

## Thin Places

Micah 4:1-2; Psalm 84:1-2, 10

May 16, 2021

The term “thin places” is generally attributed to the Scottish clergyman George MacLeod in the 1920’s or 30’s. He was the founder of the Iona Community on the island of Iona in western Scotland. Long before that, though, the ancient pagan Celts, and later, Christians, used similar language to describe mesmerizing places like the wind-swept isle of Iona, or Saint Brigid’s well in western Ireland.

Heaven and earth, the Celtic saying goes, are only three feet apart, but in thin places, that distance is even shorter. Thin Places are where the eternal world and our physical world meet and mingle. They can also be found in everyday life. Maybe even in your own backyard if you’re looking. While you will not find the words “thin places” in the Bible, there are nonetheless many sacred places and encounters that can be considered “thin.”

It’s hard to know where to start today on this vast subject, and it is even more difficult to know where to end! The experience of the holy is not limited to a place, yet it is fair to say that it can be found in particular places in your life. If the term “thin place” doesn’t mean anything to you, think about holy places and holy experiences.

\* \* \*

I came across a couple articles lately that brought the subject into focus. One was written by Rachael Young, entitled, “Thin Places – Here, There or Everywhere?”<sup>1</sup> She is the associate pastor of spiritual formation at a church in Houston, TX. Rachael writes: “In the summer of 2004, I traveled for two months in Scotland. Six of those weeks were spent volunteering with the Iona Community on the Island of Iona. It has a long, rich spiritual history.”

“The story begins with a 6<sup>th</sup> century Christian monk and missionary named Columba. Columba was Irish-born, and there are several stories and explanations for how he ended up on a small island off the west coast of Scotland. The one I remember best is that Columba was exiled from Ireland.”

“He and his companions traveled by boat across to Scotland and landed only after they could no longer see their homeland. When they landed, they buried their boat and Columba wept over his exile, turning the stones green, as legend has it. Thus, as the story goes, Columba’s Bay is still a source for beautiful green stone.”

Rachael traveled to Iona with a heart hollowed out by fatigue and difficult relationships. She volunteered for community chores in exchange for room and

board. She says that in the six weeks of cleaning toilets, hanging laundry and chopping vegetables, framed by morning and evening prayer, her soul was slowly healed.

In thin places, the boundary between heaven and earth becomes more permeable. We encounter God in fresh ways that startle us out of our inattention, and we are often transformed by the experience.

“I don’t know if the ancient Celtic Christians limited the term “thin places” to only certain physical places. I can certainly understand if they did,” Rachael believes. “Iona felt different. It was a place of peace, of vivid dreams, of greater attunement to the divine, of transcendence. God journeys with us wherever we go, whether we are surrounded by natural beauty or breathing in the smog of the city.”

She quotes a poem entitled, “Circuit”, from the book The Pattern of Our Days, edited by Kathy Galloway.

The poem concludes with this line: “God has no favorite places. There are no special things. All are God’s and all is sacred.”

Rachael says, “I carried this poem in my bones as I returned to work at a nonprofit in Los Angeles. It kept me awake and attentive to God’s presence in the places that had wearied and wounded me. And I’ve had this conviction since then that thin places are everywhere, if only we pay attention.”

“Thin places are places of transcendence, of moments when God feels nearer and clearer to us. Thin places can be physical places, but they can also be expressed in relationships of grace and forgiveness, in moments of prayer, or even in expressions of sheer delight. Thin places, in this way, are subjective experiences of the divine, based on a person’s ability to perceive them.”

She concludes: “But here’s the thing: Now, nearly 20 years after I volunteered on Iona, I have a strong urge to return. Fatigue has once again dulled my senses to the presence of God. I long for healing and transformation. And I think going back to the island, while not being the same experience as before, will still be a sacred experience, because there is something holy about the island that goes beyond one’s subjective experience.”

“Thousands upon thousands of pilgrims over the centuries have come and gone from Iona. And they have encountered God while making their pilgrimage. Iona’s “thinness” comes from a shared history of many people making space for the divine, such that the place itself has become sacred. It is a communal thin

place. Sometimes we need the community to remind us that God truly is present with us and with our world.”

There are as many thin places as there are people, maybe more. The Camino in Spain is a sacred experience for many; the Holy Lands, or ancient sites of indigenous people in the Southwestern US. Muir Woods close to home and Sequoia would be on my list.

There are trails you might walk and hike, or a favorite spot in your garden where you kneel to pull weeds. Sometimes it helps to get your hands dirty. After all, soil is sacred. I brought a packet of soil back with me from Iona in 2012, and spread it in my front yard, so a part of the island was always just beneath my feet.

