

Thin Place Moments
Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz
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This morning's scripture is probably familiar—Jesus is baptized by John the Baptist in the waters of the Jordan River. John tries to prevent him at first, but Jesus overrides his hesitation and doubt, telling John that this moment will "fulfill all righteousness."^[1] John consents and baptizes Jesus—and the heavens open and the Spirit of God descends like a dove just as Jesus comes up out of the water. We hear a voice from heaven, "This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."^[2] All four Gospels reference Jesus' baptism. And this story is about God affirming Jesus and soon sending him on his way, out into the world to teach and heal and proclaim that the Realm of God is here and now. But it's also a Thin Place moment—and that's what I want to explore today.

You've likely heard of Thin Places before—the term has Celtic Christian origins. The Celts believed that heaven and earth were only three feet apart. Don't ask me where this measurement came from. Thin Places were believed to be special places where this distance is even shorter. Presbyterian minister Mark Roberts in exploring the history and Biblical roots of Thin Places, defines them as "a physical place where human beings experience God more directly. The metaphor assumes a worldview in which heaven and earth are, in general, separated by a considerable distance. But some places on earth seem to be thin in the sense that the separation between heaven and earth is narrowed. Thus, people sense God's presence more readily in so-called thin places."^[3]

Thin Places are physical locations in Celtic spirituality; we can point to them on a map or explain to a friend how to find them. But I also think Thin Places can be moments in time where somehow God bursts forth and breaks through and the distance we sometimes may feel from God all of a sudden vanishes. I've always liked Theologian Paul Tillich's concept of God as the very Ground of our Being and the concept that the Divine Spark is found within us.

Celtic Christianity often verbalizes the presence of God out in the world and also within us. A prayer from the Iona Community explains this better than I can. It goes like this, "You are above me O God. You are beneath. You are in air. You are in earth. You are beside me. You are within. O God of heaven, you have made your home on earth in the broken body of Creation. Kindle within me a love for you in all things."^[4] There is so much movement in this prayer from Iona—God above, beneath, beside, within, in the earth, in the air. But sometimes it sure doesn't feel like God is there for us in all those ways, which is all the more reason to appreciate Thin Places.

We see God's movement and the necessity of Thin Places in Jesus' baptism. The Jordan River itself might have been a Thin Place—God in the earth and water if you will. It was certainly a holy place where John the Baptist was performing baptisms and calling people to turn and return to God. But there's more to it for Jesus. Jesus goes to this Thin Place and has a real Thin Place moment in time. Somehow whatever felt separation between heaven and earth disappears as the Dove alights on Jesus from above and he hears God affirming him as God's own beloved Son. Jesus lived a life of Thin Place moments and folks constantly experienced Thin Place moments in his presence. But he also faced struggles and heartache and resistance and hostility and it seems to me that God prepares him for what is to come in this lovely moment of baptism.

I'm not sure that the distinction between time and space when we consider Thin Places matters a lot, but it's worth noting that not every holy place is a Thin Place for every person. Moreover, being in a Thin Places doesn't guarantee you a Thin Place moment. It can be terribly

difficult for folks who go on pilgrimages to holy sites to not experience God's presence even if they're in a place that is significant for other pilgrims on their own spiritual journeys. In fact, not readily experiencing the presence of God in a Thin Place can be devastating and painful for people.

As a minister, my hope is that church feels like a Thin Place. In a society that is increasingly secular and serving a church in New England, a very secular part of the country compared to how I grew up in Ohio, the concept of church itself as a Thin Place matters more to me now than it ever has before. Church should be a space and a time for us to recharge our batteries and reconnect to one another and reinvigorate ourselves to go back out there and love folks into wholeness and also remember that the world does not revolve around us. There's a great saying that worship really only has an audience of One. We're here to worship God, all of us. So churches should be Thin Places for us to feel God's presence, and we can have Thin Place moments here to give us the strength to go out into the world to love God and our neighbors as ourselves as Jesus taught us.

Speaking of Thin Places, my home church allowed me, from birth, to feel God's presence in church. The sanctuary at Trinity UCC has a high ceiling, beautiful wood, bright red carpets, shiny silver organ pipes, a dome in the middle, a huge cross carved within the wood behind the altar, and stained glass everywhere. The two largest scenes are in the balcony, depicting Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane and Jesus blessing the little children. But the stained glass at Trinity is such that the sunlight pours through, the sanctuary isn't dark at all, and you can see the myriad of colors reflected all around.

