

“Thin Places”

There is a saying in the Celtic spiritual tradition: “Heaven and earth are only three feet apart, but in thin places the distance is even smaller.” I like that. “Heaven and earth are only three feet apart, but in thin places the distance is even smaller.”

Celtic Christianity gave rise to the term “thin places” to point Christians to those places where heaven and earth seem to almost touch... Those spaces where the division between divinity and humanity grows so thin, so transparent, you’d swear you’re glimpsing the divine. Those spaces you can just tell... there’s something special... even sacred about them.

Today, many in the Celtic tradition point to thin places along the Irish or Scottish coast, which isn’t surprising considering the Celtic tradition arose in Ireland and Scotland. Still others might point to St. Peter’s Basilica in Vatican City. And others still might point to any number of the holy sites throughout Jerusalem.

The list is theoretically endless of where one just might uncover a thin place, which I realize might sound a bit silly, as if we who live in the realm of the temporal could ever gaze into the realm of the eternal. But it’s also true that both the Old and New Testaments are chockfull of examples in which God’s people encountered places in this world where God chose to reveal the divine will and word. What’s more, if we were to look up each of these places, we’d find that many if not most of them occurred atop mountains.

It was atop Mount Sinai that God first came calling to Moses in the burning bush.

And it was at Mount Sinai that God had Moses and the Israelites encamp amid their Exodus from Egypt.

And it was atop Mount Sinai that God spoke to Moses amid a cloud, giving him the law to give to God’s people.

In fact, the distance between Moses and God was apparently so thin atop that mount that when Moses came back down the mountain, he had to wear a veil to cover the divine glow of his face.

We might also recall that Jesus gave his very first sermon... where... but atop a mountain. It was atop a mountain that he revealed the glory of God found in the Beatitudes. And it was atop the mountain that he told his followers that they are the salt of the earth... that they are the light of the world. And it was there, atop that mountain, that Jesus revealed the very nature of grace, and the extraordinary power of love.

And for just one more example, as we read in our second lesson this morning, it was not by coincidence that Jesus took his disciples to the top of another mountain so they might witness his transfiguration... When the glory of God shone down and transfigured Jesus, and God’s voice bellowed from the skies... “This is my son, the beloved. Listen to him!”

Scripture is clear. God often used mountaintops... where the air begins to thin as the earth meets the sky... to reveal God’s glory to God’s people.

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But of course, God didn't *just* use mountaintops. In fact, I'd argue that the thinnest place our world has ever known was not relegated to a mountaintop, or any particularly place at all; but was found amid the incarnation. When God chose to put on flesh and bones and be born among us. When God chose to move and breathe among us in order to reveal God's kingdom in the truth he lived and the love he shared.

Which means, as far as I can tell, that thin places in this world aren't limited to spaces or places. Certainly, while we might see the glory of God amid the grandeur of creation, the thinnest places I have personally known have occurred more around experiences and relationships than actual physical spaces.

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I remember how thin it was when I saw my bride walk down the aisle and we shared our vows. And I remember feeling as if I was holding heaven in my arms when our children were born. And today... today I love how thin it seems to get each time I stop and watch our children laugh and play with each other. There's something salvific and sacred within each of these moments.

But that's not all. I've also felt the profound thinness of receiving forgiveness I didn't deserve.... and getting support I didn't expect.

And as a pastor, I've been so blessed to witness the distance between heaven and earth seem to shrink when I've seen grieving families huddle together in tears and in love... And when I've been blessed to watch people find themselves able to rise above their fears or reluctance and step out in faith in order to follow the call of God in their hearts.

In fact, it's not overstating it to say that this is one of my favorite perks of being a pastor—getting courtside seats to watch someone use their gifts for God's purposes. There are almost no words for it—witnessing God use people to do extraordinary things. Watching God equip people to lead extraordinary ministries. Watching God lead people to bring about the kingdom of heaven on earth. Talk about thin places!

All of this is to say... this past week... I was blessed to see just how thin it was at Camp BeeTree amid their Mountain Adventures. Not just because our children were exploring some of the stories of God's revelations amid thin places atop mountains. But because, at Camp BeeTree, God's people were doing amazing ministry.

If you were there, then you understand. So many children... running and playing and singing and learning and growing closer to the God who loves them so much. And so many youth serving as CIT's... helping these children while modeling such love themselves... they were inspiring to behold. And of course... the adults... what a gift it was to see each and every leader, counselor, organizer, helper who let God use them—and some of their vacation days—to help create the thin place that was Camp BeeTree this week.

Towson Presbyterian Church, I'm here to tell you, the distance between heaven and earth was less than three feet in Parkton, MD this week. But you don't have to take it from me. This morning, we will also hear reflections from Jeffery, Ella, and Amy on how they experienced God amid it all.