

FAITH&VALUES

Baha'i Ridvan celebrates declaration of founder's mission

"The Divine Springtime is come, O Most Exalted Pen, for the Festival of the All-Merciful is fast approaching."
(From the Baha'i scriptures)

By DARREN HIEBERT
For The Times

The Baha'i Festival of Ridvan (pronounced RIZ-von) is the holiest and most significant of all Baha'i festivals and celebrates the public declaration, in 1863, of the divine mission of Baha'u'llah, the prophet upon whose teachings the Baha'i Faith is founded.

Each year, Baha'is celebrate the Festival of Ridvan during the 12-day period of April 21 through May 2. The first, ninth, and 12th days of this festival are observed as holy days on which work is suspended.

The connection between the Festival of Ridvan and the season of spring is a very significant one. Materially, spring is

Reader's Rite

when a burst of new growth begins and becomes evident. Spiritually, the divine springtime corresponds to a burst of spiritual growth in the world.

In the material springtime, we see the decay of the old growth alongside, and fueling, the new growth of spring. Likewise, in the divine springtime one may see the decay of old ideas and dogmas alongside, and fueling, the growth of a renewed sense of spirituality among people, coupled with a renewed quest for God's presence in the world.

Baha'is, which number 6 million worldwide, believe Baha'u'llah (1817-1892), is the fulfillment of God's promise of the return of his spirit to mankind — a promise given to each of the world's historical religions, though each awaits that same

spirit by a different name.

Baha'is attribute the return of God's spirit to mankind as the cause of the radical changes taking place in the world today, renewing all things while simultaneously shaking the foundations of institutions whose existence no longer serve God's purpose. Just as in springtime, one can observe the spiritual forces of integration and disintegration acting in a reciprocal fashion.

For his progressive teachings, centered upon the theme of the oneness of mankind, and asserting the essential unity of the world's religions, Baha'u'llah suffered imprisonment and banishment at the hands of a fanatical clergy. Baha'u'llah was first imprisoned in 1852 in an underground dungeon in Tehran, within the Persian empire (now Iran). He was subsequently banished to the Ottoman Empire, first to Baghdad in Iraq, then eventually to Akka, Palestine (now Acre, Israel).

It was at the conclusion of his time in Baghdad, as Baha'u'llah was about to undergo another in a series of exiles intended to move him farther away from the Persian Empire and reduce his growing influence, that Baha'u'llah declared to the multitude gathered to bid him farewell that he was the anticipated manifestation of God's spirit in the world and the revealer of God's will to mankind.

During his 10 years in Baghdad, Baha'u'llah's reputation changed from one of a lowly prisoner to that of a dignitary who won the respect of virtually all who knew him. Even the governor of the province had come to regard Baha'u'llah with deference. He gave the officers accompanying the prophet a written order commanding the governors of the provinces through which he passed to extend him the utmost respect.

Thus, Ridvan is also a celebration of the power of God to

conquer the hearts of people, and of how God can take even a lowly prisoner and raise him up to prevail over worldly power. This is the story of Joseph played out once again in modern times, for Baha'u'llah, like Joseph of the Bible, was thrown into a pit, betrayed by his brother, taken as prisoner to a foreign land, and eventually raised up to a position of great honor.

Ridvan is celebrated variously by Baha'is around the world. Common elements of celebration include feasts, devotional readings, song, recitations and dramatic presentations of the story of Ridvan, and fellowship. Such elements will be incorporated into the Ridvan celebrations observed by the Baha'i communities of Huntsville and Madison.

Call 1-800-228-6483 or visit www.bahai.org for more information.

Darren Hiebert lives in Madison.