

A couple years ago, Sarah and I were lucky enough to see the Northern Lights while we traveled in Iceland. Now I will not even begin to pretend like I fully understand how the multi-colored show comes to life in the night sky, also known as the aurora borealis, but smart people tell me that, basically, “charged particles emitted from the sun during a solar flare penetrate the earth’s magnetic shield and collide with atoms and molecules in our atmosphere. These collisions result in countless little bursts of light, called photons, which make up the aurora” (aurorahunter.com), in case you can understand any of that, or need to use such material to make yourselves appear smart among family and friends later. But regardless of *how* it happens, it is one of those sights in this world that can never be forgotten.

It was, also, the one thing Sarah was in sheer desperation to see during our week-long exploration on the other side of the Pond. She even downloaded a special app on her phone to let her know when and where we could see the astronomical wonder. And, of course, the one time we had a chance to, a few days before, there were too many clouds to even catch a glimpse of it. So, come the last night of our time there,

we were eating in a restaurant and the cell notification beeped aloud: the long-awaited Northern Lights were about to commence. Of course, I didn't think ahead, and still had to get gas before we drove out into the rural landscape away from all the city lights. And yet, even at the gas station: a mind-boggling sight to see, to say the least! As we started driving, cars filled all these open spaces along the highway: these people from all over the world transfixed by a breathtaking symphony of nature with the most vast array of green and purple shades flowing through the endless darkness.

That night might have been the closest we will ever get to understanding what the magi went through thousands of years ago: not only enamored by what they saw in the sky, but to make them completely alter their lives for a brief period of time, pulling off from the normal day-to-day and to be swept into an ecstatic journey, creating a memory that would last a lifetime. Except, looking back, I'm wondering if something we saw earlier that same day may have been even closer to the magi's journey than the most spectacular showcase in the night.

The *first* stop we made that Sunday was a church on the western coast of the country: one of those churches that, if you blinked, you would miss it altogether. Nevertheless, we drove up this not-so-smooth road up to the top of this hill, overlooking the Atlantic, to this entire church that would probably fit inside our parlor. Looking up, oddly enough, the steeple was as multi-colored as any aurora borealis seen in that country, but looking right in front of us, we learned the structure was built using basaltic stones from the surrounding area back in the 1880s. Inside, the walls were made of driftwood found off the beach nearby. And, surrounding the building was the cemetery with many of the graves of the very people who helped raise that precious structure that ended up being consecrated, oddly enough, on Christmas Day in 1887, about 130 years before we made our journey there.

A building that may not have been nearly as impressive as many of the cathedrals throughout Europe or as breathtaking as what we witnessed in the sky several hours later; still, it was the very sacred place that housed many memories to shape generations of sisters and brothers in Christ, that empowered people to break off from the normal day-to-

day for just a short while, to catch even a glimpse of the Emmanuel right in front of them on the holy ground level.

And what made it all the more connecting to the magi's journey from long ago was, when we first got there, there wasn't a soul to be found inside that church. We wondered if it was no longer in use: just a religious museum of sorts, as many houses of worship are throughout Europe. And then, all of a sudden, there they came, from the furthest distances away with there being hardly any houses nearby. All these cars coming up the not-so-smooth road, guided, not by something fantastic they witnessed in the sky, but only a fascination with what was on the holy ground level: sisters and brothers in Christ, fellow wonderers on the journey of faith, trying to get just a little closer to hope, a little closer to joy and love, a little closer to God.

Except, ironically enough, every time they would walk up to that house of Resurrection, they would walk through this eerie path of the greatest hope, joy and love, when they made the trek through the tombstones; as if, even in death, the newborn Savior can still live. As if, it was rather fitting that that meager not-overly-impressive-to-the-eye

church would end up being dedicated on Christmas Day, because it was out of such not so impressive circumstances that came the child for the magi who traversed afar, and even those in Iceland that day, and all the centuries before.

And that, no matter where their journey on earth took them, including through the darkest valley of the shadow of the death, that child would grow up to travel into those depths, too. After all, it wasn't something from the sky that ended up saving us. It's what happened on our holy ground level, on the ground Jesus still walks among us, as if we do not have to travel the furthest distances on earth to find him. Believe it or not, he still is Emmanuel, God with us now and forevermore. And for that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!