

The Place Where You are Standing is Holy Ground

October 10, 2021 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

A Shared Reflection by

Rev. Daniel A. Smith and Lexi Boudreaux

Texts: Exodus 3: 1-6

From Lexi

We heard the story of the burning bush together this morning, a story of a mark of the holiness of God being witnessed in a sacred place, hidden away among the mountains. The horizon seemed as if it was burning as I brushed my teeth with the water from my Nalgene bottle all those years ago on the reservation land of the Navajo people located in the Southwest of the United States. The red mountain ranges in the distance looking like something from Mars were illuminated by the strong sun rise of a hot summer morning and for a moment I could feel the pull of the energy of creation in my heartbeat. As I reflect on this memory this morning, I wonder if it was anything like what that Mountain of God looked like all those years ago for our ancestors in faith, and if they brushed their teeth in front of it too, the wind gently brushing against their faces, unsure of what the day would bring. Back in 2007 I traveled with my church to live and work beside the elders of the Navajo people in the northeast corner of what we call Arizona. We were there to build relationships, to cook together, to do chores with one another, to learn from each other in whatever ways we could. Our only agenda was being present with one another.

Our main contact for the 10 days we were there, a woman named Elsie, spoke to us as we unloaded plastic barrels of water from the town 75 miles away from the border of their land out of a red pickup truck. She shared about how their language is dying, that the language of their ancestors and the culture with it are not being learned by their young people. They move away from the reservation for work and schooling opportunities in more populated areas. Their elders are left to themselves, isolated and without resources like running water and electricity and without a next generation to pass on the healing wisdom and spirituality of their people.

Their ancestors were as close to them as the red clay dust that clung to our feet and most everything else and yet the survival of their wisdom was being threatened by the need for resources to survive physically. They were already grieving something they were still trying to save. There was hope in practicing the rituals and traditions of their past and present, and yet, I couldn't help but see the grief in their eyes as they told their story. I couldn't help but feel it with them.

Many of the older people did not speak English, only Navajo. As a result, much of my time with our new friends consisted of silence interrupted by full on belly laughter, soft smiles, an encouraging tap on the shoulder, a wave of the hand, an eye welling up with a tear, the tapping of a foot to a beat. I learned in the desert that sometimes silence and presence can do all the talking. It seemed as if time slowed down when we prepared our meals on folding tables under floodlights and the stars, the purple and pink horizon glowing along the mountains, warning us that it would be pitch black soon. When making the fried bread for the meal I would often be recruited by this one older woman no taller than my shoulder. She would enthusiastically wave me over and proceed to drop different kinds of ground flours in front of me and point to what she was doing until I got the idea.

Her smile had a warmth and grace in it that felt much undeserved, but so welcome. There was nothing that the two of us could do about the horrors of the past or the grief of the present. We knew that, but this daily task of making bread, of helping one another be fed without so much as a word,

showed us a way into relationship with one another in the present and into a hope for mutual understanding. We were both doing something familiar, making a meal, standing on this ground that held so much wisdom and so much pain. Sharing this embodied experience became the language we needed. That dusty desert floor on which we stood together was indeed holy ground. It was not ours, but God's.

To the Navajo people, this sacred place, this land is not meant to be owned, but is a part of who we all are. It is alive with holiness, memory, and spirit. It cradles us into who we are becoming and reminds us of who and what we have come from. And, when we take time to quiet our need for words and listen to the few that are needed, when we tune into the gentle hum of creation within and around us and our neighbor, we take off the barriers that prevent us from fully feeling the holy foundation that is the ground of being for us all. In relationship, we become more human, together, and on that holy ground, it is there that we experience God. Amen.

Dan's Reflection

“Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is Holy Ground!” I, too, often hear these words as invitation to a deeper awareness of sacred connection to the land and to others. They can coax us to orient and ground ourselves in space and time and give us pause to wonder about what burning bushes of truth, beauty, encounter are right before our eyes. On this Indigenous Peoples Sunday and on this day in which we've introduced our land acknowledgement, this kind of invitation may have a particular resonance for us, not only in conjuring individual experiences like the powerful ones Lexi just shared, but as we consider our collective experience, as a church community.

For what of this holy ground, here in Cambridge and here in New England, that our First Church spiritual ancestors 'discovered,' 'settled,' and colonized almost 400 years ago? How do we both tune into that ongoing 'gentle hum of creation, of holiness, memory and spirit' that connects us all, while also encountering painful and searing truths about how our Christian ancestors and First Church forebears have done devastating harm to this holy ground and to the Peoples who have called it sacred for millennia? We can't have one without the other! It's a little like climate change. Of course, we still want to fully enjoy a beautiful day, a hike in the woods, a walk on the beach yet. It's like trying to hold that beauty and hope while also holding the grief and fear about the irreversible changes we've wrought upon our planet.

