

Concealed in the Crease

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

*So his brothers said to (Jesus) . . .
“No one who wants to be widely known acts in secret.
If you do these things, show yourself to the world”
(For not even his brothers believed in him).
(John 7:3-5)*

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the 7th Sunday after Epiphany, **February 24, 2019**
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Through the season of Epiphany we’ve been *Living in the Thin Places*, an early Celtic description of spiritual experiences we’ve all had, places along our spiritual journey when we sense God in an unusually close way. It’s as if the veil separating heaven and earth has grown so porous as to allow heaven to shine through to our awareness, leaving us with a sense that we are “*Made for Another World*” (to quote C. S. Lewis), “*pilgrims and strangers in this world.*” *Thin Place* experiences allow our true home to shine through so that we realize that while in the flesh we occupy a temporary dwelling, our true citizenship is in heaven.

So far, we’ve seen two categories of *Thin Places* as we’ve moved chapter by chapter through the early portion of John’s gospel. Some *Thin Places* are *Sought*. Others are *Unsought*.

In John 3, Nicodemus went in search of spiritual illumination. And are we not doing precisely that now, this very moment, symbolized by the light our acolytes bring into the sanctuary? Do we not seek a *Thin Place* when we embark upon a pilgrimage to sacred sites, or pack for a retreat such as an Emmaus Walk? We seek a *Thin Place* when we intentionally hitting of the pause button on our day-to-day experience. The Hebrew *Shabbat* reminds us that experiencing the *Thin Place* need not be extraordinary. We can choose to make it a habit of life.

But some *Thin Places*, the ones we remember and talk about and write about, are indeed extraordinary. These are usually *Unsought*, not experienced because we’ve hit a pause button to free us for the spiritual endeavor. In John 4 the woman is at the well when she encounters Jesus. In John 5 the cripple is in his usual spot, by the Pool of Bethesda, when he meets Jesus. Both might say, “*I didn’t see that coming.*”

Today, as we come to John 7, I introduce a third category of *Thin Place*. I’ll call it, the *Nearly Missed Thin Place*. Whether *Sought* or *Unsought*, what if our eyes aren’t ready to see? What if heaven is breaking through all around us, yet our eyes are blinded to the moment’s blessing so that the *Thin Place* is hidden from our eyes, concealed in the creases of time.

Our journey through John has brought us today to John 7. Its the Festival of Booths, or

Tabernacles (Hebrew = Sukkoth). This feast is comprised of seven days in late September to late October. It's a festive and colorful time when the people intentionally live in booths or tents, temporary structures to remember the forty years of wandering in the wilderness. It was one of the three times Hebrew men were to go on pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and this chapter opens with Jesus and brothers questioning if he should attend the feast, fearing for his life should he travel to Jerusalem.

It's a question of secrecy vs. openness. His brother say, "*No one who wants to be widely known acts in secret. Show yourself to the world.*" John suggests that they really needed proof for themselves. Matthew names these brothers: James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas. They saw, but they did not see. They had missed the *Thin Place* all of their lives. Would they see it now, or had familiarity blinded them to the One who was with them always?

Now, I wondered this week, how shall I get at this theme? I decided to call Michelangelo to help and enjoyed his company so much that think I shall begin next Sunday a new series – *Masterpieces of Michelangelo* – whose first message will both close out Epiphany and begin Lent. A single message next Sunday will straddle the two, for in that one week we experience both the Light of the Transfiguration and, three days later, the Dark of Lent on Ash Wednesday.

Today's message is a taste of what's to come as we look at Michelangelo's *Pieta*, the marble sculpture Michelangelo finished in 1499 at the age of 26. It's the only sculpture he ever signed,

his name engraved on the strap across Mary's chest as the body of her recently crucified son lies across her lap. Mary's garment is one of voluminous gatherings of material, fold upon fold forming creases. And, there it is, "*Michelangelo Buonarroti the Florentine was making.*"

The story is told that he added his signature after the work was already gaining some renown after hearing a rumor that some were saying it was the work of another sculptor in Rome.



He was young, and I can hear his friends advising him as Jesus' brothers advised him, "*No one who wants to be widely known acts in secret. Show yourself to the world.*" On the *Pieta*, Michelangelo showed himself to the world.

If it sounds odd to end a signature with "*was making,*" I think that it was meant to sound odd and attract attention. It's an unusual use of the Latin imperfect, *faciebat*, a form of the verb intentionally conveying a lack of finality. Was he saying something about the piece itself? Perhaps, hinting that there is yet form beneath form, just as there is fold upon fold. Maybe he was encouraging the public to search deeply for spiritual meaning.

