

**Augustana College  
Chapel of Reconciliation**

**Kris Dahlen**

**25 January 2008**

Hello and good morning. I am Kris Dahlen, and I am a senior Religion and English major, which immediately makes this more difficult with professors from both departments watching to see if I confuse some eschatological motifs or end a sentence with a preposition, so thank you all for attending. Speaking about my religious journey is something that I find myself doing quite frequently. It turns out meeting a Russian, Norwegian, boy in the middle of America with a first name that translates to Christ bearer but happens to practice Judaism tends to raise a few questions, so I like to think that I am getting a little better on speaking about my views on God, religion, and faith.

These last few weeks, trying to think of a topic for my sermon, I had several friends and family members bombarding me with questions. What readings are you going to choose? Who's going to show you what a good hymn is in the Lutheran hymnal, and my personal favorite, just how Jewish are you going to make your sermon? These were added to the proposed ideas from others, telling me that they had loved discussing this or that with me, and that all of these topics would make great sermons. I then had to explain to them, that most of the topics we had discussed were straight from Krista Tippet's Speaking of Faith Pod Cast, and I would probably break some kind of copyright laws by turning them into a sermon. So, in hopes of avoiding a predictable and stolen message today, I decided that there were things I do want to say, and things that I feel I need to say.

I didn't really pay much attention to the date of my sermon when I signed up with Pastor Paul, but it's settling in now, that we are in the first month of a brand new year. I love this month because it really does feel new, like there is so much potential and hope mixed with the bitter South Dakota cold and sporadic snowstorms. People are studying more in the library, the weight room fills with prospective health nuts, and the general attitude seems to be one of optimism. I look around at all of this individual betterment, and it makes me think about the possibilities of a different kind of resolution; a resolution that can be founded not within ourselves, but through and with our respective religious communities; a resolution that has been necessary for thousands of years and is begging for some takers; a resolution that goes beyond toleration, and preaches unity and respect in a variety of different languages.

Across the world there are millions of names for God. There are hundreds in the Christian Bible alone, but for some reason, when a foreign name of the God we put so much faith and love into enters our ears, the warning lights flash, and immediately, we shift into defense mode, ready at any moment to stand up for our faith instead of discussing the similarities or differences that could bring us closer together, disallowing engagement of two different people of faith to talk about the glory and love that connects them.

We do this because we are proud. We are proud to be Jews, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, and we have every right to be proud. Within each of our faiths lies a history rich in tradition, accomplishment, persecution, endurance, and most importantly, survival. We are proud because we belong to families as old as time itself. Our religious traditions fit us into stories that have outlasted empires and have shaped the history of the world as we know it. The problem is, we know these stories so well, that hearing new ones, whether they are variations of the ones we are accustomed, or if they are completely different, affect us in a very visceral and personal way. They affect us, because though we are proud of our faith, we are also very scared of what these stories can mean.

A retelling or a new story means that there is different interpretation, and different interpretation means that there are inconsistencies, alternate versions of stories that we live our lives by. But what we fail to see, is that these retellings and these different stories that seem so threatening, have the power to connect us more than the general foundations of our faiths or the similar messages within them. The differences and the inconsistencies offer to all of us a mystery that lies within our religions, and it is the mystery that opens to us that wonderful opportunity to ask questions and embrace the fact that there may not be an answer. This is a concept that is central to scripture in all types of faith ...an idea of wonder and the appreciation that God is beyond our understanding.

The two readings I chose for today's service exemplify this mystery of scripture. Both the Shema and the Beatitudes are foundational texts for Jews and Christians. However, their importance lies within the mystery of their meaning and their ability to mold and evolve with our lives and our faiths. A Christian who reads or hears the opening lines of Matthew's fifth chapter may respond or absorb the text in a much different way than another Christian would, depending on their life and their own faith. Similarly, everyday when Jews around the world say the words, "shema yisrael, Adonai, Eloheynu, Adonai, ekhad," a variety of different emotions, feelings, memories, and messages are felt. These are just two examples of why our scriptures are so important and continue to be analyzed. The mystery of the text forces us to look not only at the words, but at the gaps between the words, a process that has kept the stories and messages alive and new for thousands of years, with endless possibilities of study and discovery.

To view the Exodus and the parting of the Red Sea as a story of coincidence and natural phenomenon, takes away from the importance and the beauty of the story. The recitation of Muhammad, an illiterate salesman, to create the Koran is a story of mystery that forms the entire religion of Islam. And the most important story for Christians, the death and resurrection, has so much meaning and wonder that it breaks away from understandable human thought, and is responsible for the creation of the largest and most influential religion in the world.

What we share in these stories is not what we know, but what we don't know. The ambiguities and incomprehensible wonders that shape our faiths provide a path to one another, the question is, who is going to take the first steps? Pastor Paul, during his sermon on Wednesday, talked about 'The Common Word,' an offering of peace from over one hundred Muslim scholars to the Christian community. The message of 'The Common Word' is so simple that it is remarkable that such an important step has taken so long to become a legitimate proposal. The scholars write that though the three

monotheistic faiths are different in some ideas, they all believe that the centrality of the faiths are love for God and love for one another, and this should unite us, not push us away from one another. As we wait for responses from Christian and Jewish leaders, we should applaud the authors of the 'The Common Word,' learn from their courage, and think of other ways to venture out onto our uniting path of peace and respect.

