

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Celebrating religious holidays during a pandemic



Douglas Kindschi *Director, Kaufman Interfaith Institute*

We are entering that time of the year when many religions celebrate major holidays. These are holidays when communities come together to share the meaningful stories of their traditions. Passover, or Pesach, began Wednesday evening. It's a time when the Jewish community celebrates the movement from slavery to freedom. Passover marks the exodus from the bondage in Egypt to their Promised Land and freedom.

In his column last week in *The Grand Rapids Press*, Rabbi David Krishef reminded us that the first Passover took place during a series of plagues in Egypt. The final plague resulted in the death of the firstborn except for the Israelites, whom the death "passed over." He wrote of the early Israelites, "The next morning, they left Egypt with Pharaoh's army on their heels. But in the midst of this chaos, they celebrated coming together as a people in relationship with God, who brought them from subjugation to redemption."

Reflecting on today, Rabbi Krishef continued:

"So we, too, are celebrating Passover at a time of plague, a time of fear and darkness and isolation. And we, too, have found ways of connecting with each other and coming together as a community, albeit electronically, to continue to sing and pray together and support each other. May your Passover be a moment of calm and reflection within the chaos. When we cross the Reed Sea together and begin to emerge from our social isolation, may you free yourself from the things that keep your spirit yet imprisoned. And when we enter the Promised Land together, may we put aside the electronic devices and revel once again in face-to-face contact with our community!"

Good advice for all of us during this challenging time. Last year, Temple Emanuel invited others to join them in an interfaith Seder, including leadership from Christian pastors and priests as well as a Muslim imam. Such an event could not occur this year even for the Jewish community, let alone for the interfaith community invited last year. While Passover is primarily a family celebration, often friends are invited to come and celebrate together. This year, some of that will happen online with Zoom or other programs.

My first significant interfaith experience occurred many years ago when I was a graduate student, and my wife and I were invited to celebrate the Seder with a Jewish family in South Chicago. That was when I first experienced the close relationship between my own understanding of the Christian celebration of Holy Communion or the Eucharist and the rituals of the Passover meal.

This week for Christians marks the important transition of moving from death to life, leading up to Easter Sunday, when the resurrection of Jesus is celebrated. Known as Holy Week, it began last Sunday with the entrance of Jesus into Jerusalem to cheering crowds waving palm branches. It should be noted that our brothers and sisters of the Eastern Orthodox tradition will celebrate one week later, with Palm Sunday on April 12 and Easter the following Sunday.

Holy Week includes the service called Maundy Thursday or Holy Thursday, when we commemorate Jesus' Last Supper at Passover with his disciples. That occurs today, the first full day of Passover. The week continues with Good Friday, commemorating the day of Jesus' Crucifixion, and then culminates on Easter Sunday. The core narrative of Holy Week is the movement from death to life, and Easter is a major celebration bringing people together for the event.

This year, however, most churches are celebrating by livestream or other online techniques for coming together without being physically together. Unfortunately, some religious communities are ignoring the directives to physically separate and not meet in large gatherings. In South Korea, one of the centers of the coronavirus outbreak was a religious community that refused to follow the instructions. Some governors, including in Florida and Michigan, exempted religious services from stay-at-home executive orders. This is particularly sad as the various religious communities enter this period of celebrations such as Passover and Easter.

For Muslims, the month of Ramadan, which begins later this month on the evening of April 23, is a time of spiritual reflection, prayer and giving to the poor. One of the five pillars of Islam, it is practiced through fasting from sunrise to sunset by refraining from all food and drinking of any liquids. After sunset, the fast is broken by a meal called the iftar. This meal is a celebration for the end of that day's fast and often brings people together.

At the conclusion of the month, the Eid al-Fitr is considered one of the major celebrations in Islam. Observance of Ramadan is commanded in the Quran and celebrates the beginning of the revelation of scripture to the prophet Muhammad. The core narrative of Ramadan and Islam is the movement from pride to obedience and submission.

Last year, The Islamic Center and Mosque of Grand Rapids joined with their partner congregation, Boston Square Christian Reformed Church, to sponsor an interfaith iftar that more than 200 people attended. This year, such a gathering is not possible.

The basic message of these three important religious observations should be a constant reminder to us all. We can affirm each other's religious traditions and celebrations, even if we cannot meet together. And, we can all affirm the importance of these commitments to freedom, life and obedience to God.

As our various religious traditions enter this period of "Holy Days," we can choose to ignore those who are different, or even find ways to argue about the differences. But we also have the choice of seeking ways to relate with one another, learn from one another, and affirm the basic messages of hope and peace.

Our religious traditions also share the commitment to love God and love our neighbor. The first rabbi I met when coming to Grand Rapids over 40 years ago was Rabbi Phillip Sigal, who served Congregation Ahavas Israel. He was com-



The traditional Passover plate served during Seder on the first day of Passover in 2010 at Earl and Tamara Norman's house in the Kalamazoo area. *MLive.com files*



A member of St. Paul's Episcopal Church takes communion during a service in Flint. There is a connection between the Passover Seder and elements of Christian worship. *MLive.com files*

mitted to his Jewish faith and also conversant with Christian Scriptures, having received his doctorate in New Testament from Pittsburgh Theological Seminary.

Prior to Rabbi Sigal's untimely death, he was quoted as saying, "When this world has love, then we finally will indeed have Passover and Easter. There will be redemption!"

interfaith@gvsu.edu