Ramadan Reflection 2021

Week 1. Dates – the sugary sweet fruit of the palm tree. They are the first things traditionally eaten after a day of fasting during Ramadan, washed down with a cup of water, like one’s first bit of nourishment after crossing the desert. They have been a staple of people in the Middle East for millennia.

They are a biblical food and they are a Qur’anic food. According to the chapter (surah) of the Qur’an titled Maryam (the Arabic form of Mary), when it came time for Mary to give birth to Jesus, “the pains of childbirth drove her to the trunk of a palm tree” where God provided her with dates and water” (19.11-25). The dates and water with which God sustained Mary also revive those who are fasting.

Ramadan is about hungering and thirsting, not simply for food and drink but for a closer relationship with God, for cultivating God-consciousness (taqwa). It’s a time to hunger for a stronger faith, for forgiveness, justice and peace, and for a world in which God’s bounty is available to all. It’s also about bringing to birth something new in our lives, a new commitment to one’s faith, to one’s God and to one another.

My first experience of Ramadan was in 2001. I was living in Egypt, serving at a leprosy clinic outside of Cairo. Most of my co-workers and the people to whom I ministered were Muslim. One of the male nurses, Mohsen, invited me to stay overnight at the clinic to break the fast with him and celebrate with the local community.

We waited for the sunset call to prayer (maghrib) to signal the end of the fast. It blared into the room not from a minaret but from the TV. Then we ate dates – just two or three, but slowly my body, fatigued from the work day and weakened from fasting, came back to life, and my mind awoke from its torpor. God had provided us with sustenance from the palm tree just as he had Mary.

We spent the rest of the evening and much of the night in the village going from home to home feasting and celebrating. It felt like Christmas to me, and with good reason: that year Ramadan and Advent coincided for several weeks in December. Ramadan lanterns and Advent wreaths together lit up the dark winter nights. Muslims and Christians both looked up into the night sky remembering the God who dispels the darkness with the Light of His Word.

The world today still needs that light, the light that Muslims, Christians and other people of good faith can bear to the world through their respective faiths and traditions, witnessing to the one God who sustains us all.

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