These opportunities show themselves constantly in our lives, in ways that we may or may not realize. Our religion department offers classes in different religious studies that look at other faiths from a serious and academic point of view. Studying abroad for a year, a semester, or even a month with some of our school's programs can show a different world to us and place us in the middle of a group of very different people all with their own stories and ideas. However, there are ways of connecting to this otherness that doesn't require effort and adds even more to that wonder and mystery that binds us.

When the Augustana Choir went to Tanzania two years ago, we had expectations of what we would experience. We knew to pack minimally, to be prepared to try different food and not eat as much as we were used to, and to understand that we would, more than likely, see poverty and disease beyond our comprehension. When we arrived, we were overwhelmed with a different kind of feeling than the expected sympathy or heartache. Though the poverty and disease was very real, and the living conditions were difficult to get used to, there was something powerful within the people that could not be expressed through words, it had to be experienced. In every village we went to, where food was hard to come by, and money even harder, was a feeling of joy and hope. During church services and time with the locals, our small, white, Lutheran choir spoke about God, about love, and about peace with men, women, and children, who were saying the same thing, in a very different language.

The climax of this dialogue took place at a concert one evening in a city whose lights were failing through most of the afternoon and into the night. At one point, the whole city browned out, and it looked like our concert would be canceled. Dr. Johnson, our director decided to take us to the venue anyway, to see if we could find some artificial light and maybe grab a few audience members. By the time we got there the whole city was still engulfed in the darkness, and I remember sitting on the bus, spirits low with the other singers, not sure what was going to happen that evening. After a few minutes waiting, Dr. Johnson opened the bus door and waved us off saying, "let's go ladies and gentlemen, they are waiting for us." Of course we weren't sure how many 'they' were, but a concert is a concert so we walked off the bus ready to sing. When we got in, flashlights in the audience showed us an open stage with an audience that filled every seat and then some.

As we walked in place to the stage, filing in and trying not to trip over one another, the lights came on, and our jaws dropped. We thought we had just witnessed something truly special...miraculous...mysterious. We hadn't seen anything yet. As our hands interlocked, and we started into our first song, the lights turned off again, and this time, they stayed off. We sang an hour-long concert that night, praising God, feeling the love of our choir as our hands squeezed harder and harder as every note started and ended together perfectly. We felt the love from the audience as they stopped listening and became part of the songs we were singing, and we felt the most powerful love that some of us had ever felt, completely in the dark.

That night, the songs of love and peace went far beyond that dark room. For a dark and mysterious hour in a impoverished city in Tanzania, we were connected to something much bigger than just us. This is the mystery that unites us. That darkness that seems to hide all the answers and block all the paths, when appreciated, can be the outstretched hands that bring us together. The darkness and the mystery allows Christians to see Jesus in the eyes of a Jew, for Jews to hear the power and wisdom of the Torah in the prayers of Muslims, and for Muslims to witness their pillars of faith in the form of a cross.

January is a month of new beginnings. It is a time that allows us to cover our faults with the snow and cold of winter, and create hope and peace with the knowledge that Spring is around the corner. It is a time of possibility, and it is a perfect time for us to look at one another, look at ourselves, and enjoy the mystery. Amen.

**MORNING WORSHIP**  
**Friday, January 25, 2008**

**Prelude**

Rachael Hoogedoorn, piano

**Welcome/announcements**

**Invocation**

P: God of all creation, all people, all history, bless you to be a blessing.

**C: And also with you.**

L: Let us pray. God help us to be present to you mystery, promise and hope. To learn to live in you by learning to listen and respect one another. Gather hopes and dreams, heal hungers and hurts, strengthen wisdom and love. Respectful of all names, we pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

**Hymn**

*“All Are Welcome”*

ELW #641

**Scripture**

Deuteronomy 5:1-5

Matthew 5: 1-14

**Sermon**

Kris Dahlen,  
Majors: Religion and English major  
Hinton, IA

**Hymn**

*“When Our Songs Say Peace”*

ELW #709

**Prayers**

**Benediction**

**Postlude**

## **CAMPUS MINISTRY ANNOUNCEMENTS**

**CONCERT** - UBG and Lifelight are partnering to bring Augustana a top level Christian concert! Please join us for refreshments in the Back Alley on Friday, January 25th, at 7:30 PM and find out who the bands are! Tickets for the first 200 students will be \$10 and every student ticket after that is \$20. Don't miss out on getting your ticket early!

### CHAPEL CALENDAR

Sunday (27<sup>th</sup>)      Worship, 11 am - Pr. Paul  
Monday (28<sup>th</sup>)      Taize Prayer, 10 am  
Wednesday (30<sup>th</sup>) Holy Communion, 10 am - Dr. Jerome Freeman