

Hoping in Eternity

Sermon delivered by Imam Genghis Kahn
Rensselaerville Presbyterian Church
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Peace be with you all ... it's an honor for me to worship with you today ... We begin with Praise, Thanks, and Asking of God ...

*Indeed, all Praise and Thanks belongs to God,
The Lord of all the Worlds
The Possessor of Mercy, The Bestower of Mercy
The Master of the Day of Judgment.
It is You alone we worship, it is You alone we ask for help * Guide us on the
Straight Path,
The Path of those upon whom you have given your bounties, * not the path
of those who have earned Your anger, nor those who are misguided.*

(The Qur'ān, Chapter 1)

الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ * الرَّحْمَنِ
الرَّحِيمِ * مَا لِكَ يَوْمَ الدِّينِ * إِيَّاكَ
نَعْبُدُ وَإِيَّاكَ نَسْتَعِينُ * اهْدِنَا الصِّرَاطَ
الْمُسْتَقِيمَ * صِرَاطَ الَّذِينَ أَنْعَمْتَ
عَلَيْهِمْ * غَيْرِ الْمَغْضُوبِ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا
الضَّالِّينَ

The sermon title is: Hoping in Eternity. Our theme this year of “Hope: A Bridge to the Future,” inspired me to reflect on each of the three words: hope, bridge, and the future. So, we’ll explore Qur’ānic insights on these, seeing hope is all about our expectations which come from a diverse set of sources. I’ll focus on the Qur’ānic textual source: the future—the true everlasting future—is the life of the hereafter, eternity; and the central piece is this life we exist in: the bridge. To begin, The Qur’ān summarizes for us:

Show them an analogy: this present life is like rain which we send down from the sky. The vegetation of the earth mixes with it [and comes to life giving them nourishment], but in time it becomes dry stubble which the wind scatters. Indeed, God alone determines all things.

[So then know that]: Wealth and children are ornaments of this present life. What truly is everlasting are the good, virtuous, just actions which are best in the Sight of your Lord to earn your reward and the best for you to have hope in.

(The Qur’ān, Chapter 18, Verses 45-46)

وَأَضْرِبْ لَهُمْ مَثَلِ الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا كَمَاءٍ أَنْزَلْنَاهُ
مِّنَ السَّمَاءِ فَأَخْضَلَ بِهِ ثَبَاتٌ الْأَرْضِ
فَأَصْبَحَ هَشِيمًا تَذْرُوهُ الرِّيَّاحُ وَكَانَ اللَّهُ عَلَى
كُلِّ شَيْءٍ مُّقْتَدِرًا *

الْمَالُ وَالْبَنُونَ زِينَةُ الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا وَالْبَاقِيَّاتُ
الصَّالِحَاتُ خَيْرٌ عِنْدَ رَبِّكَ ثَوَابًا وَخَيْرٌ أَمَلًا

The metaphor of the first verse is clear, and we had discussed that in 2023’s sermon when we spoke of immortality: we benefit from the nourishment and beauty of vegetation brought to life by rain, the metaphor of this life, but then that same vegetation withers away, the metaphor of death. But it comes back again, the metaphor of resurrection and immortality.

Transience and permanence are established in the second verse: This life is temporary, the attractive things in it are temporary. Those things many put their future hopes in: wealth, property, children, descendants, are

temporary. We spoke on that in 2023 also. Yet permanent, everlasting hope is in the good deeds we do, the just and fair things that we do; that is where our hope should be placed. And what should we expect for doing that? Everlasting reward, happiness in an eternal existence.

But our attention needs to be focused on the linkage between our actions in this present life and our eternal one. It should be obvious regardless of our belief systems that they are linked; you heard it in the New Testament readings today. The Qur'ān continues in the same place as the previous verses:

The day We will remove the mountains so you will see the earth as a widespread plain, and we will gather them all, not leaving a single one out.

وَيَوْمَ نُسَيِّرُ الْجِبَالَ وَتَرَى الْأَرْضَ بَارِزَةً
وَحَشَرْنَاهُمْ فَلَمْ نُغَادِرْ مِنْهُمْ أَحَدًا *

They will be presented to your Lord in rows of straight lines [and it will be said to them] you have indeed come before Us, just like We created you the first time, but you used to falsely claim that We would never fulfil this promise to you.

