

Made for Another World

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

*“Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’
The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it,
But you do not know where it comes from or where it goes.”
So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.”*
(John 3:7-8)

*"If I discover within myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy,
the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world."*
(C. S. Lewis)

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the 3rd Sunday after Epiphany, **January 27, 2019**
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Has an idea ever come to you so suddenly, unexpectedly, that you described by saying, “*I had an epiphany?*”

The liturgical season we’re in now, Epiphany, means, a Revealing. What is being revealed? Well, the core of that Revealing is, of course, Jesus Christ, whose messianic mission is expressed in his words we read this morning, “*For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son.*”

What an Epiphany! God loves you! God loves you so much that he sent Jesus, his only son. There’s a reason that this is the best-recognized verse in the Bible. Its Epiphany value is sky high. God loves me! John 3:16 is an Epiphany drawing back the curtain of heaven and Revealing the heart of God.

Epiphany begins on January 6 each year with the story of the star guiding the Magi, a star as if peeking out from the dark heavens. Subsequent to January 6, the Sundays after Epiphany witness the light of Christ steadily growing.

To accomplish this incremental increase of wattage, this year I’m turning the spotlight to the gospel of John, at least to its early chapters where the light of Jesus steadily grows brighter until it reaches its zenith on Epiphany’s last Sunday, the Transfiguration.

If the star at the beginning of Epiphany is but a faint light peeking out from the dark heavens, the Transfiguration, closing the season of Epiphany, is when Jesus’ face shines like the sun.

In this series I'm describing these Epiphany moments when heaven shines through to the mundane as *Thin Places*. This is a term used by Ireland's Celtic Christians in the 5th century to describe sacred spots – rivers, mountains, caves -- where it seemed that the veil separating earth and heaven was so porous so as to allow God's glory to seep through to one's awareness.

The Celtic Christians may have coined a neat term, but they claim no exclusive market on experiencing *Thin Place* encounters in which heaven was experienced on earth. Our human story begins with Adam and Eve in the intimacy of the garden, walking with God. Abraham by the oaks of Mamre is visited by the angel of the Lord. Moses at the Burning Bush in the Sinai stand on holy ground. David in the Shepherd's Fields around Bethlehem is inspired to become the sweet singer of Israel. Daniel in the Lions' Den finds a *Thin Place* in the moment of crisis. Elijah at the cave on har-El, the mountain of God, hears a still small voice. Isaiah in Jerusalem's temple cries *Holy, Holy, Holy*, when "*in the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord, high and lifted up.*"

Then the New Testament, Peter in Jaffa by the Mediterranean experiences the vision of unclean foods descending. Saul of Tarsus meets Jesus on the Damascus Road and becomes Paul the Apostle. John, exiled on the island of Patmos, experiences perhaps the grandest Epiphany of all, resulting in the Book of Revelation, the Revealing.

The sum of it is that virtually every spiritual tradition acknowledges this phenomenon and cherishes these *Thin Place* experiences.

In so many ways being a pastor is a blessing, and one such blessing is to so often hear of such intimate *Thin Place* moments in the lives of their congregation. I love hearing *Thin Place* stories, several even this past week after we began this series, holy moments of serendipity or of synchronicity producing intense spiritual experiences of tasting heaven, and finding heaven familiar, as if home.

Through the years and even this week, some such stories have been casually shared, others beautifully written, but all profoundly felt. I invite you to share your *Thin Place* moments with me, whether by e-mail, letter, telephone, or a visit.

One wrote to speak of being with a dying loved one in hospice. She told me of a moment when, on the last day, a friend briefly visited and offered a beautiful prayer. She wrote to me that, as her friend prayed: "*Talk about a Thin Place! Sso thin it was almost like the breath passed through my body and out into the room, up toward another place where (my loved one) would soon be going.*"

C. S. Lewis wrote. "*If I discover within myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world.*" Lewis made much of this human *Longing* for Something More than our earthly home. He argued that just as our natural thirst for water shows that we were made biologically to need water, so also our natural thirst for Something Other shows that we were made,

spiritually, to need this Something Other to complete our lives, however much beyond scientific analysis that Something Other may be.

Modern medical technologies have vastly increased the number of *Near Death Experiences*. The stories brought back from such brushes with eternity are, you might say, the zenith in *Thin Place* experiences, a Transfiguration of sorts, a brush with glory before returning to re-engage the world, forever after feeling themselves somewhat a stranger in the world, knowing that their home is elsewhere. That's what Jesus experienced, shining with glory then coming off that mountain to re-engage the world in the valley, even the valley of the shadow of death.

Our hunger for such stories is why recent books such as *Proof of Heaven – A Neurosurgeon's Journey into the Afterlife*, was a best-seller in 2012. Dr. Eben Alexander, a neurosurgeon who taught at Duke and Harvard, tells the story of coming back from a seven-day coma in 2008. People were hungry to hear it, filling an auditorium to overflowing in Little Rock a few years ago. Why? To hear the story of one who experienced the ultimate *Thin Place* and then to come away with what C. S. Lewis said, a conviction that we are *Made for Another World*.

Our reading from John 3 was the visit to Jesus, made at night, of Nicodemus. Jesus seemed to want Nicodemus to be aware that he was "*Made for Another World*," that he needed to be born again, or "*born from above*." Jesus teaches, "*Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above . . . what is born of flesh is flesh, and what is born of Spirit is spirit.*"

Nicodemus struggles to move conceptually from one reality to another, so responds to Jesus' teaching with a biological observation. Jesus gently chides, "*Are you a teacher in Israel and yet you don't recognize and understand these things?*"

I think the paramount lesson from Jesus is that we are *Made for Another World*, so that unexpected *Thin Place* moments when heaven is felt should not be surprising. Like the breeze blowing, we undeniably feel it, even if we don't know where it came from or where it's next stop will be.

As Jesus continues to speak with Nicodemus, he alludes to the Hebrew Bible's ultimate *Thin Place* account, Jacob's ladder. "*No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man.*" Jesus is clearly suggesting that he himself should be regarded as the angel of Jacob's ladder.

If this leaves Nicodemus with the idea of the Son of Man suspended between worlds, between heaven and earth, Jesus solidifies that image when he next refers to a story from Numbers 21 where salvation is found in that which is suspended between heaven and earth.

When the Hebrews, having escaped Egypt, were afflicted in the desert of Sinai with poisonous serpents, God instructs Moses to fashion a serpent of bronze and set it on a

pole, so when the Hebrews looked upon it, they would be healed. *“Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.”*

Here’s an image of the Bronze Serpent lifted up which pilgrims to Jordan see at the crest of Mt. Nebo where Moses overlooked the Holy Land.

I find it fascinating that bronze is an alloy, a mixture of primarily copper but also of other metal additives, such as tin or aluminum. Its technology was so significant that historians speak of human populations emerging from the Stone Age into the Bronze Age. In the ancient near east the Bronze Age lasted for 2½ millennia, from 3600 to 1200 B. C., until it was replaced by the Iron Age.

And was not the crucified Jesus, lifted up on the tree and suspended between heaven and earth, an alloy of the Word and flesh, of heaven and earth? Jesus on the cross becomes the *Bronze Serpent* suspended for our salvation.

Holy Communion offers us the body and blood of Christ, the clergy lifting up those elements as if to call the church to look upon the Bronze Serpent who is Jesus, he of heaven and of earth, an alloy of sin and righteousness.

This is why Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:21, *“For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”*

Glory be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

