



The Texture of Blessing

JENI FALKMAN GRANGAARD

Time, in Jerusalem, is neither cyclical nor linear. It is something between or beyond those options. Time echoes, bends, and circles, reaching back to move forward, stretching slowly and all too fast.

My time in Jerusalem was a long and fast four years in global service through the ELCA with Young Adults in Global Mission. Our work was to be in accompaniment with the young adults in the program, along with the Palestinian Christians among whom they were serving. Our lives happened alongside our work. Daily we moved between Palestine, Jerusalem, and Israel, a privilege to hold in space that is generally segregated. Jerusalem is a complex place with incredible people and delicious food. I dream about it, still.

I kept a journal in Jerusalem, a way of keeping track of and holding on to time. The entries are offered here not in civic-calendar time, but in liturgical time. I use the rhythm of the liturgical seasons to sort the details and to give texture to the blessings that seemed to slip so fast through our hands.

As captivating as it can be to visit Jerusalem on a tour or pilgrimage, it is quite another thing to live there for an extended period of time. In a longer residence, one comes to understand and daily experience the seasonal rhythms of the land, and the parallel beauty and trouble of this small, special piece of territory.

ADVENT

December 5, 2017

[On the cusp of the announcement that the US Embassy would move to Jerusalem.]

Is this what I'm supposed to do? Stay awake? Keep awake? Watch for the Lord?

The questions come from all angles and directions, all streaming from a future not yet here and possibly never arriving. Tax plans. "Peace" plans. Vacation plans. (Some plans are better than others.)

The boy kicks off his blankets, rolls into my back, sets his head to mine, and drifts back to sleep. His curls have almost grown out, but I still can't cut them. He is on the go, learning how his body works and just what he can do. I hold him when I can, marveling at his being.

The girl wakes with a request for snuggles. I hold her for a while, smell her head, feel her arms folded around mine so she does not fall off the edge. We have to shift to her bed to fit. I return to mine once her light snores tell me she's back to sleep.

I pray. For my biggest blessings curled around me. For friends and friends' families as death nears.

I read. The news. John O'Donohue's blessings. Marcella Hazan's *Essentials of Italian Cooking*.

I think. Mostly about polenta.

How when you make it, you release the grains from your hand in such a way that you can see each one hit the water.

It's this image that both warms and startles me.

It's all slipping too fast. My children's childhood. Our time in Jerusalem. My life. Try as I strain to see each piece, each moment, I arrive at the next one. As I catalog the wonder and beauty and challenge and joy, I feel these days and moments move on all too fast.

I've had polenta twice in the last week or so. Not by my hand. The warm, salty, earthy flavors spiked with pecorino and humbled with roasted greens. And truffles—who could imagine? Maybe all of these grains that are slipping out of our hands and into the water are preparing for a feast. The feast. The time and place and space where we are gathered and held in love and light.

These moments pass, one by one, but they are neither lost nor gone.

The day will soon begin here. The call to prayer is soon to break the predawn silence. My prayer is to let go of what has passed through my fingers, hold on to what is at hand, to not try to count what is left, and to trust the feast that is being prepared out of my ordinary and wonderful time.

CHRISTMAS

December 25, 2018

The entrance into Bethlehem was more absurd than normal last night. Women border patrol agents were dressed in Santa's clothes, handing out chocolate Santas and offering season's greetings. Standing next to the women were men with guns, you know, for safety. Over the long speed bump and the lowered spikes and on to the round-about, an LCD star of David and Cinderella carriage pointed us through the not-so-narrow gate with the not-so-small barriers.

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We drove past the graffiti and Palestinian soldiers climbing out of trucks to stand guard, keep watch, and direct traffic. The sun was setting to the west, a wall of blue cloud with a silver—no, golden—lining. A fragile slit between day and night.