At First Church, we are just beginning to learn not only about slavery and white supremacy but also about settler colonialism, that is, about that land theft, violence and cultural erasure that was and continues to be perpetrated upon Indigenous Peoples. Last week, in a powerful after church session, we were led by a brilliant educator and Greater Boston Interfaith Organization friend Mishy Lesser, and by gkisedtanamoogk, a Wampanoag from the Mashpee community on Cape Cod. He was one of five commissioners of the Maine Wabanaki State Child Welfare Truth and Reconciliation Commission. About 70 of us learned about the powerful work of that commission when we viewed documentary Dawnland here in 2019. Well, gkisedtanamoogk and Mishy joined us last week to premiere another documentary. This one was called *Bounty*. Here's how its described by those who are featured in it:

“We are citizens of the Penobscot Nation. For this film, we bring our families to Boston to read our ancestors' death warrant. This abhorrent proclamation, made in 1755 by the colonial government, paid settlers handsomely to murder Penobscot people. It declared our people enemies and offered different prices for the scalps of children, women, and men. Bounty proclamations like this, some even paid in

stolen land, persisted for more than two centuries across what is now the United States. The memory of being hunted is in our blood. We know this to be true, and the science now affirms that trauma can be passed down from generation to generation. In Bounty we take control of this process by inviting our children into the colonizer's hall of injustice, to read their hateful words and tell the truth about what was done to our ancestors. We exercise our power by sharing the horrors of this hard history as an act of resistance, remembrance, and a step toward justice."

The Proclamation they read is called the Phips Proclamation. It's one of 68 such documents issued by colonists throughout New England. This was one was penned and signed in 1755 by Spencer Phips, Lt. Gov of the Province of Massachusetts Bay. Phips lived "owned" a large tract of land that is now considered much of East Cambridge. And, he was a First Church member. I'm quite sure this is why the filmmakers decided to give our community a sneak preview weeks before its wider premier.

The documentary itself was only 9 minutes long. It showed several Penobscot and their children taking turns reading from the actual parchment that Phips had signed. And they did so in the Old Statehouse in downtown Boston, in the place where he signed it. It was gut-wrenching as it was inspiring to witness the remarkable strength and resilience of the families.

After the film, the 35 or so of us that watched it took a few moments to begin to let the story sink in. Frankly, the story left me stunned, speechless even, and I knew what it was going to be about. gkisedtanamoogk graciously stepped into to help set a tone for the conversation that followed. He invited us to ground ourselves in the shared values of our traditions, and in a sense of hope that such truth-telling will lead us towards the healing and wholeness for which he firmly believes we are created. Together, we know that this a process, a lifelong journey, that will involve ongoing learning, acknowledgement, relationship and commitment. Indigenous persons have heard these stories all of their lives. Indeed, we are just beginning, and the land acknowledgement that Hilary shared at the top of our service is just a first step.

We shared and shaped its words with Mishy and gkisedtanamoogk and are in the process of sharing them with members of other local tribal councils. We pray it will give us all a chance to pause as we gather, to humble ourselves before God, to remind ourselves again and again that we stand on holy ground, ground that has held beauty and violence, joy and terror.

I've come to learn from our partners that for so many years, our spiritual ancestors on this land, were agents of erasure - erasing indigenous names, cultures, bodies. The question before us now is how do we become agents of un-erasure - how do we continue to learn about and acknowledge harm, past and present day? How do we move forward with openness to genuine relationships and showing up in solidarity with the indigenous persons who continue to fight for recognition, resources and repair? How do we commit and recommit to this forever journey not out of a sense of shame or guilt but as an opportunity to grow in love and to be who we are called to be in joyful and loving relationship with our neighbors.

Here is the second part of our Land Acknowledgement that will soon be on our website:

We grieve and repent of First Church's complicity with the living legacy of settler colonialism and slavery. We know that First Church families offered financial support to the colonists during Pommetacomet's Resistance, otherwise known as King Philip's War. Our 18th century records show that

First Church members enslaved Indigenous and African persons. In 1755, Lieutenant Governor of the Province of the Massachusetts Bay and First Church member Spencer Phips authored and signed the [Phips Bounty Proclamation](#), which legalized the hunting, capture, and scalping of Penobscot and other Indigenous people. We also repudiate the 1452 [Doctrine of Discovery](#) that shamefully offered a legal and theological rationale for centuries of colonization, land theft and genocide by our Christian forebears. We consider this acknowledgement very much a "work in progress" as we continue to listen and learn about our history and work towards healing and repair.

Indeed, we are standing on Holy Ground. Holy, because it's God creation. Holy. because it remains sacred to the Navajo about whom Lexi shared, to tribes and nations across the continent, and locally to the Massachusett, Nipmuc and Wampanoag. Holy ground, because, we pray, this is a place of ongoing truth-telling encounter, of growing relationship and of ever deeper recognition of the dignity of all persons and creatures and creation itself. May it be so. Amen.

