

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church

“Thin Places”

By Eric Howell

John 21:1-19

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I went to a meeting in October one year near Canaan Valley, West Virginia. It's one of the most stunningly beautiful places on the east coast, perhaps the whole country. If you like trees, fall colors, early-season snow fall, crisp air, rolling hills, trickling mountain streams, and grassy meadows, you might like Canaan Valley, and you are actually human. The meeting was over late Saturday so early Sunday I began to drive home. But it was Sunday morning; I had a guest preacher lined up. I was about three hours from home with plenty of time to get there. And I was all alone. What to do? I got lost on a 4WD path as fast as I could find one. These paths, called Jeep trails, are unpaved, barely marked, public roads through backcountry scenery that don't really take you anywhere, but are very fun to drive.

Without my beloved wife, who is also a chicken about this sort of thing, I pulled my vehicle into 4WD and took off. I can't reveal all the twists, turns, holes, and hills over which I rocked the car (because she's sitting here), but I can tell you this—it was really fun. Toward the end of the drive, there was a little pull off with a trail leading into the woods. I didn't know where it went . . . so, why not? I pulled off and went to check it out. At first, it was just trees, which was nice, but then ahead, was a rail—probably built by a scout for his eagle badge. The trees cleared and within just a few steps I was perched overlooking a vast valley of fall-colored trees carved by a winding and ancient river way down below. With no one looking, I channeled my inner Pentecostal and raised my arms to heaven in praise for this—for this moment, for the beauty, for a world where places like that exist and can be stumbled upon on a Sunday morning as a place of worship. It was a holy place.

Some years earlier, late one evening, I quietly entered the bedroom of a lady named Louise. Her family was all there -- daughters, sons, grown grandchildren. They had called just a few minutes earlier, “Mama's dying. You might want to come over.” No one said a word. Louise lay there in her bed where she had been for years, as long as I had known her. But now her eyes were closed, her breathing was shallow and halting and slow. She was dying. I asked if the family would like to read scripture. They did.

“The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.”

“In my Father's house are many rooms...”

“Death, where is your victory. Where is your sting?”

Someone cried a little. Someone softly sang, “Amazing Grace, how sweet the... sound.”

I said a prayer. “Amen.” We waited a moment. Then Louise stopped breathing. We had prayed her from this life into the next. It's how she would have wanted it.

These were moments, very different from one another, but just as poignant. On a mountainside decorated with God's abundant beauty, in a humble bedroom full of old lady stuff, these were moments when God was near. They were both places when it seemed like the stuff of earth was full of the stuff of heaven.

There are places like that, you know. There are places where people feel most strongly connected with God's presence, where the seen and unseen worlds are most closely connected, and inhabitants of both worlds can momentarily touch the other.

The Celtic Christians had a word for places like this. They called them "thin places." "Thin places" is an early metaphor for those times or places when the boundary between the sacred and the everyday feels "thin," when God's presence is more strongly felt. According to Sister Joan Miriam, "It is a place where it is possible to touch and be touched by God, as well as the angels, saints, and those who have died."

It should be little surprise that there are places that people consider to be special in this way. The Old Testament is full of these kinds of places where a hole opens in the membrane between heaven and earth. The Holy of Holies in the very inmost of the Temple in Jerusalem was thought to be the ultimate example of such a place—a place so holy, so full of God, that it was restricted. Only the High Priest could enter there on one day of the year.

What might be a surprise is that in the New Testament, God shows up in lots of places other than the designated religious holy place, and shows up to a lot of people other than people who have it all together. And, He shows up at times that are unexpected. Two pillars of the church, Peter and Paul, at times in their lives when they were a mess, encountered a thin place where the membrane between heaven and earth, and between who they were and who they would become, disappeared.

Peter was a denier --- a scoundrel, a guy who couldn't, or wouldn't follow through on his promises. Denying that he knew Jesus three times as Jesus was being arrested, Peter's shame drove him into the night. Days after the resurrection, Peter is fishing on Lake Galilee. He sees Jesus on the shore. He dives off the boat and swims to Him. "Do you love Me?" Jesus asks three times. "Yes Lord" Peter replies. "Feed My sheep." Three times Peter denies. Three times Jesus commissions him. There Peter met the Lord and was changed. He was transformed. "Thin places" are not just good experiences; they can be places of restoration.

They can also be places of transformation. In Acts 9, an enemy of the church, Saul was breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord. He set out on the dusty remote road to Damascus to hunt more Christians. Somewhere in the desert, a thin place opened up. A light from heaven flashed around him and a voice came down, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?" Saul was struck blind. He went on to Damascus and there was healed by a Christ-follower. Saul's life was changed. He went on to be known as Paul, and preached the Good News of Christ in Damascus, Jerusalem, Athens, Rome, and all over the known world. Somewhere on the dusty road, on the outskirts of Damascus, there's a place where a man's life was changed.

I think this idea that there are thin places is right, but I don't know if it's the same place for everyone. I don't know if there are coordinates of longitude and latitude that could be pinned in Google Earth as a thin place. But maybe there are places that people are more open to encounter the Divine more than other places.