We parked next to a fading pomegranate tree with yellowed flowers and two bulging fruits. We walked to church with little hands in ours and little feet beside us. The street was busy but not chaotic, strawberries for sale: 10 shekels per half kilo. Strawberries in December, a miracle for this Midwesterner, but a fact of life in the Middle East.

Our journey to Bethlehem reminded me that Christmas, in itself, is absurd. God being held within a young woman's body, being born, vulnerable and needy, born in a cave and not a world-renowned birthing center.

In worship: the five-year-old colored in her notebook, Jesus on the cross and the cave in which they laid him. Born in a cave. Laid in a cave. Life where we would never expect.

Maybe it's absurdity that saves us, that cracks our armor—and walls. God coming where and when we don't expect—or prepare. The thrill of hope, a weary world.

The man on the moon walked us home following worship. He bobbed up and over the hills, around and between buildings, in and out of sight. He was looking at the world slant, as if resting his head on a celestial pillow, pondering. Absurdity invites us to do the same, experiencing things not as we expect, but as we need. Could our enemies also be our friends? Could justice take root from uprooted trees? Would God be born in such a way? Could the fig tree bloom twice?

It did this year. The fig tree, I mean. Surprising summer rains sowed a second harvest, and even now, at the cusp of winter, figs still ripen on the near-leafless

branch. I saw it even last night, in the faint and darkened light of sunset. If you can bend with the absurdity, you might understand that there is a fecund hope here, a faint echo carried from the walls of the cave all those years ago.

EPIPHANY

January 2019

The word for “winter” in Arabic is the same as for “rain”: *shittah*. Men cover their heads with *keffiyeh* topped by *‘agal*, the black-corded band that holds the cotton and wool fabric in place. The black-and-white-patterned square folds to a triangle that covers head, neck, and shoulders against the wind and rain. Small white tassels bob and sway from the fabric’s hem, gathering at the triangle’s point. The temperature stays above freezing, mostly, but the cold penetrates like water to a rock, reflecting off the cold and wet stone.

But [to me] winter [feels like] an upside-down season in Palestine. For it is not death or dark days that control the narrative, as in much of the Northern Hemisphere, but life and light. Sun-popped almond blossoms burst pink and white on the branch. Rains wash in a green tide that pulls the grass through and between the rocky hills. Shepherds lead their sheep and goats down hairpin paths that cut at the hill’s stepped edge. The sheep and goats feast together, fattening for the year’s festivals.

Walaja is a place that holds light and darkness with equal beauty. Sun and shadowy mist strike through tall but foreign pine trees in sunrise. Around another bend the sun burns the morning dew and floods the mist with light that reveals each tree on the hill’s slope—a wet fire consuming the valley.

The valley braids its hills, pushing into the light that reveals, pulling into a shade that conceals. In and out, up and over, across and back again. The hill gathers together in a westward slope toward the sea, toward the setting sun. The sunset illuminates and darkens each hill, flowing gold and ebbing darkness, flooded and emptied of light. On a clear day you can see the sea flow into the sky beyond the hills. But you can see even more on a hazy day when the sand blows in from the Arabian Peninsula.

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It is the haze that reveals the valley’s topography best. The lines are not seen except for the cluttered air. The haze fills in the space, collapses the distance, refracts for better clarity. Haze is the medium for sight.

Is there a word that exists to describe the lines that are set to sight in the haze? That which obscures also reveals; an unforeseen apocalypse. The land folds out beyond the valley like an accordion. Each hill in silhouette—the closer the hill, the darker it appears; each layer lightening until the hills blend with the sky.

Hills fall like lines of a keffiyeh draped over the land, subtle arches that stretch like birds floating on thermals at the horizon. From above, the valleys and hills look filled in or blanketed, but from below, one notices the space along hills, naked in all their glory. Such a sight depends on the heaviness of the air, one day radiant and stunning, another day unremarkable except for what the hills may hold.

LENT

March 20, 2017

It's the exhaustion hour—at least in our time zone. One is asleep and the other, well, we can only hope that soon she will sleep.

