

The Gospel of Jesus Christ Was Announced on the Day of Pentecost

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According to the book of Acts, Christianity began at a single place at a single moment in time. Fifty days after the death of Jesus (now known as Pentecost), a miraculous event took place. “Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them” (Acts 2: 2-3 NIV).

This is the picture we get in Acts, because different groups of disciples of Jesus gathered to try to make sense of what they had experienced with him and what happened to him after his death. The beginning of Christianity began with different groups, different people. It must have been an amazing mixture, amazing diversity. This is clear from the beginning of Christianity. Speakers of Arabic were among the first people to hear the Good News; “Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues!” Amazed and perplexed, they asked one another, “What does this mean?” (Acts 2: 11-12 NIV).

The Arab merchants traveled to Palestine to do business, and they are mentioned in the book of Acts 2:11, among those Jews converted on Pentecost. Arab Christian tribes were all over the Arabian Peninsula, which is bounded by the Red Sea on the west and southwest, the Gulf of Aden on the south, the Arabian Sea on the south and southeast, and the Gulf of Oman and the Persian Gulf (also called the Arabian Gulf) on the east.¹ These tribes originated from Yemen and immigrated to some parts of the Levant (Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine, Israel, Syria, and part of Iraq) after the destruction of the Marib dam in the 6th century BCE. Most of these tribes converted to Christianity by the 5th century CE.² Arab Christians in the peninsula were speaking and praying in Arabic, but their liturgical and confessional formulas were written in Syriac language.³ For over thirteen hundred years, from the seventh century until today, the constant struggle to articulate and proclaim the Christian faith in a language largely defined by Islam gave the Christian communities of the Arab lands much of their unique character. Today, contrary to popular perception which associates Middle-Easterners only with Islam, most ethnically Middle-Eastern people in the United States are Christians. In fact, the majority of Arabs living outside the Arab World are Christians. Unfortunately, because their numbers are small and because their culture is unfamiliar, Christians of Arab and Middle East heritage are often overlooked by fellow Christians, even those committed to diversity. Christians of Arab and Middle East heritage have many gifts to bring to their siblings in the Church in the U.S.

While most persons of Arab heritage in the United States are Christian, most Arabs living in the Arab world are Muslims. So, in their places of origin, immigrants to the United States from the Middle East have lived as religious minorities. They understand what it means to witness to their faith in circumstances where such witness may be viewed as alien to the dominant culture, forbidden or even dangerous. Their experience can strengthen the commitment-to-witness to Christians whose whole lives have been lived in a predominantly Christian culture.

Christians of Arab and Middle East heritage bring a connection back to the roots of our Faith that they can share with the rest of the Church. Much more than Christians of the West, changed by the Enlightenment and by secularism, Christians in the Middle East remain much more closely tied to the bodily forms of the Faith. Their experience of liturgy is often much more an experience of the mystery of faith, an intuition of the presence and reality of God as Incarnate. Ephraim, an important Syrian theologian of the early 4th Century, asserted that Christians receive the knowledge of God not only through scripture but through the liturgy in which the divine is apprehended through the senses rather than the intellect.

Christians who have a direct connection to the lands of the Bible can often provide a helpful understanding of the context and meaning of biblical narratives and teachings. Their grasp of the relationships and situations in Jesus' parables, for example, may come from having lived in similar settings. Their insights can bring understandings to their fellow Christians when they read and study the Bible together.

About four years ago, two Christian faith communities decided to come together. Dearborn, Michigan, has one of the highest populations of Arab Americans in the country. For the first time in the history of the Episcopal Church in the U.S., a primarily Anglo congregation, Christ Church, Dearborn, joined with Arab Middle Eastern Christian Church, Mother of the Savior Church, for the sake of learning from each other and enriching each other's vitality. The former, an English-speaking congregation, the latter an Arabic Speaking congregation—they share the same space, liturgy, Bible Study, conversation, food, and social events through a wonderful Partnership-In-Faith. My congregation, the Arabic-speaking congregation, Mother of the Savior, has about 50 members in that community. The community worships in Arabic and English; it is a diverse community of ethnic Arabs, including Iraqis, Jordanians, Lebanese, Palestinians, and Syrians.

As both congregations began to learn from each other through meals and story sharing, both realized that “we share the same faith in God.” It was to the dominant culture people, the primarily English-speaking European-descent people, to learn how to embrace diversity and experience of the “Fifth Gospel” through the experience of the People of the Land (Bible lands). Through this partnership between Mother of the Savior Church and Christ Episcopal Church, Dearborn, we were able to grow together through all the challenges, cultural differences, and language barriers, and were encouraged that Jesus is in the midst of all these challenges, walking with us and through

the Holy Spirit. New things started to emerge. These new things were the transformative power in knowing each other through our different cultures and languages. We were able to enter into a covenant with one another to worship and fellowship together, support each other, and witness to the church God's reconciling mission in a broken world that longs for peace, justice, and unity.

In the spirit of Acts and the Day of Pentecost, I would encourage Christians everywhere to seek friendship, learning, love, and blessing with your Arab Christian neighbors. We have much to teach each other about the world of the Bible, Christian community, and following Jesus. Shukran (Thank you!)

Notes

¹ William L. Ochsenwald, *Encyclopædia Britannica* (Encyclopædia Britannica, inc., November 20, 2019), s.v. "Arabia Peninsula, Asia," <https://www.britannica.com/place/Arabia-peninsula-Asia>.

² Niveen Sarra, "Who Are the Arab Christians?" ALAMEH Conference, Chicago, Illinois, 2020.

³ Sidney H. Griffith, *The Church in The Shadow of The Mosque* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 9.