

The Bridwell Quill

a note from the director



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Issues 63–64: *Theaters of the Absurd*

Arafat arrived at church that evening without warning. In a twist of revisionist liturgy, he presided over the Christmas Eve service like any good Anglican, though it was the local Arabic-speaking priest who preached the nativity sermon on Muhammad instead of the expected quaint, feel-good birthing story of Mary. While the mostly Euro-American expat group in attendance certainly had imaginings of pine boughs, warm hearths, and a spanking clean Jesus nestled into a folksy and comfortable manger, the traditional service in the ancient stone Church of the Nativity (below) in Bethlehem was anything but that—

shared, those of us in attendance mostly remembered something like “Jesus came, but others came after.”

The confusion of the unorthodox pronouncements made sense only after the congregation, already standing in a tightly packed space, spread open like the Red Sea in anticipation of Moses. Instead of the receiver of the commandments, the PLO leader drifted through the chapel and to the altar and spoke for some time. It was a political speech, punctuated by repetition and intensity, and paused only by the quick interpretations into



or anything predictable. The cold, dank space was akin to a dungeon replete with silvery ornamentations, only reminiscent of that original manger by its discomfort and musty scent. The clergy leading the holiday service were supposedly members of the Church of England, but by the abundance of characters in various clerical dress, it wasn't clear what denomination was rendering their doctrine that evening. When the Christmas homily was

English by the priest. I stood no more than the length of a full-grown man away from the altar. If I'd fallen, my face would have been at the feet of both men. But under the intense security entourage that followed Arafat, he stood flanked by thirty beret-wearing men in mud-brown fatigues. The service was over, and those in front of me thrust out their hands for a fleeting shake to immortalize the moment. Before long, the throng of guards enveloped

Arafat like cake batter consuming a stick of butter, and he was gone. His wife floated out through a side door in a fur coat and golden mane, more like an exaggerated Disney character exiting across a screen.

The very place of Bethlehem and the Church of the Nativity are sacral places that are honored by Christians around the world. Down the ancient stairs there is an altar adorned with jewels and lanterns, where Jesus was supposedly born. The space itself is surreal, a place of imagination, presentation, performance, and theater. That alone would be enough for a visitor to have many thoughts and questions. To have a Christmas Eve service of such political and syncretic nature only added to the illusory and quirky nature of the place and the world we were living in at the time—and it begged those among us to wonder *what was this all about?*

A quarter century later, I still think of this as a moment of absurdity and illusion, especially as the world today has unfolded in those lands in very precarious, cruel, and unreal ways. I lived in the ambiguity of the Holy Land for three years. It was a liminality of in-betweens, both/ands, a land and imagination that exists in tension with itself and the people residing there. A few years after I left Jerusalem and moved back to the United States, I was at a community lunch at the University of Chicago with the French philosopher Jean-Luc Marion, who upon hearing the topic of Jerusalem come up, motioned energetically and declared “Jerusalem is not a place, it is an i-deeeeee!” (Photo right, Mount of Olives, ca. 1905).

Whatever it was or is—an idea, an imagination, a reality, an uncertainty—it strikes a chord with anyone who has ever been there and experienced its peculiarities, absurdities, and paradoxes. The tensions of space and time are punctuated by this very absurdity of how the mind and body react to the narratives of landscape, how the imagination coerces our realities, and how these things allow or inhibit

us to live day by day. An example of this cognitive dissonance was the feeling of great ease in local travel and safety while riding buses wherever I wanted in Jerusalem, only to subconsciously dart behind telephone poles when buses drove by on the street for fear they might explode. I only realized this absurdity one day while walking with a friend, and I found myself doing it to my astonishment. Who knew that a Pavlovian conditioning was happening to me in such a stunning way!?