The toddler woke up before the sun and headed out to play. The baby was in cahoots. In truth, the extra time to prepare for the day was welcome. No matter how long she dragged out breakfast, there was still time for sorting out the details of life, the sum of which is greater than its many parts. Today's equation: coffee, showers, lunches, and ponytails.

But it's time now: for rest, quiet, and empty arms. The boy is teething, so he won't get very far, but at least for now he is still. Nothing being pulled into his mouth and nothing pouring out, except (with my deep gratitude) his every breath. I can hear it as it rises and falls against my chest.

Of all the noises that arise in this holy city, for me it is the wind hurling itself in and through our windows that is the most unsettling. Some days and seasons it is relentless. Daytime, nighttime, early morning. Loud like a train but never seeming to turn the corner out of town. Lately I wonder if it is an echo of my own cries, a projection of my own longing.

For what? I do not know. Nothing. Everything. I only know that it isn't anything new, but a companion from whom I've long tried to run.

If the wind is not my echo, my toddler is. Or, I fear, the rough edges of her. We are working on breathing, she and I. I'm learning and teaching in the same moment. Nothing else seems to temper the frustration, hers or mine. So we lie on our knees on the floor in child's pose, or we draw our knees to our chest. In through our nose, out through our mouth. Breathe. Breathe. Breathe. On repeat until our hearts return from our throats to our chests.

At what? For what? I don't know. I am who I have long wanted to be. I have what I have set out for. I am free to work and live with my family in a way I could never imagine. It is beyond good. And yet, and yet. The wind.

Someday this will all be dust, blown apart by the wind. How do you keep from rage?

And so my chest tightens and my face scrunches and I hold my breath—unaware—until I must breathe and my breath cools my nose and fills my chest and returns me home to the here, the now, the holy and exhausting ordinary. And I'm grateful, not just for the end of the day but for all that it saw and held. I can do that now as I am about to let the day go.

“Mama,” she cries, her face scrunched as she bides the time between sleep and awake.

Here I am. Here I am.

HOLY WEEK

March 25, 2016

My son flings bread to the ground of a restaurant and the young server immediately comes to pick it up, dust it off, and return it to the table. All of the other food remains on the floor. Jesus says, “I am the Bread of Life.” Bread is holy and is never to be wasted, thrown, or discarded.

Plastic bags hang on the outside of dumpsters, tied shut and weighted down by bread. For Muslims it is a sin to throw bread away while others are hungry. Leftovers are left for others. Yesterday’s bread becomes someone else’s, something else’s daily bread.

I’m drawn to the bags, and the bags draw me back to childhood and the many treasures we found in the apartment’s giant dumpster. An end table. A lamp.

Now I pass by, often oblivious. One day while following a man and his daughter in the car ahead of us, we watched as he scraped the bag off the hook and set the meal on the dash. More often, though, the bags are taken by shepherds to feed their sheep and goats.

This is what holiness looks like, I think. An extended table. A sharing of abundance. An anonymity for those who want it. A placing of food in a common location where everyone must pass by. A compassion to keep the bread outside the trash and off the ground.

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“When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest; you shall leave them for the poor and for the alien: I am the Lord your God” (Lev 23:22).

Cornel West says that love is what justice looks like in public. To be holy is to love.

Jesus was asked to name the most important commandment. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, strength (Deut 6:5) and you shall love your neighbor as yourself (Lev 19:18). To love God is to love your neighbor. In Hebrew, a word for “worship” and the word for “service” are rooted together in the word *avad*.

On Maundy Thursday, so named for Jesus’s *mandatum* (Latin for “mandate”), we are given a new commandment: Love one another as I have loved you (John 13:34).

Worship and service need no definite borders. We cannot keep the sacred from the profane (and vice versa). Holiness is not a line in the sand but a circle, ever expanding and ever drawing together. Like yeast in the dough. Like bread for the neighbor. Like love.

