



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

A Thin Place

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There is a Celtic saying that heaven and earth are only three feet apart. There is also a Celtic understanding that in some places, the distance is even less. These are called thin places – where the veil between the material world and the spiritual world is so thin that the divine shines through. There are well known thin places in the world, like Stonehenge and the Island of Iona offshore of the Western Highlands of Scotland. While the idea of thin places is mostly associated with the Celtic lands, it is not limited to the British Isles. The Pyramids of Giza, Machu Pichu, Sedona, and the Black Hills are thin places as well.

Some people claim that thin places correspond to energy lines that crisscross the earth. The energy is highest where these lines intersect and people so attuned experience something when they are near. People are drawn to thin places and so it is no wonder that they become holy places as well. The Cathedral at Chartres is a prime example; the place was holy long before the grand cathedral was built. We tend to interpret the power that is present in these places according to our traditions, but the energy of a thin place is not owned by any religion – it is divine energy, that in which we live and move and have our being. It is all around us, available at all times if we could learn how to see through to it.

There is another kind of thin place and that is one that happens in time. Liturgy and other rituals, if done well, create thin places in time. Good worship opens our senses to the divine and we get glimpses and tastes of a different quality of life, the life of the spirit. Music and beauty can be portals to a place beyond our normal experiences. Meditation is an intentional creation of a thin place.

Mountaintops have long been thought to be thin places – the dwelling place of the gods or of God. Our readings this morning from the Hebrew Scripture and the Gospel are testimony to the mountaintop as a place of power – divine power. How many times have we heard the phrase, “on your holy mountain.” Perhaps it is that on these mountains, energy intersects and opens up a doorway on the divine world or perhaps it is simply that we see that which is so high above us and liken the mountaintop to the One who is so far above and beyond our small selves.

Moses first encountered Yahweh on a mountain, in the form of a burning bush. He was given a cryptic glimpse into the nature of God, the One named I Am That I Am. What one learns in a thin spot is not always peaceful and joyous, it can be filled with awe and fear. In the Bible, when one is drawn to a mountaintop thin place it is usually for



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great purpose. Moses received his marching orders to go back to Egypt and serve as the voice of The I Am demanding liberation for his people. Moses was called from being a shepherd tending his father-in-law's sheep to tending God's flock and bringing them safely out of slavery.

It is not surprising that Moses continues to encounter God on the mountaintops of the Exodus. A thin place is a place of revelation, and God is revealed in the law, given through Moses, so that the people might know what is in the mind of their divine rescuer. What is revealed is God's desire for people to live together well and justly, continually drawing strength and direction from their faith. During Moses' forty days on the mountain, all the Israelites below could see was the "glory of the Lord, like a devouring fire." They were probably glad that Moses had gone so they didn't have to.

This morning is commonly called Transfiguration Sunday. Each year, on the Sunday before Lent, we read one of the three accounts of Jesus' transfiguration on the mountaintop. They all include the brightness of Jesus' appearance as well as the presence of Moses and Elijah and the voice from heaven.

Only the Gospel of Luke uses the word "glory" but the divine glory is unmistakable in the descriptions. It wasn't until this week, as I began thinking of thin places in the context of the transfiguration that I finally got what glory is. It's always been one of those nebulous religious terms that get's wrapped up with excitement, hosannas and halleluiahs – "the glory of the Lord shone round about them" as the angels sang of Jesus' birth. And in opening of John, "And we have seen his glory...full of grace and truth." Such stirring words, but what is it really?

What came to me this week is that it is what we see in those moments when the other world breaks into this one. The way things truly are, the way that God made and intends them is glorious. Sometimes that glorious nature pierces earthly disguises and we see things through God's eyes. What looks like a circle of standing stones is suddenly alive with the vibration of creation. What looks like a lovely cathedral building becomes a place infused with God's presence. That vibration and presence is always there, everywhere, but we don't see it regularly. What Peter and James and John saw was Jesus as he truly is as a spiritual being – love and truth personified. Up until then, all they had seen was the human experience of Jesus, the spiritual being. But on that mountaintop, the veil was removed and they saw him as he truly is for the first time. Their impulse was to try and stay in that moment. What they didn't understand was that it was given to open their minds to a greater understanding of life and to strengthen them for the trials ahead.

We can go in search of thin places; there are tours of the thin places in Ireland and Scotland. I'm already making plans to spend time on Iona when I've earned a sabbatical. And then sometimes, a thin moment just happens for us. It was sometime

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in the mid 80s, my children were maybe four and six. I was an Indiana housewife, with no spiritual pretensions. One day I was sitting in the living room, by the bay window with the Boston fern hanging in it, reading – I have no recollection what but I doubt that it was very profound or esoteric. Suddenly everything in the room changed and I was flooded with the awareness of love. That love was being poured into me from the outside and welling up from the inside at the same time. It was as if everything in me was being restructured, made new. And then just as suddenly, it was gone. My immediate response was one of “Oh, come back, do that again!” But as quickly as those thoughts formed, they were replaced with a calmer realization that if I never felt that experience of that liquid love again it would not matter. Because I had experienced it once and now knew what it means to say that God is love. That spontaneous thin place was an out and out gift, something that I wouldn’t have even known how request. Who knows how to ask for glory when it is beyond our imagining? But what that glory did for me was to plant the knowledge and assurance of what God is really like and how I am perceived. I learned that we are all beloved.

I have heard enough stories from some of you, to begin to suspect that this lovely church has some thin place qualities about it. As I considered this enchanting thought I began to wonder what would happen if we chose to be a thin place. Could we, through love and joy and welcome and prayer, open the gates of glory onto the way things really are, for the divine realm to shine through for everyone to experience? Could we begin to let our spirit selves shine through our human experiences more and more? These are good questions to take into the desert of Lent. Thanks be to God that we go, strengthened and beloved by the one who has gone ahead of us into glory. And in whose name we say, Amen.