

It was about 12:30 am on our first night in Iceland, and I was laying in bed drifting off to sleep with the phone by my ear, sure the day couldn't possibly get any better. My friend Julie and I had driven along the coast of Iceland with periodic stops along the way to the Western peninsula Snaefellsness. We'd visited exhibitions on the history of Iceland and one of its most famous sagas. We'd walked on a path over lava rocks along the crashing sea on the lookout for one of Iceland's hidden people and had the most incredible meal. We even got to witness the total eclipse of the sun from afar when we just happened to turn turned on our computers as NASA live streamed the magical moment for all the world to see. Last but not least, we'd just finished watching the penultimate episode of season 7 of the Game of Thrones after I worked some wonders on the computer to enable its viewing outside the US. It had been a great first day of vacation, and I really didn't think it could get any better. My friend Julie, however, was amped up and ready to push our luck, so she had ventured outside on the off-chance that there might be a light show in the night skies. Just as I slipped into sleep, my phone vibrated with the message, "Come out hurry!!!!!" I threw on some warm clothes and tore outside to maybe, just maybe, catch a glimpse of the Northern Lights.

For a long time, Julie and I stood alone outside the rural hotel staring up at the sky silently immersed in expectant wonder. The northern lights were somewhat faint – gray brushstrokes across the sky, but nonetheless mesmerizing as they playfully shifted in and out of view. Then all of the sudden, this stream of light moved toward us like an immense curtain and descended around us, enveloping us and beguiling us with its enchanted dance of shimmering lights. It was as if this moment were meant for us and us alone. My body met the moment with a visceral electric charge as my arms extended involuntarily to meet the moment in praise. Within seconds the curtain lifted and the light faded back into the dark of the night. Julie and I looked at each other, a bit uncertain of our senses, and simply uttered, "whoah." If it's possible to communicate gratitude to a natural phenomenon, I surely did that night as I reveled in spectacle of the Creator's creation. So enraptured was I for those few brief seconds that if all of the sudden a voice had spoken out of the visual display, I might have been startled, but not surprised. For the uninitiated, it was a moment worthy of one of God's messengers.

While I was overwhelmed by the rather ordinary occurrence of the Northern lights in Iceland, Moses, on the other hand, seemed somewhat nonplussed to see the rather extraordinary

occurrence of a bush in flames that wasn't burning up. He said to himself with some curiosity, "Let me check out this amazing sight to find out why the bush isn't burning up." In fact so nonplussed was he that after responding "Here I am" to the voice calling him from the bush, "Moses, Moses," he had to be instructed to take off his sandals because he was standing on Holy Ground. God then let it be known that he would be the one to help carry out God's plan to deliver the Hebrew people from the Egyptians. In the face of a bush burning in such extraordinary fashion as to not destroy the bush, Moses, after a momentary flight into awe and fear, maintained enough wits about him to even question God's judgment in sending him, "Who am I to go to Pharaoh? Who am I that the Israelites will listen to me when I tell them that the God of their ancestors has sent me to them? Who am I?" So sure he was about being ill-suited to the task that Moses harassed God until he walked away from the encounter with a magical shepherd's rod and his brother Aaron as his spokesperson.

Moses wasn't entirely wrong in his inquiry. Who was he, after all? He was a Hebrew man raised by Egyptians, a man who was neither 'us' nor 'them' or maybe both 'us' and 'them'. He was a man who had committed premeditated murder, checking first to see if anyone was looking before killing an Egyptian who was beating one of his own people and then burying him in the sand. He was a man who ran from his deeds and returned to his own people as a fugitive. Who was he, really, to be the one to go to Pharaoh and to bring the Israelites out of Egypt?

Who was he? He was the one chosen by God to stand on holy ground, the holy ground forged by in the fires of the burning bush, and the holy ground forged in the fires of slavery and oppression, the holy ground that gave witness to the truth that those fires might burn and rage but they would not consume the Israelites, and they would not destroy the Hebrew people, because God said, "I have seen my people oppressed in Egypt. I have heard their cries of injustice. And I have come down to rescue them!"<sup>1</sup> Moses was the one to whom God said, "Go. Go set my people free!"

My friends, everywhere we walk these days we come upon Holy Ground – those places where God sees, hears, and enters into the suffering God's people – where God sees and hears and enters into the suffering of God's beloved creation. In the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey and the water-logged landscape of South Asia, in the heat and fire of California, underneath the crushing weight of addiction, on the border of Mexico, throughout the prison industrial complex,

in Charlottesville and the insidiousness of white supremacy, in the heteronormative, LGBTQI-condemning words of the Nashville Statement released by some Christian religious leaders, in impoverished homes and school and city streets, in the ravages of war and violence, in the depths of injury and illness and homelessness and unemployment, in the rising seas and warming air and mass extinction – in all those places God beckons God's people to take off our shoes and know that they are standing on Holy Ground. In all those place God beckons God's people to give witness to the truth that the fires of injustice, oppression, poverty, hate, violence, addiction, hopelessness may burn but they will not consume, they will not destroy, because it is on this ground where God meets fire with holy fire and promises to set God's people free!

My friends, what Holy Ground are you standing on? Do you hear God's voice calling to you out of the burning bush? The voice that calls us to claim this Holy Ground, to stand witness to the truth of God's promise in all that we do and all that we are and all that we have? Heed this holy voice – heed the voice that says, "Go! Make this ground the place where love is not destroyed and life is not consumed because it is where God meets fire with holy fire and promises to set God's people free!" Take off your shoes. You are standing on Holy Ground.

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<sup>1</sup> Janzen, J Gerald. 2002 "...and the bush was not consumed." Encounter 63, no. 1-2:119-127. ATLASerials, Religion Collection, EPSCOhost (accessed September 2, 2017).