The Episcopal priest Elizabeth Keaton offers her own experience. She writes, “I am kneeling on the beautiful soil of Iona, adding my prayers to the prayers which millions of pilgrims have prayed over the centuries there.”

“I am walking in the beauty of creation all around me that I might find the beauty of that which God has created in me. I am here to find parts of myself that I never knew existed, but recognize immediately when they are discovered. Or uncovered. Or recovered. I am here to be more connected with the whole of creation in the world, and to be made more whole myself. I am here to become more authentic so that my integrity can be made strong. In that thin space between what was and is and is yet to come, I am more of who I am meant to be. I am here because I belong. Because of the thin place experiences I've had, I know that no matter where I am, I am home.” 2

\* \* \*

It has been a journey, maybe even a pilgrimage for me over the years, sometimes feeling out of place or without a home. It was a feeling deep in the bones that engendered some wanderlust at first and a period of deep introspection second. I sometimes felt out of step with many of my peers, and not always at home in my own denomination, who seemed to value doing over being, and plans over prayers. Sometimes I wonder secretly if this is a part of the reason that all major denominations have experienced a decline for decades.

Spiritual hunger is real. Maybe that's what some people mean when they say they are, “Spiritual, but not religious.” People are hungry, and sometimes they don't even know for what. As St. Augustine said, “Our hearts are restless until they find rest in Thee.”

There are more years in my life and ministry behind me than there are before me, but that doesn't mean that the best is not yet to come. Iona woke me up in 2012.

It could have happened at other places and other times, but it happened then and there. There is something to be said for specificity. It was a thin place. A holy place. I always said, “I have never been to the Holy Lands, but I’ve been to a land that is holy.” We were supposed to go back this summer, but things were cancelled due to the pandemic. We are planning to go next year, along with some of the holy places in Ireland.

None of us know how many birthdays we have left. None of us know how many arrows we have left in our quiver. But this much I know – I want to aim for the mark every single time, and not waste a moment. By aiming for the mark, I mean putting yourself in a place and position to experience God wherever you may be and whatever you may be doing. You don’t have to stop what you’re doing, but it is important to do it and see it in a special way. The Apostle said, “Be transformed by the renewing of your minds.” Friends, we are not put on this earth to remain the same.

On a walk recently, I saw a yellow-bellied sapsucker, and it stopped me in my tracks. It was a God-tinged moment. So provide the space for God to enter, or more precisely, take the time to notice the God who is already there.

As the Psalmist says this morning in Psalm 84 –

*How lovely is your dwelling place,  
O LORD of hosts!  
My soul longs, indeed it faints  
for the courts of the LORD;*

*my heart and my flesh sing for joy  
to the living God. . . .*

*For a day in your courts is better  
than a thousand elsewhere.*

*I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God  
than live in the tents of wickedness. Psalm 84:1-2, 10*

Or, there are these words from the prophet Micah:

*In days to come,  
the mountain of the LORD’S house  
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,  
and shall be raised up above the hills.  
Peoples shall stream to it,  
and many nations shall come and say:*

*“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,  
to the house of the God of Jacob;  
that he may teach us his ways  
and that we may walk in his paths.*

*Micah 4:1-12*

I had not noticed those passages before, but they describe what some would call today a “thin place” or a “thin experience.”

\* \* \*

I would like to close with a passage from “Little Gidding” by T.S. Eliot in his Four Quartets as he describes his own version of a thin place:

If you came this way,  
Taking any route, starting from anywhere,  
At any time or at any season,  
It would always be the same: you would have to put off  
Sense and notion.  
You are not here to verify,  
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity  
Or carry report. You are here to kneel  
Where prayer has been valid.

May you find your place to kneel, a place where prayers have been made holy by all the pilgrims who have gone before you. Amen

1 Rachael Young, “Thin places — Here, There or Everywhere?”  
Presbyterian Outlook, February 23, 2021.

2 Elizabeth Kaeton, “Thin Place Experience,” Telling Secrets blog,  
May 29, 2019.

Psalm 84:1-2, 10

How lovely is your dwelling place,  
O LORD of hosts!

My soul longs, indeed it faints  
for the courts of the LORD;  
my heart and my flesh sing for joy  
to the living God. . . .

For a day in your courts is better  
than a thousand elsewhere.

I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God  
than live in the tents of wickedness.

Micah 4:1-2

In days to come  
the mountain of the LORD'S house  
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,  
and shall be raised up above the hills.

Peoples shall stream to it,  
and many nations shall come and say:

“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,  
to the house of the God of Jacob;  
that he may teach us his ways  
and that we may walk in his paths.”

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,  
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem”