

Pastor's Column

My Name Is Issa

My name is Issa. Issa is the Arabic name for Jesus. At least one male in every generation of my family has been named Issa, in honor of Issa, Jesus, the great messenger of God born of the Virgin Mary, chosen to spread God's message.

If you are not familiar with his story, you can read the account in the Qur'an. His story is also found in the Christian Scriptures, but I am told there are differences in the account of his life. I am not very familiar with those differences because I have little education, especially in the area of theology.

I was born in a tent on the outskirts of Sana'a, the capital of Yemen. My father, his name was Issa also, raised goats and sold their milk, and of course, their meat.

My father was obsessed with giving his family a better life. He worked so hard, and he died young, from fatigue.

Someday I would like to tell you more about my family. But that will be for another time.

His focused energy allowed me to get a grade school education, move to Sana'a, live in a small apartment, get a driver's license, and purchase a taxi cab. That is how I now make my living.

I am learning so much from the people who ride in my cab. Yemen, unbelievably, is a crossroads of many peoples and cultures. I have learned a bit of English, Russian, and even a few words in Chinese!

Yemen, once a part of the Ottoman Empire, then, after its fall, Yemen gained its independence in 1918. But, despite that, over the years, until my time, we were harassed by Saudi Arabia, Britain, and Jordan.

There has been so much in the way of political violence over the years; I do not pretend to understand a lot of it. I just want to drive my cab, and make a living for my wife, Maryam, and my four children.

I am a Muslim. I am a peaceful man. I believe that Islam, like all religions, is meant to be peaceful, and its purpose is to honor Allah, the "One God," and the unity of all people.

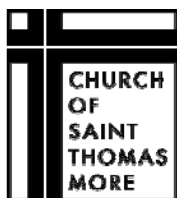
But too many "religious" people become spiritual warriors and cause violence.

My hero is Tawakkul Karman, a Yemeni human rights activist, who won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2011. She is the first Yemeni, the first Arab woman, the second Muslim woman, and the youngest Nobel Peace Laureate at the age of 32.

I cherish peace, and my heart aches because of the violence in our world, and in my beloved Yemen.

There has been much unrest and political violence in Yemen in recent years: the al-Qaeda suicide attack on the USS Cole in 2000 in which seventeen US personnel were killed, the growing number of al-Qaeda training camps in

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my country, and now the US drone attacks which are targeting key al-Qaeda leaders, and the 2011 killing of two American citizens in Yemen who were al-Qaeda leaders, Anwar Awlaki and Samir Khan.

Unfortunately, these US drone attacks also kill innocent people who happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. These innocent people are called, “collateral damage,” a new phrase that I have recently learned.

I pray so hard that my family and I will never be “collateral damage” in these drone attacks.

My heart aches. I want harmony like so many people around the world who just want to live in peace, make a living, raise a family, and die being loved.

I believe in equality for women. Did you know that Yemeni women received the right to vote in 1970? We were the first country in the Arabian Peninsula to do so! My wife has voted in every election since she was able to vote.

Maryam is a very beautiful woman, although you will never see her physical beauty because she chooses to wear the burqa. She comes from a very traditional family, and although I have insisted that she neither needs to wear the burqa, nor even be veiled, she continues to do so.

She has told me many times that her beauty is just for me, and that no other man will have the opportunity to gaze upon her.

You cannot imagine the thrill for me when she comes into the house and removes the burqa! Our home is filled with such great light and beauty because of her. This choice is her way of committing herself totally to me and to our children.

My four daughters are “going Western.” They occasionally wear a veil, but oftentimes not, and frequently they dress in jeans and tee-shirts. Many times they are in veils and jeans! East meets West!

I am okay with that. Our world is shrinking and we are becoming one village.

Our world “shrunk” so completely once we got that television satellite dish on our roof! I am learning so much. There is much I like, but there is so much that I find unsettling, and I worry about the “Western influence” and its effects not only on others around the world, but on the West itself.

I watched my first “Super Bowl Football Game” this year. I was told that this is family entertainment, and that millions of families around the world would be sitting together watching the game.

I hear that the commercials are of special interest and, most of all, the half-time entertainment. So I watched with much curiosity.

Needless to say, I was so shocked as I sat with my wife and daughters and watched the so-called half-time entertainment: Beyoncé and a number of other women, half-naked, writhing and wriggling on the stage in such a sexual manner.

I felt so uncomfortable sitting there with my daughters. I thought about the millions of families in the United States who were watching. Is this United States family entertainment? If so, it is not what I want. This is not what I would want my daughters to image for themselves.

If I had a son, this is not what I would want my son to desire as he thinks about a woman who will become his wife.

My life efforts, in my own small ways, have been to help create peace and understanding among people. But if this is what the United States has to offer, I do not want it.

Am I being tricked? In my desire to allow “West to meet East” in my family, is this the “gift” that my children will receive? Is this what a better life means? I doubt it!

If anyone can help me understand, or assist me in this question, in any way, please write Fr. Mike with your thoughts and ideas...

Thank You! Shukran...

Fr. Mike

