

Towson Presbyterian Church

August 26, 2018

Rev. Joel Strom

1 Kings 8:1, 6, 10-11, 22-30, 41-43

“Thin and Thick Places”

It took roughly 7 years for the Temple to be built. This was the first temple in Jerusalem, also called Solomon’s Temple, and it was a very impressive building, inside and out. The preceding chapters describe what went into its construction, with the finest of building materials, elaborate decorations on the walls, and gold everywhere, even on the floor.

And right before Solomon offers his prayer, this dark cloud descends into the Temple. And we are led to believe that this is the same cloud that was with the Hebrews on their escape from Egypt, the same cloud that Moses entered into when he reached the peak of Mount Sinai to be with God and receive the 10 Commandments, and the same cloud that guided the Hebrews as they wandered in the desert for 40 years. The cloud was God’s literal presence, and it was now to reside and find a home in the temple. This was not to say that God was not elsewhere, but that God was *uniquely present* in this space.

Which would make traveling to the Temple and walking up its steps quite the experience, wouldn’t it?

Whether you were traveling to participate in one of the Jewish festivals, or to make an offering or sacrifice, or if you were a foreigner, whom Solomon includes in his prayer, who has maybe come on a pilgrimage, you approach the temple knowing that this space is different than anywhere else. It’s special...it’s filled with God in a way that others places are not.

The temple would *feel* very different than your home or the field where you are growing crops, or the water where you will hunt for fish. That space would have just felt different, whether you were inside or around it.

We could call Solomon’s Temple a *thin place*. Have you ever heard that phrase before? It comes from the Celtic tradition of Christianity and a thin place is a physical location where the separation between God and the earth was thin. It’s this space where our senses quickly go up that God is very near and present. It’s where your connection with God comes into focus faster than it usually does. Thin places get us to an awareness of God’s presence faster than other places do.

The Temple was a thin place. I imagine once you saw it from the distance, everything changed. The dirt and rocks that you were walking on quickly became sacred and holy dirt and rocks. That space quickly became *thin*. It felt different.

And so where is your thin place, where your senses go up that God is very near and present? I know you have it. I'm positive each of you has it. You might have never officially named it as a thin place, but you have it. It's there. You might have never used the word "God" before when describing it, but I would say you were actually referencing God's presence that had filled that space for you in a different way than other spaces do.

For me, this space, our sanctuary, is a thin place. Whether it's Sunday morning, or throughout the week, it's special. Even when I am moving through it on a random Wednesday afternoon to get to the Youth Room or the Preschool, I can sense its holiness. To be holy means to be set apart. This space is special, distinct and set apart from other spaces.

Sometimes I'll walk through here as its getting dark and all the lights are off except a single flood light, illuminating that cross. I'm pretty sure Mr. Stephen Harouff intentionally leaves that light on...but it works. The feeling it evokes is powerful.

Iona, and island just off of the western coast of Scotland, is often called a thin place. I haven't been there, but would love to one day. When I lived in Chicago and worked as a youth director, I'd take high school teens to a camp in Minnesota called *Wilderness North*. I'd also travel there occasionally for personal retreats. And it was really in the middle of nowhere and right on a lake, which isn't too surprising for Minnesota. But for me, it was one of the thinnest places that I've ever been. I have a hard time describing *why* it was such a thin place for me...it was just the feeling that it evoked for me. It brought me to an awareness of God's presence quicker than other places do.

Just over a week ago my family and I were on vacation in Deep Creek and decided to spend an afternoon at Swallow Falls State Park. There are two beautiful waterfalls there and we found a little space where we could rest for a few minutes and put our feet in the water. As the kids played, my wife and I noted what the space brought up in us at that moment – calm, peace, the sound of rushing and falling water and the warmth of sunlight descending upon us. We weren't intentionally talking about God's presence in that moment by the waterfall, but *we were talking about God's presence in that moment.*

In Presbyterian-land, many people call Montreat a thin place. Montreat is a conference center in North Carolina and our high school teens spent a week there in July experiencing the *Montreat Youth Conference*. And it is a thin place; it's a special place for many people. For many, just

merely approaching Montreat causes them to feel as if the space between God and earth has become very thin.

