

# *Thin Places*

(#1 in the “*Living in the Thin Places*” Epiphany series)

*As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.*

*My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.*

*When shall I come and behold the face of God?*

(Psalm 42:1-2)

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the 2nd Sunday after the Epiphany, **January 20, 2019**

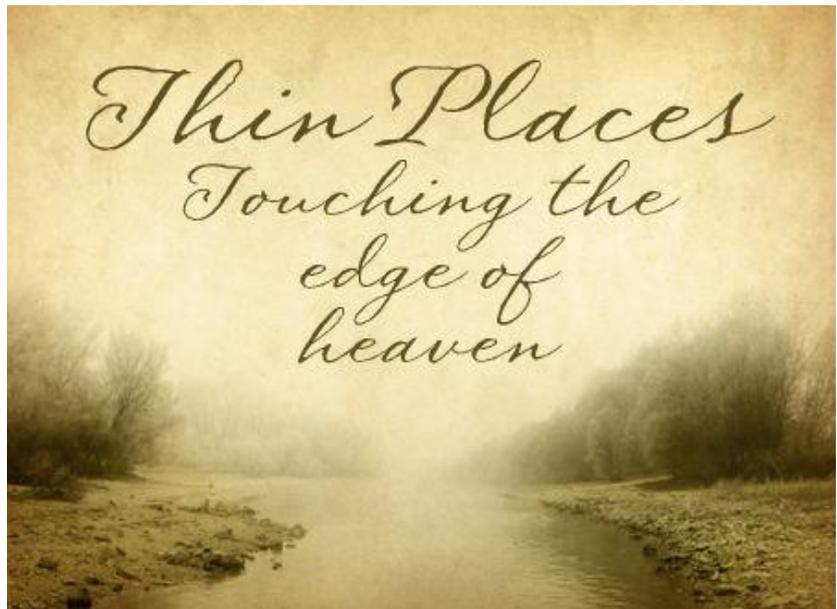
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In the season we call Epiphany, beginning each year on January 6, we witness the light of Christ growing, a gradually increasing Revealing of who Jesus is. Epiphany, which means Revealing, continues this year through March 3, its last Sunday known as Transfiguration Sunday. On that day Jesus ascend a Galilean mountain and will shine like the sun. Until then, each week the light of Christ grows incrementally brighter.

I'm excited to begin an Epiphany series today titled, “*Living in the Thin Places.*” Textually, we'll focus on the early narratives of John's gospel. This morning we read John's account of the baptism of Jesus, an Epiphany of Revealing as the dove descended upon the Lamb of God. Each Sunday will find us moving forward in John's gospel.

I'll link those passages, though, with a theme drawn from the writings of early Christianity in Ireland, “*Thin Places,*” a term used by Celtic Christians from about the 5<sup>th</sup> century, having in that beautiful land developed a strong sense of sacred space, certain trees, caves, streams, and mountains regarded as sanctuaries of nature. In a *Thin Place* the veil between this world and the divine world, heaven and earth, seemed somehow sheer, porous, allowing God's glory to seep through to our awareness.



We opened our worship this morning with, “*Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee.*” The second stanza might almost be the theme song for the idea of *Thin Places*:

*All thy works with joy surround thee, earth and heaven reflect thy rays . . .  
Field and forest, vale and mountain, flowery meadow, flashing sea,  
chanting bird and flowing fountain, call us to rejoice in thee.*

Having traveled to Ireland a few years ago to lead a group on the John Wesley Heritage Tour, I can echo what Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor wrote: “*I’ve known Thin Places all my life, but I didn’t have the language for them until I took a trip to Ireland a few years back . . . Thin places are transparent places or moments, set apart by the quality of the sunlight in them, or the shadows, or the silence, or the sounds . . . What they have in common is their luminosity, the way they light an opening between this world and another . . . they pull aside the veil for just a moment, so you can see through.*”

John’s account of Jesus being baptized in the flowing stream of the Jordan is such a moment of luminosity, heaven and earth embracing, intertwining.

The Hebrew Bible offers many *Thin Place* stories. Moses at the Burning Bush, standing on Holy Ground. Elijah at the mouth of Sinai’s cave, hearing the Still Small Voice. My favorite, though, is Jacob’s ladder, his vision of a ladder bridging heaven and earth with angels ascending and descending on it. Jesus referred to this story in his preaching, as we will see next Sunday. Jacob, moved by the sight, sets up a monument of remembrance and says, “*Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it. How awesome is this place! This is none other than the House of God, and this is the gate of heaven.*”

Can you recall a *Thin Place* moment in your faith journey, a time when you became acutely aware of God’s presence, an unexpected God-burst piercing the tedium of the ordinary? Once experienced, we become like that deer by the flowing streams, possessing a *Longing* for more. In such moments, earthquakes of worry shaking our existence can simply melt away, shed in an unexplained shimmer of serenity.