In the late 1990s, the world only had modest cell phones and the internet was an infant technology comprised mostly of green and white computer screens. My memories are still vivid and are easily retrieved when I look at several oversized albums



from that time, all full of vibrantly colorful photographs. Those realities are long gone, but the mysteries of the late 20th century are emblazoned in my mind, the beautiful and enlightening, but also the raw and shocking experiences I had, likely different than how a post-social media era might curate or articulate them. At that time, it was easier to travel freely anywhere—I visited the West Bank and Gaza seamlessly—and it was rather common to see well-known political or religious figures or celebrities on the street or at the university. I saw Pope John Paul II make his historic visit to the Western Wall. I met former Secretary of State George Schultz after hearing him tell a God joke, and had a serendipitous encounter with the late Jerry Falwell, at one of the signature Jerusalem hotels. Two flat mates and I had dinner at the hotel, only to realize we were the only ones *not* from a church tour in the restaurant. I introduced myself and he and his entourage engaged us in some theological banter, from a random dad joke by one of his administrators that had the repetitive punch line “it’s Greek to me!” to an inquiry by Rev.

Falwell himself asking “what those folks up the hill (i.e. at Hebrew University) thought of Isaiah 53?”—the prophecy of Christ’s atonement. Of course he asked! Classmates often reported seeing Itzhak Perlman at dinner or meeting a former prime minister for a class project. I had coffee one morning with the philosopher Emil Fackenheim, who told me secrets about Hannah Arendt! And one friend found himself sitting in a class next to an incognito Natalie Portman.

Perhaps everyone views their pasts with manipulated visions and absurdity, but that space of earth we know of as the Holy Land, and Jerusalem especially, is its own masterpiece of crazy and cruel—and one of my favorite places on earth. During this most recent season of Christmas, I have thought about the Middle East more, and often feel reserved about how to best understand the human relationship with the earth beneath our feet. And as I submerge myself into the wildly abundant Advent and Christmas activities of DFW, I consider how each of us, individually and collectively, cultivates and curates our spaces around the holiday to fit with what we want and how we feel. Sometimes that curation can be illuminative, and sometimes it can be absurd. I’ve now attended more than two dozen holiday events, from Christmas concerts, Lessons & Carols, a suburban children’s parade, an advent festival, three performances of Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*, a Catholic novena service, the 4am Feast of Our Lady of Guadeloupe replete with mariachi bands, two chili cook-offs, three Broadway-scale megachurch performances, including one that had flying angels and drummer boys, and countless lunches, brunches, and cookie socials. Every activity I attend is aglow in a holiday curation, and generally emotes a celebratory flare, but at



moments are equally absurd in the sheer amount of time and money put into emblazing our neighborhoods with decorations, sweets, and performances.

Amid this very crowded schedule, my elder daughter wanted to visit a new interactive arts cooperative in Grapevine called *Meow Wolf* (left). As we dropped a hefty chunk of change on entrance fees, we spent an hour in an immersive and surreal art experience with distorted spaces, optical illusions, manipulated sounds, and an abundance of aesthetic absurdities. I felt disoriented and confused, but also entertained and intrigued by the undertaking. And once we emerged from this charming chaos of color and incommensurable rooms, I began to reconcile its disorientation. It was both absurd and sensical. The randomness of the spaces and colors, the off-kilter pathways or incongruities of perception began to make sense. It made me think of the Holy Land again, in its majesty of confusion and absurdity, whether in the hyperrealities of encountering world leaders or hearing a Christmas homily about Islam. Oddly, the disorder of *Meow Wolf* was more logical in its formulaic design and corporate packaging than the absurdity of the Holy Land. It may be a surprise then that *absurd* itself comes from the Latin for “out of tune” and the root *surdus* means “deaf.” Maybe that is the lesson: that a place so contested, a *center of the world*, is one where the chords of nature will always be dissonant, even while the sounding of the sacred is eternal. Then again, absurdity may be our human inability to hear through the cacophony of a chaotic world, to be deaf to it all, in order to deal silently with that very small patch of earth beneath our own feet.

Pax vobiscum! ~ AJE

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