EASTER

May 11, 2016

A girl, maybe six years, sits atop her dad’s shoulders and traces the cross that was hewn at the top of a pillar. Apart from her dad’s shoulders, she couldn’t see it, let alone reach it. Without her, I would have missed this detail. The pillar is rose-colored stone, and it adorns the Orthodox baptistry at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem—the structure built over the cave where Jesus was born, the gathering place for pilgrims throughout the world.

The room echoed the cacophony and heat of bodies gathered for the baptism. In the wall of sound around him, the young priest offered prayers, hands raised, blessings codified in the sign of the cross, and the breath of the Holy Spirit from his own lungs. He breathed on the boy, just as he was breathed on by a priest, just as he was breathed on by a priest—a bestowal of the Holy Breath.

The priest led the sponsors in the Nicene Creed, which they recited from heart over the boy as a prayer with their eyes toward heaven. *Allah min Allah, nur min nur.* God from God, light from light. *Amiyn.* Amen.

Beyond this holiness, photographers and videographers hovered to capture the moment. From our vantage point in the wooden chairs that were built into the wall, we were captivated: in awe, at the treasure of baptism, at the beauty and meaning of the space, by the hospitality of our companions, by the wide smile of the eight-month-old boy.

As has long been practiced in the Orthodox tradition, the one being baptized is prayed for and blessed, then submerged in the waters as they were born, naked. *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

As the boy was drawn up and out of the waters, his smile was replaced with shock and he was quickly dried and dressed by his family. No longer naked, he wore a white crown with a gold cross on it. A white suit and white shoes. He was clothed in Christ.

Al Masih Qam!

Hakan Qam!

Words we knew and could recite:

“Christ is risen!”

“He is risen indeed!”

We were standing on our chairs, straining to see the dance around the font. Round and round it went. It felt as if we all were sitting on someone’s shoulders, glimpsing a world we cannot yet see or reach on our own: one where kinship and belonging flow like water, where walls do not determine who you are or what you can become, where justice and mercy kiss, where the dead are raised to new life.

PENTECOST

May 29, 2018

Wind and prayers are sweeping through our apartment, as is the smell of *mish-mish* picked fresh today by my neighbor from his apricot tree. He was tired as he came to find us, his feet slowly climbing each stair with purpose, with care, with ebbing strength.

There are bars on our windows. The kids love to open the screen and stick their arms or their faces in the space between glass and iron. I check to see if the bars are secure. Still, they hold. “I like to feel the wind in my hair,” J says, as I ask her to move out of the sill. J and A jockey for position to spy on our neighbors as they offer water to Pedro Betsy, the cat they have named Booshie. They watch the lights hung by our neighbors for Ramadan, and she says she wants to watch them forever. I remind her it is time for sleep. Her protest registers but eventually alights with her blessing: “Sweet dreams, mama.”

The sun set an hour and a half ago. The light seemed to catch on the flat rooftops of the westernmost homes on the hill opposite ours. The last moments of daylight, the last moments of fasting, held as a breath, as if in prayer.

The full moon is alone in the sky save for one bright star. From here it looks like it is above Bethlehem, that it has embarked from Jordan’s hills, that it is early in its nightly trajectory. The holy month started with a scant crescent and has waxed to its present middle. While the moon wanes, the holy month will reach its crescendo.

I sit in quiet solitude, relishing the cool night while J’s schoolwork dances in the wind against the wall on which it hangs. I can’t help but note the peace of this place and how strange it is to name it so.

ORDINARY TIME

22 July 2015

Prayers have been ringing like music here in Jerusalem. We live close to a couple of mosques, so the call to prayer and mellifluous muezzins are resonant in the air.

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It is Eid al-Fitr, the celebration marking the end of Ramadan. Ramadan brings a month of fasting from sunrise to sunset. It is a pillar of the Islamic faith. We have bumped into many Muslim families as they celebrate the holiday, including our generous neighbors. They brought us flowers and we made them home-made chocolate chip cookies.

