

Great Births

Rev. Rebecca M. Bryan
December 11, 2016
First Parish in Brookline

Mawlid, the celebration of the Prophet Muhammad's birthday, always observed on the 12th day of the third month in the Islamic calendar, happens to begin this year tonight at sundown and conclude tomorrow evening. Though it is becoming increasingly accepted, the question of whether to celebrate the Prophet's birth has been a source of great debate and one of the things most frequently studied in Sharia or Islamic law for over one thousand years.

Those who believe that it is not to be observed consider it unnecessary as neither their Prophet nor the Qur'an stipulates it. Equally important, these Muslims believe that God perfected religion through his revelations to Muhammad and that any additional religious observance is unacceptable.

Mawlid has its roots in Egypt during the 11th century when Sufis began celebrating their Prophet's birth. For these believers, Muhammad's birthday is a celebration of tawhid or the oneness of God. Sufis see the existence of the universe as a celebration of the birth of Islam, which is especially beautiful remembering that the word Islam comes from the same root word as Salaam, meaning peace.

Either way, my remarks this morning are not a celebration of Mawlid. Rather what I want to share is this:

There is a message in the Great Birth stories of the Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, that is relevant to us today and can serve as a source of instruction and hope.

First let's look at some of the similarities between three birth stories.

Moses, the most important Prophet in the Jewish faith, was born during a time when the Pharaoh had made the decree that first-born sons of Hebrews were to be killed. When Moses was born, his mother hid him to save his life. The book of Exodus from the Torah tells the story that "When she could hide him no longer she got a papyrus basket for him, and plastered it with bitumen and pitch; she put the child in it and placed it among the reeds on the bank of the river." (Exodus 2:3) From there Moses was saved by the Pharaoh's daughter and raised as her own child.

Islam's Prophet Muhammad, was born in 570 CE. His father died shortly after his birth. In sixth century Arabia, the father and one's tribal affiliation was key to one's survival. Muhammad's mother knew that her son was not safe, and as Sarah Conover tells it in her book, *Muhammad*, Muhammad's mother "resolved that..she'd find a...wetnurse to raise the boy in the fresh air of the desert...[she] bundled Muhammad in a thin camel hair blanket..."¹ The story goes on and she finds a couple to take her son.

There are more similarities.

¹ Conover, Sarah; Muhammad, *The Story of a Prophet and Reformer*, pg. 3. Skinner House Books, Boston, 2013.

Muhammad’s mother, Aminah, had visions and signs of her son’s greatness during her pregnancy. So too in the Christian story in the Gospel of Luke when Jesus’ mother Mary was visited and told of her pregnancy by the angel Gabriel.

I could go on. The parallels abound. There are also differences.

For example; in the Christian story, a pregnant Mary and her spouse Joseph travel to Bethlehem to participate in a census. Once there, finding no room at the Inn, they stay in a stable where Jesus is born in a lowly manger.

The Qur’an tells this story differently. In this version, Mary is a young woman supported and educated by her Uncle Zachariah. One year before the birth of Jesus, Mary goes alone into the wilderness to continue her studies. It is there that the angel Gabriel visits her and tells her that she is to be a mother. Mary returns to her family with her infant son, named Jesus. No Bethlehem, manger, nor even Joseph.

The comparison of these birth stories is a fascinating course of study in its own right. However it is more than that. These Great Birth stories have universal messages that we can learn from.

A Great Birth as I use the term today is a personal or a collective change that is so deep and important that it can only be called transformative. Great Births result in a “before” and “after” time.

I believe that we are living during a time of Great Birth in this country. We’ve been pregnant for some time now. It may be that we are finally in labor. I know, without a doubt, that many of us are also in times of Great Births in our own lives. Grief, illness, a feeling that something must change in our lives. Something is calling us perhaps needs to be addressed.

The birth stories of the Prophets can offer us all hope. Great Births share certain elements. First, there are messages letting us know that the change/birth is coming. We must be willing to see these messages and more importantly believe them. And the messages are there.

Great births happen because times are bad. Change is required. Something has to give. Inevitably there is a long period of darkness, and we feel alone. It is during these times that we realize the old must make way for the new. There are things that no longer work, things that we must turn away from and perhaps even reject. The pain during these Great Births is like none other, and yet it must be experienced before any joy can return.

Finally, though, they may feel like the end; Great Births are really the beginning. The beginning of something new and unimaginable. *We don’t know what will be*; however, we do know this. Life will never be the same.

Amen and Blessed Be.