Virtually every spiritual tradition acknowledges the mystery of these *Thin Places*. There is nothing mechanical about them. Your GPS won’t be able to locate them precisely and lead you to their longitude and latitude. I mean, rather, to say that *Thin Places* are points of experience, moments of enlightenment when, possessed by unexpected joy, or contentment, or peace, we become aware that the ordinary has been transformed. We sense that we are standing on Holy Ground, having ventured upon the landscape of the sacred. Unsought, the awareness of our belonging to God shines through the moment with particular immediacy and unusual clarity.

Artists, poets, philosophers, and preachers assume the task, not only of describing these *Thin Places*, but of sharing with us how to live in them. It is that, “*Living in the Thin Places,*” that is my goal in this Epiphany.

The first lesson, I suppose, is that we need not go in search of *Thin Places*. We certainly can do so, and I do regularly, whether a journey to the Holy Land or, closer to home, to a monastery. I suppose, in one sense, each of us arrived in the sanctuary this morning with a hope that we might here experience a Thin Place of communion with God, longing to drink in worship from the flowing waters of the Spirit.

Still, despite our searching, the lesson is that our Thin Place experiences are not automatically conjured by arriving in a certain spot. In the same way inspired thoughts can wash over you in the shower, or jump out in front of you while driving, or drift into your awareness while listening to music, that's how *Thin Places* work. We don't find them so much as they find us.

Nor need those places be breathtakingly beautiful, or calm and relaxing as a sunset on the beach, vacation having relaxed us from the daily pressures of home and work. *Thin Places* may, in fact, be discovered in the most distressing of places. Which is why today I want to talk about epiphanies, *Thin Places*, in the critical moments of one's living, in the hospital room grieving beside a dying loved one or in a drug rehab unit seeking inspiration to overcome.

Or, perhaps in a jail cell.

Tomorrow is Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. I often read in January Dr. Martin Luther King's *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*. Dr. King went to Birmingham in April 1963 to support non-violent protests of the city's then-pervasive racism and segregation. He landed in jail charged with parading without a permit. Eight white clergymen published a letter saying that while of course they agreed with Dr. King that all men deserve equality, they disapproved of his methods. They were advocating patience, sure that the courts would eventually bring about change. They were saying, in essence, "*What's the hurry? We'll get there. Let it unfold naturally.*"

*Letter from a Birmingham Jail* was Dr. King's eloquent answer, an incredibly lucid, insightful, courageous work reminding us that, "*injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere,*" saying that "*segregation statutes are unjust because segregation distorts the soul and damages the personality. It gives the segregator a false sense of superiority and the segregated a false sense of inferiority . . . thus politically, economically, and sociologically unsound, it is morally wrong and sinful.*"

Expressing disappointment in his white clergy friends he wrote, "*I have heard numerous southern religious leaders admonish their worshipers to comply with a desegregation decision because it is the law, but I have longed to hear white ministers declare: 'Follow this decree because integration is morally right and because the Negro is your brother.'* In the midst of blatant injustices . . . I have watched white clergymen stand on the sideline and mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities."

It was his words at the conclusion of this long letter and his reference to being in a "*Narrow Jail Cell*" that I wondered at the "*Thin Place*" this jail cell must have been for

Dr. King. Listen to his conclusion, and imagine the *Thin Place* he must have experienced in that cell: *“Never before have I written so long a letter. I’m afraid it is much too long to take your precious time. I can assure you that it would have been much shorter if I had been writing from a comfortable desk, but what else can one do when he is alone in a narrow jail cell, other than write long letters, think long thoughts, and pray long prayers? If I have said anything in this letter that overstates the truth and indicates an unreasonable impatience, I beg you to forgive me. If I have said anything that understates the truth and indicates my having patience that allows me to settle for anything less than brotherhood, I beg God to forgive me. I hope this letter finds you strong in the faith. I also hope that circumstances will soon make it possible for me to meet each of you, not as an integrationist or a civil rights leader, but as a fellow clergyman and a Christian brother. Let us all hope that the dark clouds of racial prejudice will soon pass away and the deep fog of misunderstanding will be lifted from our fear-drenched communities, and in some not too distant tomorrow the radiant stars of love and brotherhood will shine over our great nation with all their scintillating beauty. Yours for the cause of Peace and Brotherhood, Martin Luther King, Jr.”*

*Shine with all their scintillating beauty!* An Epiphany thought, if ever there was one. Sometimes – is it not so? -- our most enlightened moments come in the midst of our greatest fears, emerging from the narrowest confines of circumstance.

*Thin Places* aren’t just spiritual moments of good feeling leading to an exhilaration of the soul. They may be that, of course, but rather *Thin Places* offer moments when we become aware of how to live, moved to right and courageous action. May God give us such moments, and such courage to live faithfully! Amen.