For Eid, and even a bit for Ramadan, many have been granted permission to travel out of the West Bank. That is a big, positive deal. It means increased flying checkpoints and road closures, but it also means more access to places that are usually cut off, like family, places of prayer, and the sea.

Because Jerusalem closes down on Saturday for Shabbat, we headed to the sea. There we met many people celebrating life and many people celebrating Eid al-Fitr. We saw mamas in hijab wading in the waves with their toddlers. We saw swimmers and runners and paddle boarders and puppies and PDAs (public displays of affection).

The best thing we saw, the most beautiful encounter of the day was this: a family of four, a mom and dad and two children. One child swaddled in mama's arms—an infant, too small for the rocking waves. Mama was in her hijab, protected from the sun. The other child, a boy, was in his father's arms, beaming like the sun. His dad picked his son up from his wheelchair and carried him and his smile down the craggy stairs, across the melting sand, and into the green-blue sea. He set his boy down in the water, holding him up under the arms so that the boy could use what muscles he had to walk in the water. As the waves got bigger and bigger, the dad picked his boy up so he could feel the waves and jump over them. Then the father helped the boy float in the blue-green sea, feeling the water up to, but not over, his ears. We sat and watched for ten minutes, engrossed in the gift of family and care and kindness and adaptability we carry within us.

REFORMATION

October 31, 2017

I'm warming up some *shoreba* (soup) while waiting for the *sfeeha* (sfeeha) to cook. *Im* Ahmed (Ahmed's mother) watches the children a few days a week. She

also cleans and cooks. Our life has significantly improved in the time we have known her.

The sfeeha is from the stash in the freezer. The shoreba was made fresh tonight, for my throat.

She arrived at prayer time, so she used our living room rug as a prayer rug, offering her *salats* with whispered words. Pausing. Bending. Kneeling. Touching the ground with her face. Repeat. And again. Finishing by facing each shoulder and offering a *salaam aleykum* to an imagined community on either side of her.

I had to change quickly into my clerics after helping my son nap. He stayed sleeping until after I left. My daughter sat on the couch with Im Ahmed, sorting red lentils. “We have to save some for my mom,” she said. The girl was asleep when I returned home.

On the way to church, tea with lemon and honey in hand, I learned that I couldn’t actually sing. My voice was shut up in its box. My game plan was to save my voice for the part of Psalm 46 I was asked to read—and then try to sing “A Mighty Fortress.”

And I could not sing. My voice squeaked to a halt.

What is a Lutheran pastor to do, unable to sing on this five-hundredth anniversary?

With a graciousness I could not afford, I got to listen. I listened to a Finnish pastor sing the Swedish words of “*Du Ar Helig*” (“You Are Holy”). I listened to the congregation sing “A Mighty Fortress” in Arabic, German, and English. I listened to a beautiful children’s choir from Beit Sahour sing hallelujah.

I noticed too. Noticed the way that German words swish and float in the jowls of native speakers. Noticed Catholic and Orthodox guests sitting in attendance, welcomed to the front. Noticed the inscription on the altar from 1898.

I looked up to the walls and wondered what prayers they have held. What faithful they have gathered. What bodies they have seen fed.

While my voice matters, I could see once more that we speak and sing and pray from a community. I was carried by those who have held that space before and those who filled that space now.

But.

When it came time for the Nicene Creed, we were all instructed to confess in our mother tongue, but not so loud that our neighbors couldn’t also say the Creed in their native tongue. So while the whole congregation had to whisper, my laryngitis let me shout, “WE BELIEVE!”

I feed my son now so he can sleep. He was waiting up for me. I drank the shoreba from the bowl like a cup. Standing in the kitchen. No spoon. Leaning against the counter. I couldn’t wait any longer. Its warmth was grace, soothing and unearned. 

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