وَعَرَّضُوا عَلَىٰ رَبِّكَ صَفًّا لَقَدْ جِئْتُمُونَا كَمَا
خَلَقْنَاكُمْ أَوَّلَ مَرَّةٍ بَلْ رَعِمْتُمْ أَلَّنْ نَجْعَلَ لَكُمْ
مَوْعِدًا *

And the book of deeds will be laid open and you will see the guilty full of hopeless dread for what is in it, saying: Woe upon us, what is this book? It leaves nothing out, whether big or small, it takes it into account. So, they find themselves reunited with their deeds [awaiting the consequence], and your Lord is never unjust to anyone.

وَوُضِعَ الْكِتَابُ فَتَرَى الْمُجْرِمِينَ مُشْفِقِينَ مِمَّا
فِيهِ وَيَقُولُونَ يَا وَيْلَتَنَا مَا لَ هَذَا الْكِتَابِ لَا
يُعَادِرُ صَغِيرَةً وَلَا كَبِيرَةً إِلَّا أَحْصَاهَا وَوَجَدُوا
مَا عَمِلُوا حَاضِرًا وَلَا يَظْلِمُ رَبُّكَ أَحَدًا

(The Qur'ān, Chapter 18, Verses 47-49)

So, let's reflect. Whether a person believes that eternal salvation is through someone else or whether it is belief in a supreme deity, in God by whatever names they call upon God, both the textual communication and logic concludes that our actions in this life are tied to our eternal state in the hereafter. For those who believe in scripture, we can ask why would God command us to do things, like the ten commandments we heard today, and not have us hope in the eternal consequences linked to them?

One might say that consequence is in this life only, like many who studied the Old Testament only have concluded, but other conclusions from the Old Testament, and the New Testament, and The Qur'ān make clear that the deeds of this life are linked to the eternal one. You feel and know that even naturally.

To zoom further into this linkage, we consider a statement from the previous verses:

... and your Lord is never unjust to anyone.

... وَلَا يَظْلِمُ رَبُّكَ أَحَدًا

(The Qur'ān, Chapter 18, end of Verses 49)

Said in the context of people being reunited with their deeds on the Day of Judgement, their deeds being the evidence of their final judgement requiring no intervention by God, therefore no blame on God for their outcome, i.e. just action will bring about a consequence and unjust action will bring about another.

So, let's pause for a moment and talk about Justice and Equity. I had touched on this in 2023's sermon, promising details later, so we'll do that now.

The two most important and overarching teachings of Islam upon which all other teachings are based are: 1) Acknowledging the Oneness of God: in Arabic Tawḥīd ; and 2) Justice and Equity: Just, Equitable, Fair, Truthful action, speech, and values. I'll describe the Arabic words just now.

The two teachings are completely intertwined and are really one, in that acknowledging the Oneness of God is something internal, known only to the person and God, while Just and Equitable action is the external manifestation of that internal acknowledgment. Anyone living these two teachings is on the path of Islam.

We discussed the Oneness of God in detail in last year's Unity topic. In summary: God's commanding our acknowledgement of His Oneness is all about Exclusivity: Exclusivity offered by God. He wants a relationship just with Him and you. It is something every human wants in every other relationship, but many people find themselves feeling that they need other company in that relationship with God. The Supreme One has said you have direct one-on-one access to Me, yet many don't feel that is sufficient and seek to bring others into that relationship. But God is always there, always Forgiving, always Merciful, so He keeps calling to all of us; will we not respond to Him alone?

Islam's second most important teaching, again how our internal, exclusive relationship and acknowledgment of the Oneness of God shows up, is Justice: Just, Equitable, Fair, Truthful action, speech, and values. It is described by two words in Arabic due to the comprehensiveness of Justice and Equity i.e. Justice in the sense of straightness and correctness; the other is justice in the sense of balance and fairness.

Justice in the sense of straightness, in Arabic 'adl, is defined as "that which is established in the self as being straight and correct." Justice in the sense of balance and equity, in Arabic qist, is defined as "an equal portion of something, a fair and balanced portion." Both foundationally mean "making two things equal," which is always a good thing except in two cases: making something else equal to God; and making good and evil equal. For the latter, English has the same root word correspondence for we call the act of making evil and good the same: Justification, a theme we'll repeat in what follows.