Or, perhaps he was saying something about his own calling as a sculptor, offering a promise of more. *Michelangelo Was Making!* As yet unmade were more masterpieces from his heart and hand – the colossal statue of the David, the Sistine Chapel ceiling, Moses the Lawmaker, and more. I look forward two summers from now, in 2020, to being in Florence and Rome with several of you to see these and more works. We'll focus in coming weeks on a few of those *Masterpieces*, remembering how God is yet sculpting us, the imperfect tense at work in our baptized lives, shaping us toward his divine design.

I want to draw you into the “*Was Making*” moment as I tell something else about this intriguing signature, something Michelangelo himself seems to have hidden. Perhaps you're already looking closely at the sash in the creases for what Michelangelo might have hidden, as if the master artist were toying with us by hiding something up his sleeve. He did exactly that, as hinted at in my title, *Concealed in the Crease*.

I love titles. Sherry tells me I couldn't even propose to her back in 1974 without first assigning a title to my proposal (not overly loquacious as I recall, something about my love for her being a many splendored thing, or never having to say you're sorry, or something like that. Hey, it was the 70s, after all! I'm kidding, of course, about my proposal, but not about loving titles. The best titles, I think, tantalizingly hide something. To the extent they misdirect in order to provide an “*Aha!*” moment, they can be magical.

For example, in that same year of 1974 I came to pulpit, and I recall in one of my earliest sermons at a youth led revival in north Arkansas (I but 20 years old) offering a sermon about David's son, Absalom, who rebelled against his father and lost his life trying to escape from soldiers loyal to David. Absalom's long hair became entangled in the branches of a great oak. It's quite the story, told in 2 Samuel 18:9:

During the battle, Absalom happened to come upon some of David's men. He tried to escape on his mule, but as he rode beneath the thick branches of a great oak tree, his hair got caught in the tree. His mule kept going and left him dangling in the air.

My sermon to the kids, on perhaps the day I fell in love with titles: “*When God Hung a Hippie and the Mule Walked On.*” I intended misdirection. The title had everyone looking at the hippie God hung, as if I were going to offer a message about long hair. We were barely out of the 60's, after all, and long hair and drugs seemed to go together. But no, it was rather my intent to hoist them up on that mule to ride on into their futures with eyes to see God's providential working.

In signing the Pieta Michelangelo artfully hid something. While our eyes are on his name (Michelangelo Buonorotti) and his hometown (Florence), *Concealed in the Crease* was his hoisting us up onto that imperfect verb, “*Was Making.*” He knew he was going to walk on to create more objects of beauty. Perhaps, also, he wanted those who saw the Pieta to see themselves as God's Masterpieces, yet in the “*Was Making*” moment, being sculpted.

He achieved this by a sleight of hand, mostly hiding the final “*t*” of *faciebat* within the fold and under the crease on Mary's left shoulder. It's as if Michelangelo had a card up his sleeve, not to cheat, but to conceal what would, when revealed, amaze. In that partially obscured “*t*” is the

assurance of God's continuing a work of grace in his church, an affirmation that God is not finished. Who better than a sculptor to teach this lesson! As a sculptor his goal was releasing what was hidden, to discover form within the block of marble, to set at liberty its latent potential.

Leonardo da Vinci, twenty years Michelangelo's elder, was a rival in Florence. He preferred painting, describing the sculptor's work as loud and dirty. There is another difference that stood out to me. Da Vinci threw open the doors of his studio to let all in to observe the "Was Making" moment. Nothing was up Leonardo's sleeve (unless you believe the Da Vinci Code).

Michelangelo, conversely, built walls around his work during the "Was Making" phase. He wanted to be alone with it, these intimate moments as he gave birth to the form within the mass. "Not publicly, but as it were in secret," as our text says of Jesus.

In our day of social media we share our thinking, often overmuch. On occasion, I've read a mid-week post from a young pastor serving a small church, perhaps as early as Tuesday or Wednesday: "Bulletin finished, sermon finished."

I want to say, "No, the bulletin maybe is finished, but the sermon is not – if it is, you're in trouble! Don't let it be finished! Not until you stand up in the pulpit and, truth be told, even then it's not finished. Let your message be in the "Was Making" phase, allowing the breeze of the Spirit to move you toward the final "Amen." And even then may God's Spirit allow the sermon to live on in ways yet hidden, Concealed in the Creases that have not yet unfolded into our tomorrows. "Let your sermons, and your lives, be *faciebat*, in the 'Was Making' moment, with a mostly hidden 't'."

John 7 offers us Jesus in the *faciebat* moment, with a mostly hidden "t". Something was in the making, but what? "My time is not yet come!" he told his brothers, "Go without me." But then, he goes, secretly. In Jesus, something was in the making. With Jesus, something is always in the making.

