

Did you know that more than ever throughout this past decade people are open to discussion around spiritual things? The challenge is that they are open to any and everything. But what I love about the Vision God has given Salem is that it challenges us to embrace those He has placed us near where we live, work, study, or play. It challenges me to see people the way Jesus did and really live out my faith.

Our daughter Eden, who is nearing seven years old, and only in first grade, has been infatuated with the middle school playground. As a dad, it's so fun to see her jump at the opportunity to challenge herself, climbing through the rope structure. Little did I know that her opportunity would open a Vision opportunity for our family. This past week while we were at the rope structure a mom pushing a stroller came over. Her two oldest quickly dropped their bike and scooter to run to the playground. Eden handed our huskie back to me and ran to intersect. It started slowly, but in time the kids all integrated. As they were racing and laughing, we began engaging with the mom. She was wearing a hijab, which is the traditional head garment for Muslim women. The conversation was easy and fluid. She shared about her family, origins, friends, etc. Eventually, we got onto the topic of food and local ethnic Iraqi cuisine, to which she said her falafel recipe was better than any restaurant. Selfishly, both Nikki and I thought, um...we need to have that recipe! But half a second later the Spirit nudged us and reminded us that this was a great opportunity to follow up with her. So, we got her number and said we'd love to share with her how it went and have them over sometime.

If you don't know much about the Muslim faith, this is an important time of the year as they're celebrating Ramadan (2/28-3/29). Ramadan is the ninth month of their calendar and remembers when the Qur'an was given to them as a guidance and means of salvation. It's during this month that they observe a strict fast of both food and water from dawn until sunset (basically daylight hours). As dusk comes, their fast is broken and they celebrate together over a special meal called an *iftar*, to which they invite friends and family. Throughout Ramadan, many observers will also pray for hours at their local mosque. In the end, Ramadan is practiced as a private form of worship which brings them closer to God and allows them to sympathize with those less fortunate.

We read that and remember that Jesus said, **"I am the way, the truth, and the light. And no one comes to the Father except through me"** (John 14:6). How do we respond to those around us who believe differently? Do we see others the way that Jesus saw others? Do we long to see those where we live, work, study, or play come to know Christ? **Those around us desperately need Jesus.**

Interestingly, many Christians are observing perhaps similar disciplines as they prepare for Easter. Some follow Jesus' example in the wilderness and give up food, eat frugally, or give up treats/etc. Others do forty days of prayer, both for themselves and others. Some set aside longer times for Scripture and study. Most notably, some observe *Lent* which goes from Ash Wednesday to Easter (3/5-4/17) and focuses on a variety of practices. There is no right or wrong way to prepare for Easter, though perhaps we might say it's better to prepare for Easter than to not prepare. Why? Easter fully reminds us that we are subjects of a new kingdom because we are subject to a new King: Jesus. And yet, our hearts are sinful. We long to be kings of our own kingdoms. And let's be honest...it's easy to get to Easter and simply go right through it without giving much thought to what the resurrection means in our lives.

Right after predicting his resurrection, Jesus said, **"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me."** (Mark 8:34). Do we realize just how much we need Jesus this season? Do we long for our identity to be so wrapped up in his that we can't imagine living any other way than Jesus himself did? **We desperately need Jesus.**

This Easter season, may we long for Jesus in a fresh way in our own lives, as well as long for those around us to come to him for the first time.

Preparing for Easter alongside you,

Seth