Quds

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The part that got me was that I had to take off my Chacos to enter the sanctuary. I was irked at first, drifting at the back of our group—apathetic, iPod on—deliberately detached and not in the mood for ceremonial inconveniences. I looked into the sanctuary's square, open-air center. The floor, I had to admit, was beautiful—thin blue rivulets streamed deep within white marble—but imagine how many feet had mixed their oils with the dirt that faintly coated it. Red wooden poles lined the edges of the square, rising out of white pedestals to support the red tiles that sloped down toward the center, where the rest of my friends had gone on ahead. I skirted the poles until I came to a few rows of shoes lying simply beside a pole on my right. Amid them, I recognized two small, slipperlike white ones, then, almost reflexively, imagined their owner's face; then I recognized more shoes, and then I saw more faces; then the cold stones finally sent thrills through my feet.

The baring of my feet no longer felt ceremonial, but significant: I stood somewhere else—somewhere like the Himalayas, someplace steeped with seclusion where principle trumped practicality: the hidden place where faith lives.

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One year before, a different group of friends and I were welcoming Heidi back from Jerusalem, or *al-Quds*—the Holy. Someone had just slighted the Muslims with an ignorant joke. Heidi's eyes weren't angry, but their blue was clearly burning: "You have no idea how good, how generous, and how warm-hearted those people are," she said, which

is when I realized, "Neither do I." Once I knew I didn't know, I knew I wanted to, and I began to imagine a journey I never thought I'd go on.

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After the chill shot through my feet, I turned off my iPod and caught up with our guide, who was in the shade beneath the Muhammad Ali Sanctuary's portico up ahead. The mosque wasn't named for the famous American boxer. Rather, Cassius Clay, when he converted to Islam, admired the same medieval Muslim for whom the mosque was named and so took on the name Muhammad Ali too. Our guide's name was Islam, which added a little to the confusion of names: when I caught up to him, he was explaining his religion and namesake to my friends while guiding them around the mosque—one of Cairo's glories. The whole country, like Islam's faith, felt foreign to me, such that frankly I felt afraid of its adherents, because I didn't know "them," *Muslims,* they who had taken such pains in producing the surrounding geometries of art and architecture. That jolt through my feet reminded me of what I'd felt through Heidi: they were worth knowing better.

I had heard that Muslims rise at daybreak to pray, and they pray three more times throughout the day, then once more at sunset; and I had heard of Ramadan, the month in which the faithful do not eat or drink while the sun is in the sky; and I knew that these were only two of the religion Islam's pillars, even before our guide Islam brought them up; but these facts had never meant much to me. I suppose it was their concept of God I was after, the place I hoped to find some overlap. But as Islam described Muslim prayers, my reservations rekindled: it sounded like prayer to Muslims meant reciting prescribed supplications. That felt like a forced faith, to me.

I don't like the idea of an impersonal God or the vibe from people who believe in one, or anyone who seems to believe that man was made for the Sabbath, not the other way around. I do believe that one God fits all, and I believe that one religion fits all—his—but I also believe he reaches for us through anything he can, through everything he can. He sends sacred wisps to reach for us throughout the fallen world. He'll speak to us through broken words, imperfect pictures, or any of the Hero's thousand faces—any echo of the Savior's story. I cling to each of the thousand for the glimpses of the Hero himself they sometimes give to me. Myths aren't lies, said Tolkien; in fact, though they "contain error, [they] will also reflect a splintered fragment of the true light. . . . They steer however shakily towards the true harbor."[1]

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1. Humphrey Carpenter, *J. R. R. Tolkien: A Biography* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1977), 147.

I have sometimes seen gleams in them—splinters of the whole light. Even in the true and living Church of Jesus Christ, which I believe I am in, we see through a glass darkly: hence, "One of the grand fundamental principles of Mormonism is to receive truth, let it come from whence it may,"[2] according to Joseph Smith; hence I hoped for help from Islam, a faith I'd heard essentially described as "virtuous, lovely, and of good report or praiseworthy" (A of F 1:13). But a religion that would not let a man speak his mind or heart to God—this I could not identify with, that being near the essence of my concept of God: if he really cared, he would listen to anything, not just the right things. He would understand.