At the *Montreat Youth Conference* we spend time in small groups that meet twice a day. During my first gathering with my small group on Monday in July, as we all sat in a big circle, my small group leader was describing Montreat and how many people see it as a thin place. After he explained what a thin place is to our group, the high school boy who sitting next to me leaned over and said,

*“Well... I guess that means that everywhere else is a **thick place**, right.”*

He smiled and I chuckled and said, *“Yeah, you’re right,”* and we shifted our attention back to our small group leader.

But later I couldn’t let his comment go, because he was saying to me, *“So God’s here in a special way, but that also means that God’s really not there in the vast majority of my life outside of this place.”*

He was essentially saying, *“In 95% of how I spend my time, in the space that occupies my day – the regular, normal, mundane day that is my life, and for him it was school and sports and friends and his home – that day and that life **was not** a thin place, but instead maybe **a thick place**. It was a place where the separation between God and the earth, or God and our lives, was wide and distant.*

I love thin places. I would love to spend time again at Wilderness North in Minnesota. I would love to travel to Iona. I would love to one day travel to Israel and Jerusalem. We’ll be back again to that waterfall at Swallow Falls. But the ultimate point of thin places – *the ultimate point* – is to awaken us to the reality of God’s presence in the *thick places* of our lives. And thick places are another way to simply say...our life: our life that we will be waiting for us when we walk out the doors of this sanctuary today; the life that we find at work; the life that we find at home; the life that we find in our play and recreation; and the life that we find here, within our community of faith. The one life that we are invited to live every day.

I’ve been reading a book by Brian McLaren called *“Naked Spirituality,”*¹ and in this book he describes a life lived with God in 12 simple words. And many of the words are what you might expect to see in our journey of faith – *Thanks, Sorry, Help, Please, When, No, Why...* but there’s another word he uses that speaks to us this morning: here. And he says the word “here” first

¹ *Naked Spirituality* by Brian McLaren. I’ve read multiple books by Brian and recommend his work, but hold off on *We Make the Road by Walking*, since our Adult Spiritual Formation Committee is considering it as a church-wide study in the future. Wait and read it with the rest of us!

helps awaken us to our own situation. He says, Here I am at this point in history. Here I am within the ongoing drama of human civilization. Here I am at this point in my own story – now as an adult. Here I am outside looking at this sky, as planes fly overhead. Here I am in this predicament, or this catastrophe or this boring afternoon. Here I am with all my strengths and all my mistakes, all my thoughts, rumblings and doubts. Here I am. And he says, this is really the only place that we can be to begin to awaken spiritually. Brian says, “So let’s start *here*. Now.”²

He encourages a practice to work into our everyday life – the thick places of our lives – to remind us of the God who is present – who is just as present in the thick as God is in the thin. He repeats this prayer throughout his day: “*I’m here, God. You’re here. We are here together.*” And he describes in “*Naked Spirituality*” a day in Washington D.C when he tried to implement this. As he gets on the subway, the seats are all taken, so he stands and holds the support pole and prays, “*I’m here, God. You’re here. We are here together.*” He tries to hold that awareness, here, now, amidst the noise and commotion of the subway. He enters a meeting with lots of important people and is more aware of their presence than God’s, so he whispers to himself, “*I’m here, God. You’re here. We are here together.*” As he finds his seat and offers handshakes, he tries to stay centered in the presence of God, simply breathing “*here, here, here.*”³

Now I’ve tried what he did here, and it’s hard. It takes a lot of intentional practice. Even if I spend some time in the morning in silence and solitude with God, the rest of my day is this non-stop sprint to the end. It’s “hold on tight, here we go!” So please hear me when I say this: when I preach, I feel like I’m always preaching to myself first, and you get to listen, too!

The picture that he describes here, this constant awareness of God’s presence, that’s not easy. But I’ve also tasted those occasional pauses throughout the day, those holy, sacred pauses. Occasionally I stop and catch them: in the middle of work, in the car, washing dishes, spending time with my family, in the midst of a challenging moment.

“I’m here, God. You’re here. We are here together.”

And so where is your thin place? Wherever it is, set aside time to be there and enjoy the *thinness* of it. But let that time and that space also awaken you to God’s presence in the thick places of our lives, which is, our actual life, and where God is just as present as God is in those thin places.

Thanks be to God.

² *Naked Spirituality* by Brian McLaren. p. 34-35

³ *Naked Spirituality* by Brian McLaren p. 36