

Ten years ago, she was just Monica Iken, newlywed. On Sept. 11, 2001, she and Michael Patrick Iken had been married less than 11 months. That particular Tuesday morning began as had dozens of others: a good morning kiss for Michael in that half-awake state in which many a spouse sends off their other half to work.

He said, 'I love you, have a good day. Those words soothed her back to sleep.

The couple had met during Labor Day weekend, 1999, at a neighborhood restaurant called Park Place. Monica and her friend stopped in and Monica noticed a lone man at the bar and sat down near him. While her friend ate, Monica struck up a conversation. He began telling her his life story, and the next thing they knew it was 3 a.m."

They exchanged phone numbers. Within three months, he proposed. They were married on Oct. 27, 2000, each for the second time.

On September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, Monica received a phone call. Michael's voice on the other end said, "*not to worry and turn on the news.*" She said "ok" and turned on the news, in horror. Michael called again to assure her that he was safe and to call the family. She never dreamt that those would be the last words she would hear from him.

Within a few moments Michael, in his office on the 84th floor of the World Trade Center's South Tower, would become a cherished memory. Days later, co-workers would tell her he probably could have escaped but that he had gone back to help a co-worker who, scared out of her wits, had taken refuge under a desk.

Along with a brother and a sister, Monica was raised in the Yorkville section of Manhattan's Upper East Side by a single mother. Monica would grow up to become a New York City schoolteacher. Monica was also a Sunday School teacher at Central Presbyterian Church. Monica's heartbreak and anguish that day 10 years ago would be captured in a photograph that became the Sept. 13, 2001, front page for Newsday, the Long Island newspaper.

She vowed that Michael — and everyone else who perished that day — would always be remembered, her gut instincts crying out to her that a memorial *must* be built on the 16-acre World Trade Center site.

“That site is very powerful,” Monica says. “That’s where he was — I’m drawn to it for that reason,” she says. “For the group of us who don’t have remains, not having a final resting place for our loved ones was so important in the beginning. My biggest thing was not being able to take Michael home, and I know that he would have wanted me to take him home.”

A memorial project on the footprints of the downed towers became her mission. She established “September’s Mission,” a not-for-profit organization that, according to its mission statement, works to “...support the development of a memorial park on the former World Trade Center site that ties into the overall redevelopment of Lower Manhattan” and is committed to “...working with the families, Manhattan residents, businesses and public officials to ensure that the future of the World Trade Center site not only honors the lives that were lost on September 11, but serves all New Yorkers for generations to come.”

The foundation’s efforts to bring about a bricks-and-mortar memorial began with a virtual one on its website, which allowed family and friends to post remembrances of their lost loved ones.

“September’s Mission” also hosted and supported events such as Christmas and Halloween parties where 9/11 families — especially the children — could strengthen personal connections within this unique community, creating a positive, nurturing forum for healing.

With simple and clear reasoning she says, “That site is powerful to me because that’s where he was. I want to be able to go there and honor him in that place where he was, not some foreign place” — she was especially effective in turning around those who sought to redevelop the World Trade Center site while erecting a token memorial in another part of the city.

While others may rush to claim ownership of the physical memorial, it is Monica’s mission and vision that gave the project a life and a soul.

“Michael is there. I have no remains,” she says. “If it had taken 20 years, I would have taken 20 years. It’s worth every minute, every second that I’ve spent on it. I wouldn’t change a thing. I would do it all over again the same way. The memorial and museum gives us a place to go to pay our respects and lets the world do that as well. The World Trade Center is hallowed ground,” she continues. “Souls are resting in a peaceful, reverent, reflective space now.”

Today we continue our series on the book of Exodus and we come to a section of the story which is pretty well known throughout our society. In the Scripture we read today, we hear about the place that Moses encounters as Holy Ground. Moses comes to a mountain. And in ancient Israel mountains were the places where it was believed that God resided.

Here on Mount Horeb, Moses comes upon a very unusual site. It is a bush on fire. But this fire burning bush does not burn up. It is blazing but it is not consumed. God then calls out to Moses from the bush. God informs Moses that God understands the misery being suffered by the Hebrew people. God understands that they are being abused as slaves under the control of the Egyptians. And God calls upon Moses to be the one to lead these people out of this slavery. To lead the people to a new land. A promised land.

So Moses responds to this voice and says, “if I say to the Hebrew people that I have heard a voice through a burning bush speak to me, and they question me about it because they may just not believe me when I tell them a voice spoke to me through a bush that burned but was not consumed, who should I tell them you are? What is your name?”

And God says to tell them that my name is Yahweh. Tell them Yahweh will be with you. This name of Yahweh is a very interesting name for God to choose as a name of revelation. This name Yahweh means “I am who I am” or “I will be who I will be.” God doesn’t use a noun as a name. God uses a verb. The verb “to be.” God uses action and creation to describe who God is.

I hear a lot of people talk about their holy ground. I have some places that I consider very holy to me. Places of dirt that contain my history. I can sit in a church outside of Pinehurst, NC and worship in the same church where my ancestors who migrated from Scotland worshipped. I can stand on the soil where I remember growing up as a child off Lower Richland Blvd in Hopkins, SC. When I stand on this holy ground I recall the things I did and the memories I possess. They are only my memories.

So many times we go back to Holy places and we seek to preserve them and the memories there. And that is ok. I think it is important to have places that we consider holy places. Places where we encounter a spirituality that is unique to only us. It might be a piece of dirt, it might be a home, it might be an athletic venue, it might be a place in the country or in the busiest of cities. There are places that hold memories that are special to us. Places that touch deep inside of us and recall something special for us.

A true "Holy Ground" is a place where we feel like we encounter God in some special and unique way. Those Holy Ground places are important and we should try to preserve something from those places that allow us to connect with God in a special and unique and mysterious way.

But when we are in those places that we consider Holy Ground, I invite you to hear the voice of God like Moses heard the voice of God. God said to Moses that I am not a static God. I am an active God. I am a God creating and recreating. I am a God who is moving. I am a God of action.

So as important as it is to celebrate and to recall and to cherish holy ground, hear these holy ground places as places where God calls you out to move forward and not backward. Yahweh God is a God who is an action verb. Always creating. Always making something new.

So from your Holy Ground places I pray for God to speak to you and guide you to the new place that you are called to go. To go to the new place where you are called to create something new.

Holy ground places are important because they can help keep us grounded in the important parts of our past.

But true Holy Ground places don't keep us stuck in the past. Holy Ground places do not just have to be memorials. Great Holy Ground places can be places of inspiration.

God is not a static noun.

True Holy ground places call us forward to create with God the Creator something new and exciting for the future. AMEN.

---

-Nedelka, Jim, "IT'S FOREVER PERSONAL," *Special to Presbyterian News Service*

-Text: Exodus 3: 1-15

-Given: Sept. 4, 2011 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)