"But when you are working, as I am right now, you are not expected to pray," said Islam, which seemed a lot less prescriptive and offered me a glimmer of hope. "And if you are sick or pregnant, you do not need to fast." Hmm. So God does understand, to Muslims. He doesn't ask you to sacrifice when it's unwise, just to do so truly when it's time. When you pray, for example, Islam went on, "you put your nose and your forehead on the ground to give God your power and dignity and authority." In other words, you hold back nothing; in Christ's words, you lose your life, then find it (see Matt. 16:25). If there's one thing I wish for, that is it: to have learned to not hold back. That's part of why I'm so distrustful of ceremony, I think: ceremonial obedience has not brought me to life. If I could just find more sincerity, I think God would, though.

Islam's dark Egyptian face—hair and brows just darker than his skin—seemed to glow while he talked. Who could love the doctrine of holding nothing back save someone who was willing to do it? I considered how much, so far as I could tell, Islam had not held back: he was fit enough to excel in soccer; smart enough to have learned English in addition to Arabic; diligent enough to have a PhD in Egyptology, though he was thirty years old, if that; and cool enough to be a popular deejay and confident dancer. All this he seemed to love letting go. Above all this, he was a Muslim, "one who submits himself to God."

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When Jesus first came to the ancient Americas, to prove, among other things, that no sheep were forgotten, he said very little before the people bowed before him: "Behold, I am Jesus Christ, whom the prophets

2. Joseph Smith Jr., *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints,* ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed., rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1971), 5:499; see also "History, 1838–1856, volume E-1 [1 July 1843–30 April 1844]," p. 1666, on Church Historian's Press, *The Joseph Smith Papers,* http://www.josephsmithpapers.org/paperSummary/history-1838-1856-volume-e-1-1-july-1843-30-april-1844?p=36.

testified shall come into the world. And behold, I am the light and the life of the world; and I have drunk out of that bitter cup which the Father hath given me, and have glorified the Father in taking upon me the sins of the world, in the which I have suffered the will of the Father in all things from the beginning" (3 Ne. 11:10–11). Of that passage in the Book of Mormon, Elder Jeffrey R. Holland once observed that surely the Savior, in that "initial and profound moment of spellbinding wonder," made literally crucial points: after announcing that he was the Savior, "his submission to his father [was] the first and most important thing he wishe[d] us to know about himself." Then Elder Holland continued: "Frankly, I am a bit haunted by the thought that this is the first and most important thing he may want to know about us."[3]

I feel haunted by that possibility too, because I know that I do not suffer the will of the Father in all things; but I wanted to obey a little more while I learned about Islam's religion, about the way they pray and how they give all when they do.

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After exiting the sanctuary's lower tier, we left—replacing our shoes—and walked a few dusty roads and staircases up to a higher, second sanctuary. The walls of the upper courtyard and the washbasin at its center were carved intricately and were the color of ivory. There, the ground looked dirty too, but I removed my Chacos without hesitation: green straps on brown soles on frosty white stone—winter's shadows kept some of even Egypt cold. Here, something about that chill beneath my feet convinced me if the walls could topple outward, a sea of sky-skewering mountains would be revealed, majestic and endless and white with the blood of the heavens. I felt enshrined within them again, somewhere sacrosanct.

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When I came to Jerusalem, I thought of myself as relatively enlightened, someone who had to put his light under a bushel because of the Jerusalem Center's nonproselytizing agreement with Israel. I could not preach Jesus Christ or him crucified (see 1 Cor. 2:2). And yet when I got here, I found people who, while they didn't worship Christ in name, loved

3. Jeffrey R. Holland, "The Will of the Father," devotional address given at Brigham Young University, January 17, 1989, https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/jeffrey-r-holland_will-father/.

him in spirit and in truth (see John 4:24). They moved me with their love for light, or—more simply put—their goodness. I remember:

- How the head host at the Garden Tomb, whose name I do not even know, kindly let Bonnie and Greg and me sit in the carefully tended flowerbeds. Thanks to his liberality, we didn't miss a thing about the Easter sunrise service.
- The way Hisom, a merchant on the *Via Dolorosa,* introduced me to his brother, Jaat, sounding vulnerable yet protective as he explained, "He's handicapped."
- How Elias rejoiced in even the simplest facts of life: "My grandsons are three and five!" He was a survivor of the Holocaust, or Shoah, who visited with our group one night. It changed my memory of Dachau, which he'd visited about six decades before I did, back when it wasn't Dachau but *Dachau*. I saw the beauty of the old man before me, his joy, and shuddered at my memory of the place.
- The spirit the Baptist med student shared as we watched a game of March Madness in a Galilean lounge. Texas A&M vs. BYU. At one point, he mentioned that he was an A&M fan to the death—except when they were playing our friends from BYU, of course. It didn't feel like sycophancy or even a polite lie—it felt like a gift. Like grace. The warmth of Southern hospitality, far away in Galilee.
- The Middle-Eastern hospitality that Palestinians showed me, a stranger. It happened again and again—with Amjad, Ibrahim, the teenagers along the dirt road, even the band of kids within the Kidron Valley. The boys looked about eight years old and were roasting wild onions and potatoes on a burning pile of trash. When Alli Sham, Dan King, and I approached—three American adults about three times their age—they welcomed us in broken English to their fireside and food.
- The way Elias spoke as he showed us a black-and-white photo of his family. He and the photo were all that was left of them. I remember gazing at his father's face as Elias told us how his family starved in the Warsaw ghetto. I saw the joy of the patriarch as he smiled amid his family and believed it was no coincidence that he had starved first.
- Zeki's mustache, which always broadened, and eyes, which always brightened, as I'd come up to him in the Jerusalem Center's cafeteria line. He would err on the side of excess when he served me food—nicer stuff than I, an American, was accustomed to eating.

> I remember how he buried my steak in mushrooms once, heaping a gift to me that he probably couldn't enjoy for himself. It was his job to serve food, not to remember that a certain kid loved mushrooms, and not to proactively lavish it upon him. *Shucran, shucran, Zeki!*

The thing about my experiences with these people is that their goodness didn't just "move" me, it moved me closer to my God. Protestants, Muslims, Catholics, and Jews had made me a better Mormon, a better member of the restored Church of Jesus Christ. Although they didn't formally belong to the true and living Church of Christ or even believe Christ was their Savior (speaking of the Muslims and Jews, although the Muslims do consider him a prophet), they still helped me to do so. I wonder if this isn't because they had accepted him in spirit even though some had rejected him in name. This is a roundabout way of wondering at the same time whether I may be the opposite, whether I have accepted him in name while rejecting him somewhat in spirit. While I belong to the Church of Jesus Christ, do I truly belong to Jesus?

Not truly enough, to be honest. That's why I clung to those people. Because something in them moved me to follow Jesus Christ more truly. Because I need that something at all costs, to be utterly undogmatic, as I hope for Christ. Because Christ is the point.

I think that is why his Church is so important—it helps conduct us to him. But I suspect the only reason it exists is to help us know him better, since to know him is to have eternal life (see John 17:3). The same goes for the scriptures: they matter because through them we can know him. And they say that he is love (see 1 Jn. 4:8).

Of course, to "know him" means more than merely knowing superficial things about him, like his name, for example, a point I've been trying to make all along. This is why his Church is so important. It offers us full access to his grace, the greatest evidence of his love, the core of who he is. Yet in some way I don't entirely understand, that attribute explains why there is hope for the pure souls currently outside of his church too. At least that's my interpretation of Moroni 7:48: "whoso is found possessed of [love] at the last day, it shall be well with him." If a soul has begun to love, begun to bring others to Christ, he or she will have begun to live eternally. In other words, to truly know him. And if they truly know him, how can they fail to know him by name in the end? Don't most of his names mean "He who saves" anyway, in essence, "He who loves"?

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Holiness hung like a thick mist within the mosque, just too pure to see. Dozens of golden globes dangled out of reach above me, though nowhere near the capacious dome that soared stories beyond them. As my eyes continued to adjust to the mosque's darkened interior, I noticed marble waves of jade and turquoise clashing across the ceiling, beneath the gleam of golden Arabic script. Some of it must have echoed the melodious Middle-Eastern voice resounding richly through the air. "Allah is merciful," Islam translated, as I shivered in the room and its beauty. Then on that exotic note of God's reverberating mercy, Islam announced the tour was over. We had fifteen minutes to ourselves before we had to be back to the bus. While our group explored—some wandering outside to gaze off a grand balcony at Cairo, some still standing pensively beneath the marvelous dome overhead—Islam wanted to take the opportunity to pray.

I glanced at a clump of worshippers nearby, kneeling low on the deep carpet, and paused, reflecting on them and their religion. The things I knew were so few, yet I thought I knew enough to love them and their faith. I had found a holiness alive here, and I hadn't even been looking for it. That still seems very significant to me, the memory of how something holy shimmered throughout me. Islam answered a few last questions while I stood off to the side. I was thinking about my power, my dignity, and my authority—things that I was holding back. I came up as the last questioners left.

"Is your mike on?" I asked him.

