab-speaking monotheists. Muhammad's view of Allah is found in the Qur'an: "Say: He is Allah, the One, Allah, the eternally besought of all, He begetteth not nor is He begotten. And there is none comparable to Him." (Sura 112)

Five Pillars of Islam

the core requirements and expressions of Islam. These five are: the declaration of faith, prayer, fasting, charity and pilgrimage.

hadith

a narrative, tradition, or report, generally short, which recounts what Muhammad said, did, approved or disapproved. Hadith may also include descriptions of Muhammad. Hadith refers not only to these, but also to the entire body of tradition preserved by Muslims. Hadith is a supplement and guide to the Qur'an.

Islam

(Arabic: lit. meaning: "surrender") a religious polity based on the teachings of the prophet Muhammad. Islam is an ethnic religion offering a universal teaching through a particular and restricted group of people and language. Islam is considered to be one of the fastest growing faith traditions in America. Conversion to Islam begins with the heart-felt confession of the First Pillar of Faith, preferably in the presence of a devout Muslim.

Kabah

(Arabic: lit. meaning: "the cube") the center of Islam. Considered to be located at the center of creation. The historical origins of the Kabah are unknown. It is thought to predate the life of Muhammad. In 630 CE, Muhammad cleansed the Kabah and restored it to its function as the house of Allah. The present Kabah was constructed in the seventeenth century. Before that, the Kabah has been damaged by fire and flood, as well as attacks by invaders, but each time it has been repaired or reconstructed.

Makkah/Mecca

a city in west central Arabia, the birthplace of Muhammad, the religious center of the Islamic world. All Muslims face Makkah during the appointed times of prayer. In addition, Makkah is the pilgrimage site for Muslims. Muhammad journeyed to Makkah, reaffirming it as the religious center of the faith, several months before his death.

minaret

a tower from which the faithful are summoned to prayer.

Mosque

(from Arabic: masjid, lit. meaning: "place of prostration") The mosque is the gathering place of worship for Islam. In addition, it is the center of Muslim society. The mosque is always open for prayer and meditation, as well as for study.

Muslim

(Arabic: lit. meaning: "one who surrenders") a follower of the revelations given to the prophet Muhammad; one who adheres to the way of Islam. Muslims surrender to the teachings of the prophet and the writings of the Qur'an.

Qur'an

the sacred text of Islam. Written and preserved in Arabic and paraphrased and interpreted in other languages. Qur'an refers to the entire collection of revelations given to Muhammad as well as any single one of them. Divided into 114 Suras, or main divisions, which range in length from a little longer than two lines, to 710 lines of text. The Qur'an is a compilation of the words of Allah spoken to all mankind, or to Muhammad alone, or to believers or non-believers. Passages recorded in third person are generally preceded by the word: "Say!" as an imperative. For all Muslims, the Qur'an is the ultimate expression of Allah's eternal word.

Ramadan

the ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar, a month-long commemoration of the giving of the Qur'an. Ramadan is a month of communal and individual discipline. Muslims fast from sunrise to sunset and refrain from sexual intercourse. During this time Muslims renew their commitment to Allah, and cleanse their hearts through the discipline of fasting, prayer and study. Because the Islamic calendar is lunar, the time of year in which Ramadan falls moves through the

traditional western calendar, falling in each season over the course of many years. The month ends with the sighting of the new moon and is celebrated with feasts and gift-giving.

Shi'ites

a branch of Islam which maintains a direct line of political leaders all the way back to the prophet Muhammad. Primarily a distinction based on the lineage of the Caliph, or the political leader, Shi'ites are concerned with maintaining the political order which Muhammad founded. They are dedicated to forming and maintaining a society in full compliance to the teachings of the Qur'an.

Sufism

The name most often applied to Islamic mysticism. Its origins are obscure. Rumi, (1207-1273) a mystical poet of Islam, is widely regarded as a source of insight into this tradition. Educator's note: There are many fine translations of the work of Rumi. Among them, *The Illuminated Rumi*, published by Broadway Books in 1997. This work is visually compelling, and many of the strategies employed in viewing art objects may be used in viewing this manuscript. It may also be used to suggest an art-application project in which students are assigned passages from the Qur'an, hadith or Rumi and asked to illuminate them using collage and calligraphy.

Sunnis

a branch of Islam which maintains that in instances where the Qur'an does not offer clear guidance, Muslims may turn to the practices of Muhammad while in Mecca, or to the hadith for applicable wisdom. This is in sharp contrast to the Shi'ites who turn to the political power of the Caliph to determine appropriate behavior.

transcendence

the experience of passing beyond human limitations, rising above and existing beyond the experience of the material universe.

vigil

a watch kept during the hours of normal sleep, ritual devotions observed on the eve of a holy day.

Zamzam

the sacred well located next to the Kabah in Mecca. Pilgrims drink from the well after they circle the Kabah. Many carry water away from the well in bottles and believe the water to have health-giving properties.