When I travelled the Middle East, I wouldn't say that I felt like the outskirts of Damascus, the Sea of Galilee, or many of the high places, ancient ruins, and historic tourist spots felt like thin places to me. They do to some people, but did not to me, necessarily. The Wailing Wall at the base of the old Temple Mount in Jerusalem did; as well as Mt. Nebo, standing there on the far side of the banks of the Jordan River where Moses once stood. So did St. Catherine's monastery at the base of Mt. Sinai. Those felt like thin places to me and do, to many other people. So does this sanctuary. Even when you all aren't here, in the middle of a busy week, this room feels full of the Divine. So does the area down by the creek. This whole place feels like it's full of heaven.

An encounter with God can happen anywhere. Peter was just out fishing. Saul was on his way to do dastardly things. Neither was looking for it, one, because he thought himself unworthy; the other because he was too self-righteous. Neither one travelled there for it. They both just encountered it. They happened upon it. It was a gift. We don't always get to choose our thin places, or find them on a road map. Some people may feel it more in one place than another, a sense of belonging, of transcendence, of deep peace. We already understand that sacraments like baptism and communion are mysteries where heaven and earth meet.

I think there are thin people too. There are people in whom we encounter something of the mystery of God come near. And, like there are thin places far outside the designated religious landmarks, there are thin people far outside the ordained clergy and professional pastorate.

There are people when we are with them it just seems like heaven is closer. It's not necessarily what they do or say or how they say it. It's just easier to see Jesus in them. One of my friends and mentors died yesterday. A thoroughly honest and forthright person, he was a thin person for me. Several years ago Alzheimer's overcame his wife's memory and personality. The doctors thought she would pass quickly. She didn't. She slowly descended for about five years. In that time, my friend went from shopping for her to dressing her to feeding her spoonful by slow spoonful. In sickness and in health, 'til death do us part. He kept his wedding vows with patience and love. I hope you spend time with someone like that.

Jesus was a thin place for everyone around Him. In Him, heaven and earth met. The stories of Peter and Paul and their transforming encounters with Jesus invite us into an awareness that there are moments, places, and people around us that are thin places. We should remember where we have had such an experience and return there at least in our minds. We would do well to honor those places and revere them, and help other people find those kinds of places; praying that we are those kinds of people in whom other people find heaven and earth coming close.

The vision in Revelation takes this idea a step even further. Chapter 4:1, John sees a door open to heaven and a voice says, "come on up and have a look around." Isn't that a

great image --- a door open to heaven? And he walks on through and we go with him. Chapters 4 and 5 describe the heavenly throne room scene full of creatures, elders, rulers, all bowing down before the throne of God. It's a powerfully beautiful image and probably my favorite passage in the whole Bible. I believe this scene of worship is happening right now. There's a lot of thoughts about how to interpret Revelation, so much so that the whole book scares lots of people from even reading it, but I believe that what John saw and described is happening now, at this moment in the heavenly realm. I believe that right now, at this moment, strange-looking creatures are singing, "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was and is and is to come!" And living creatures are giving glory and honor and thanks to Him who is seated on the throne, who lives forever and ever. And crowns are being cast to the ground at the feet of the One who sits on the throne. And the song rings, "Worthy are you our Lord and God, to receive glory and honor and power." And the Lamb is standing, as though it had been slain. "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!" "To Him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honor and glory and might forever and ever."

We have a small part in this heavenly worship. I don't mean just when you die and go to heaven. I mean now, our worship here. Twenty-four Elders are described as holding golden bowls full of incense. The incense is the prayers of the saints. You are I are the saints, the holy ones in the New Testament, the ones made holy by redemption in Christ. Our prayers are there, incense filling the room with the sweet smell of praise, thanksgiving, confession, devotion to God. No wonder scripture calls us to pray without ceasing. When should we stop?

If this is true, if this scene is ongoing in the eternal now of heaven, then every moment and every place has the potential to be a thin place. All of creation can be a place where we can be strongly connected to God's presence. All people are too. The spiritually-aware person approaches every person, every moment, every place as a place to meet God. The spiritual journey is to grow in awareness of God's presence in all things and all times. It is not first to change those places or people so they feel more holy; it is to change ourselves so we have eyes to see the holy that is already present. It is to find a friend in the one who might be an enemy, to discover transcendence in that which is mundane. It is to find the sacred in that which is profane. For many people, the first step on that journey is to find goodness, truth, and beauty in themselves because they believe themselves to be ugly, worthless, and useless. They can't see God out there until they have God in here. That seems like what Jesus was all about --- restoring us so we can find God in here and out there.

The amazing thing is that when you have openness to the thin places all around you, you become much thinner to other people. They'll find heaven in you. They'll see Jesus in you and you won't even know what you did that made them see Him. It's not that you have risen above the stuff of this world and been delivered from the ordinary struggles and sufferings of human existence. It's that, by God's grace, heaven and earth, which are both so real, are so close in you, they touch.