"No, it's off," he said.

"Can I pray with you?"

He considered me.

"Of course."

We went to a secluded area beside a large pillar then tapped its stone base three times—both hands—because I was not pure to pray. Islam had washed earlier. "Normally, you would leave to wash, but because there is no time, you must do this," he said, as he ran his hands over each other, as with something from out of the stone. I followed suit, grateful that my meaning counted although I couldn't show it well. Three more taps cleansed our faces, our heads, then our feet.

He had me stand just behind him and to the side so it was clear who was leading the prayer. This was important so people knew who to walk behind. No one should walk between a man who prayed and God, who is there before him.

I imitated his Arabic as well as I could while he pronounced the appropriate words as we stood, then hunched—our hands on our knees—then knelt, then bowed, then repeated each step a few times. "Because you cannot say what I am saying," he'd told me, "your prayer must be just God and you understanding each other." Such a prayer was fine with me. "I understand."

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As the final Chronicle of Narnia, *The Last Battle,* is ending, so is the world. All the Narnians have been defeated and scattered. Several main characters look on from the forest as the evil priests of a false god take power. These priests disbelieve in Tash, the dark god, but hypocritically use his name to rule the people with fear. Anyone who wishes to, they claim, is free to look upon him, though he kills all who dare behold him. Their ploy seems perfect since no one is brave enough to call their bluff, until a young man named Emeth steps forward. The priests remind him of the price of seeing Tash. He answers, "Gladly would I die a thousand deaths if I might look once on the face of Tash."[4] Emeth enters the building and doesn't come out. When the world ends not long after, and Aslan, or Christ, saves his people, he also saves Emeth.

Emeth's fate is beautiful to me because he seems to represent Muslims, based on the way Lewis describes the culture of Emeth's people; and because, to me, the perspective of traditional Christianity has failed to perceive faithful Muslims as I believe Christ will. I say this as someone who has failed too for most of my life, as someone who has not yet read significant amounts on the subject, and as someone who knows there are counterexamples in their faith of tremendously vicious behavior. I also say this as someone who has often heard and repeated popular phrases for displaying fair-mindedness—"But of course we Christians have some terrible people among us too, and we wouldn't want to be judged by them, and most Muslims, just like us, are actually good people"—and as someone who, despite this reasoning, still feared them. Fear—the absence of belief and of love. What I'm trying to convey, I suppose, is something of what I experienced, which convinced me where reason could not, that there was great goodness in this faith, goodness that I ought to concede, and goodness that I ought to embrace. I don't want to go unbolstered by any example of devotion. I regret that

4. C. S. Lewis, *The Last Battle,* Chronicles of Narnia vol. 7 (New York: Macmillan, 1956), 104.

most Calormenes—the villainous people who worship Tash—seem to be modeled on Muslims. I exult in the character of Emeth—because it means my favorite author is a little more consistently Christian for admitting the existence of the faithful among other faiths (how many times did the Savior say he had "not found so great faith, no, not in Israel" [Matt. 8:10]?), and simply because I love that character. I don't know how well Lewis understood Muslims or, of course, how well I do, but I believe he understood what was essential within Emeth and Aslan.

Emeth wonders at the offer of salvation: "Yet I have been seeking Tash all my days."

"Beloved, . . . unless thy desire had been for me thou wouldst not have sought so long and so truly. For all find what they truly seek."[5]

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After Islam finished the last of the ritual words, his hands and forehead pressed deep into the carpet, he went silent, and it was just each of us and God understanding. After I had offered a little more of my power, my dignity, and my authority, I prayed for Islam: that he would find all of the light. It didn't occur to me then, but I wonder now if he might have prayed the same for me. And I wonder, if we both did, how much else really matters, how much else really will, on the day all things shall fail but one.

We cut around the pillars to leave, arcing toward a large doorway. Once I looked at it, I could see little else: the sun itself seemed to overflow the frame. It washed over the figure of Islam, engulfing his edges while I tried to follow across the plush carpet, blinded to all but him and the pure light before me. His last few words still sounded in me—"Peace be unto you, my brother"—mixed with the way I'd wished the same to him, the way I wished the same to all. I wished until I was swallowed by light, when hot stone abruptly gritted against my feet. Then I paused and realized that I was still holding my Chacos, and that I didn't want to put them on again.

This essay by Bentley Snow won second place in the 2016 Richard H. Cracroft Personal Essay Contest.

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5. Lewis, *Last Battle,* 156–57.