

Thin Places

“In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.

And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day. And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters. And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament: and it was so. And God called the firmament Heaven. And the evening and the morning were the second day. And God said, Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together unto one place, and let the dry land appear: and it was so ... And the evening and the morning were the third day.”

Landscape, the firstborn of creation. It has been here ions before us. Landscape takes in every sound - the whispered breeze, the wonder of waves, the song of birds, the trickle of rain. All these sounds - this living music makes a landscape intimate. The

landscape calls us home. It reaches into the our souls. It creates a sanctuary. It offers us sacred space. If we are quiet and watchful, it brings us into the presence of the Divine.

In Celtic tradition the term “thin places” is used to describe mesmerizing places. “Heaven and earth”, the Celtic saying goes, “are only three feet apart”. But in thin places the distance collapses and we are able to catch a glimpse. And we see that it is good.

A thin space requires us to step from one world to another. the “prayerfulness” of this one small part of earth encourages us to seek them out on our spiritual journeys.

In Matthew 6:5-8 Jesus gives us simple instructions on where to pray and how to pray. He tells us to go into your room, shut the door, prayer to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. We know that the people of Jesus’ time lived communally and each did not have their own physical room. I believe Jesus is telling us to go apart, go within to that still small space in each of us. Shut the door to the world and all its concerns. Find that thin space where you and God meet in the silence.

Jesus tells us, that God knows what we need before we ask him. He tells us to make our prayers simple, make them sincere, and make them quiet.

There are times in my life when I go to thin places as an act of gratitude and praise and awe. There are other times when I seek thin places when I am heavy with the burdens of worldly life. I seek out thin places when my world has become thick and I cannot find that “landscape” within me that connects me to heaven. I seek out thin places when prayers seem to go unanswered, when peace does not come, and when hope seems so dim I can barely discern the light.

A few years ago I went through a prolonged period of grief and doubt, of despair and darkness. I clung to the words of Paul that we heard earlier. “knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.” I had it written on a small card and kept it in my wallet. But, I must confess there were times where the hope was something I longed for, not something I had.

I had a series of what seemed to me to be devastating losses . My father failed to thrive and then died, my mother began to fail and could not be alone and began losing herself. I gave up my career to take care of them. I lost a best friend to cancer, another friend to stroke, a third to an untimely death and a fourth to a heartbreaking falling-away. I had to sell the last of our horses, put down our two elderly dogs, sell the farm my parents had built from scratch. It seemed like my life was nothing but loss. It seemed that I had been left to deal with all of this alone.

The people, places and things that I loved, that I relied on for stability and counted on for strength seemed to be all dropping like the preverbal fly. I prayed for serenity and felt turmoil. I prayed for strength and felt exhausted. I prayer for courage and felt fear. I prayed for reconciliation and felt rejection. I prayed and I prayed and I prayed again - and heard only emptiness. There is a name for this state of being — there is a prayer format for it — it is called lamentation. It is “the passionate expression of grief or sorrow; weeping.” There is a whole book in the Bible about it.

Well. Things started to change. I think because, in part, of powerful thin space experiences.

My first thin place experience came about because of stress and exhaustion. I had been ordered away by my doctor, my mental health counselor and my pastor. And so I went to Epworth by the Sea Retreat Center on St. Simons Island in Georgia. In the small chapel on a cloudy afternoon and knelt down and wept. I remember saying out loud, "Please show me a way forward. I am a lost soul." Seconds after that I was bathed in light streaming in through the stained glass windows. The clouds had broken. The words, "Let there be light" came into my consciousness. God and I met in the silence. I caught a glimpse of faith. And it was good.

A second happened in Iceland in among the fissures of the exposed space where the American and European tectonic plates crashed together, separated and crashed again. This is a place of brokenness of deep fissures and piled rock. In its brokenness there was such a sense of power. I did not intent to be changed that day, but there was a spiritual shift. I received the insight of landscape - of a thin place where earth had crashed and crashed again but was not destroyed. And just maybe I wasn't either. I caught a glimpse of endurance. And it was good.

A third thin space took place in a church basement. My friend, whom I had mourned, and I found common ground and

reconciliation. We found hope in the future and hospitality in the moment. I thought of Paul's message — "hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us." And it was good.

A fourth thin space was found in Christ Church Cathedral in Dublin, Ireland, two weeks after my mother had died. We stepped in only as tourists. A small sign said "Eucharist service 12:45-1:15 behind the altar". I was moved to attend. The priest was a woman about my age. I told her I was a Methodist from North Carolina. She said it was God's table open to all. And added that their Bishop was from North Carolina, and as best as she knew, John Wesley had not left the church. It was a light moment of sharing. The service was intimate, only nine of us, seven visitors, the priest and the reader. The service was a Celtic Eucharist for weekday use. The priest began to read:

"Welcome to this ancient place, house of prayer for many centuries and races, home to all who come. God's grace be with you." and she read on, "Holy God, maker of the skies above, Lowly Christ born amidst the growing earth, Spirit of life, wind over flowing waters. In earth and sea and sky, you are there."

We took communion from a common cup and said the Lord's prayer in various languages and dialects. The Peace was this: "Deep peace of the quiet earth to you. Deep peace of the flowing air to you. Deep peace of the running wave to you. Deep peace of the shining stars to you. Deep peace of the Son of Peace be always with you."

During the time of meditation before we departed my voice strong from within me said, "This is what I am meant to do. This is what I am meant to do. This is what I am meant to do." I did not think I was meant to be an Anglican priest, I did not think I was meant to stay in Dublin — so, what does this mean? The words of Paul came to mind "knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us."

And I knew what I am meant to be. I am meant to be hospitable. I am meant to live life as a prayer, to see possibility - possibility of healing, possibility of redemption, possibility of reconciliation, possibility of life, And I glimpsed character and hope. And it was good.

I continue to seek out thin spaces where the outer and inner world's meet. I encourage all of us to seek out those thin places - where we are all are less than three feet from heaven. In this space we can follow the instruction of Jesus to go into our room, shut the door, prayer to our Father who is in secret, and our Father who sees in secret will reward us.

Let's have a moment of prayer:

Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart;
naught be all else to me, save that thou art -
thou my best thought, by day or by night;
waking or sleeping, thy presence my light.
Amen, and so it is.