So I was disoriented upon entering Pilgrim's sanctuary the first time, not because our sanctuary is not beautiful and a Thin Place in its own right, but because it's just so different from my most familiar Thin Place sanctuary. Some of you who grew up Catholic or in churches that have different architectural and liturgical styles can probably relate.

Our sanctuary feels so serene and calm and simple. Remember that the original Pilgrims believed in unadorned and no frills worship and based worship on Biblical precedent alone. For them, this meant simplicity in design, and no hymns, creeds, and no Christmas and Easter actually. Just in case you ever think church is a huge time commitment, keep in mind that the Pilgrims worshipped from 9-12 and 2-5 every Sunday in addition to sermons delivered on Thursdays as well![5] So no complaining about being in church all the time, and I won't either. But the plain New England Meeting House aspect of church life that came from the Pilgrims and Puritans in time remains. We can still appreciate the beauty in the simplicity. Personally, I'm coming around on the New England Meeting House design, for I occasionally look out the windows in worship (yes, even I do that!) and I love witnessing the changing of the seasons in particular.

We have all likely been to churches that didn't feel particularly Thin to us. Maybe the sanctuary was dark or drafty. Maybe it felt like there was some negative energy. Maybe it was sensory overload with too many things to examine. Or maybe there just wasn't anything to help us get centered. Other churches just feel incredibly Thin from the moment you walk into the sanctuary. Yet what feels like a Thin Place to one person may not to another. We can point to Thin Places on a map, but our maps probably differ and maybe that's exactly how God wants it to be because we experience God's presence in different ways and places.

Really, the whole idea of Thin Places has transcended Christianity by now, speaking of our culture becoming more secular. An excellent modern exploration of Thin Places was once in The New York Times Travel Section. Eric Weiner wrote, "I'm drawn to places that beguile and inspire, sedate and stir, places where, for a few blissful moments I loosen my death grip on life, and can breathe again. It turns out these destinations have a name: thin places." [6] He goes on

to say that in Thin Places we can catch a glimpse of the Divine or as he likes to term what we Christians would call God or Jesus, "the Infinite Whatever." He notes that traveling to Thin Places doesn't necessarily lead to a spiritual breakthrough, "but it does disorient. It confuses. We lose our bearings, and find new ones . . . we are jolted out of old ways of seeing the world." [7]

Each week we can be jolted out of our old ways by being in this Thin Place and hopefully having a Thin Place moment along the way, where the distance that can sometimes feel vast separating God from us and us from God all of a sudden disappears. After all, Weiner affirms that the Divine "supposedly transcends time and space, yet we seek it in very specific places and at very specific times. If God (however defined) is everywhere and 'everywhen,' as the Australian aboriginals put it so wonderfully, then why are some places thin and others not? Why isn't the whole world thin? Maybe it is but we're too thick to recognize it." [8]

When we can focus, not on ourselves, but on the audience of One, then we reach a point where the barriers break down and the thickness lessens and the distance we may feel shortens. Like Jesus, we will walk down the shores and into the water where God is waiting to affirm us as beloved sons and daughters if we would only let God do it. And maybe that can take place in this sanctuary some weeks or maybe when we go on a walk in the woods or on the beach or sit at the cemetery or travel outside our comfort zones or feel cozy and content in our living rooms with a cup of tea. At the end of the day, let's help ourselves and one another discover Thin Places so we can feel God in the earth, in the air, above, beneath, beside, and within. May it be so, Amen.

[1] Matthew 3:15, NRSV.

[2] Matthew 3:17, NRSV.

[3] Rev. Dr. Mark D. Roberts, "Thin Places: A Biblical Investigation" Patheos. <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/markdroberts/series/thin-places/>

[4] J. Philip Newell, Celtic Prayers from Iona, 44.

[5] "Faith of the Pilgrims" from The Plimoth Plantation, <http://www.plimoth.org/what-see-do/17th-century-english-village/faith-pilgrims>

[6] Eric Weiner, "Where Heaven and Earth Come Closer," in The New York Times, March 9, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/11/travel/thin-places-where-we-are-jolted-out-of-old-ways-of-seeing-the-world.html?_r=0

[7] Eric Weiner, "Where Heaven and Earth Come Closer," in The New York Times, March 9, 2012, http://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/11/travel/thin-places-where-we-are-jolted-out-of-old-ways-of-seeing-the-world.html?_r=0

[8] Ibid.

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