So, the Qur'ānic teaching of Justice is about being upright, about being balanced and fair and about seeking to make things upright, balanced, and fair, i.e. seeking Equity. As I summarize some specific Qur'ānic teachings, reflect on the state of justice and equity in our country and world of today.

So, as we begin to close, we see that the linkage of our concepts of hope, the future eternal life, our actions in the present life as the bridge, is that those actions , which we must place our hope in for a successful present

life and eternal life, are what is just, fair, equitable universally to all within our borders and beyond. We must do and have hope in our just and fair actions.

However, when we look to our world and country today, we see the consequences of our injustices, we see the consequences of placing hope in false people, idols and celebrities, we see the shattered hopes of so many.

We reflect then within ourselves how can we make this better, and we realize that the injustice is widespread because we've misconstrued the teachings of God; we've used them to justify injustice. So, we have to stop and be honest with ourselves and go back to those true teachings, and hope we can change.

In past sermons I closed reciting the Lord's Prayer but we'll do that anyway to close the service. So, I'll take another part of the Bible and close my sermon with it as prayer. And ponder how well it summarizes all of our themes today especially the linkage between our actions in this life and the eternal life.

And as we worship with this prayer, I ask each and every one of you to reflect on what you see in the news, what you see within our country, what you see at our borders, what you see beyond our borders, in Eastern Europe, in Ukraine, in Asia, in Africa in the Middle East, in Gaza. Play those images in your mind for today nothing is hidden. Ask with whom do you see yourselves, in whose company do you want to be, and let this prayer give us the strength to change ourselves, our thinking, our ministry to others, and what we place our hopes in. We pray:

"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh. Blessed are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their ancestors treated the prophets.

"But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort. Woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you will mourn and weep. Woe to you when everyone speaks well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.

"But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you. [Luke 6: 20-31, NIV]

Amen.

Today's Scriptural Readings

Psalm 75

1 We praise you, God, we praise you, for your Name is near; people tell of your wonderful deeds. 2 You say, "I choose the appointed time; it is I who judge with equity. 3 When the earth and all its people quake, it is I who hold its pillars firm. 4 To the arrogant I say, 'Boast no more,' and to the wicked, 'Do not lift up your horns. 5 Do not lift your horns against heaven; do not speak so defiantly.'" 6 No one from the east or the west or from the desert can exalt themselves. 7 It is God who judges: He brings one down, he exalts another. 8 In the hand of the Lord is a cup full of foaming wine mixed with spices; he pours it out, and all the wicked of the earth drink it down to its very dregs. 9 As for me, I will declare this forever; I will sing praise to the God of Jacob, 10 who says, "I will cut off the horns of all the wicked, but the horns of the righteous will be lifted up."

Old Testament: Exodus 20:1-17 The Ten Commandments

1 And God spoke all these words, saying, 2 I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. [1] 3 Thou shalt have no other gods before me. [2] 4 Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: 5 Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; 6 And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments. [3] 7 Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain. [4] 8 Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. 9 Six days shalt thou labor, and do all thy work: 10 But the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates: 11 For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it. [5] 12 Honor thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee. [6] 13 Thou shalt not kill. [7] 14 Thou shalt not commit adultery. [8] 15 Thou shalt not steal. [9] 16 Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor. [10] 17 Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbor's.

New Testament: Revelation 20:11-15 and 21:1-8

11 Then I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. The earth and the heavens fled from his presence, and there was no place for them. 12 And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. 13 The sea gave up the dead that were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and each person was judged according to what they had done. 14 Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. 15 Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire. 21 Then I saw "a new heaven and a new earth,"[a] for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. 2 I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from

God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. 3 And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. 4 'He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death'[b] or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.'" 5 He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true." 6 He said to me: "It is done. I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. To the thirsty I will give water without cost from the spring of the water of life. 7 Those who are victorious will inherit all this, and I will be their God and they will be my children. 8 But the cowardly, the unbelieving, the vile, the murderers, the sexually immoral, those who practice magic arts, the idolaters and all liars—they will be consigned to the fiery lake of burning sulfur. This is the second death."