

The Congregational Church in South Glastonbury
Sermon – February 6, 2005
“Come, Wait, Listen”

Exodus 24: 12-18, Matthew 17: 1-9
Transfiguration Sunday/A
Rev. Lynne Dolan

There is Celtic tradition that may be familiar to some of you. The early Celtic people who lived in the British Isles believed that you could go to certain places to be closer to God. These places have long been called “thin places.” In this tradition, thin places are geographical locations scattered throughout Ireland and Scotland where a person experiences a very thin divide between the past, present and future.

In the Celtic tradition significant natural locations were designated as “holy trees, holy mountains, holy wells.” People were fascinated by shorelines where water met the land, by fjords and rivers, by wells where water bubbled up from deep below, by doorways which were meeting places from the outside and inside. These places spoke of meeting, of transitions from one state to another, “where the veil between this world and the next is so sheer you can almost step through.”

When Christianity spread into the British Isles, the Celtic Christians preserved aspects of this ancient folklore for revering thin places. They broadened the understanding to encompass not only geographical places, but also moments when the holy became visible to the eyes of the human spirit. The Rev. Agnes Norfleet says these “thin places, then took on a Christian meaning, where a person is somehow able to encounter a more ancient and eternal reality within the present time.” (see Rev. Dr. Agnes Norfleet, “A Psalm of Thin Places.”, September 19, 2004)

Today’s lessons speak of clouds and fire and bright lights. What happens is mystical and awe-filled and fear-filled. This Celtic tradition of thin places helps me to make sense of these ancient stories. I am not Moses. I am not Jesus. Therefore, I might think that God is not likely to summons me to a mountain or speak to me out of a bright cloud. Yet if I am willing, if I set my fears and rational thinking aside, I can find those thin places all around me.

Perhaps you have a thin place: some place that seems holy, the beach you’ve walked countless times, a place where God seems always close by and all’s right with the world when you are there. Perhaps it is a mountain top or by the shore of a silver lake where you felt as though you could reach out and touch the stars and felt closer to God, or a home church or a cemetery or even your own back yard or garden. These can all be thin places.

I imagine we have all experienced a thin place, but have not known what to call them. Perhaps you can recall a special place, a special event, or a special time when you felt closer to God. I have encountered such thin places several times in my life. I remember flying from Lima, Peru to the highland town of Cuzco. As we approached this little, Andean village I looked out the window of our small plane and saw the tips of the Andean mountains peeking up through the clouds. For someone who had spent much of her life at sea level, seeing the mountains peaking up through the clouds was astounding. Prior to this my thin place had been the rocky coastline of New Hampshire where I spent my childhood summers. Now, I could literally reach out and touch the mountaintops. The veil was thin; I was in the presence of God.

It happened again just days later. As part of our visit to Cuzco, we went to the ancient site of Machu Pichu. The veil got thinner and thinner as we traveled “switch-back” up the mountainside to the entrance of these ancient ruins. On a crisp, green terrace twenty-eight American, Christian sojourners and our guide gathered in a circle. Around that circle we passed a loaf of simply baked corn bread and a cup of liquid, rich and sweet, made from corn as well. Someone uttered words of consecration; yet silence would have sufficed. We needed only to pass the bread and drink from the cup to know our place in and among this ancient tradition. The veil was thin and we were in the presence of the Holy.

For many people a thin place is a location, however, not all thin places are actual places. “A thin place is anywhere our hearts are opened,” writes Marcus Borg. “They are places where the boundary between the two levels becomes very soft, porous, and permeable. Thin places are places where the veil momentarily lifts and we behold (the “ahaah of The Divine”) . . .all around us and in us.” (Borg’s *The Heart of Christianity*, 2003)

Thin places may be hard to define or explain, because they are part of that realm beyond reason, that realm of faith. Even if we can not explain it, we know it when we have arrived at such a thin place. If an experience stays with you, if it lingers longer than others, if you feel differently afterward, if you can not explain it but know you can’t dismiss it, then perhaps you have been in a thin place. Sometimes you don’t recognize it at the time, but looking back on it the feelings return, the memory of it elicits a particular response; you long to recapture that moment. Being in a thin place changes you. The thin place is a place of blessing. It is the place of grace. It is the place of love and acceptance, it is goodness. We want to be in this place. Our souls thrive in the thin places.

I don’t think we can survive without thin places or the guides who lead us there. The disciples had Jesus, Joshua had Moses. Sometimes we travel with others, sometimes alone. Be not afraid, the angels assure us. Be not afraid to journey to that thin place. God is just beyond your reach, right there, ready to embrace you. Be not afraid. Be not afraid.

Come, wait, listen. God calls us to these thin places. While we are there God quite often invites us to wait, to slow down and to listen. Moses teaches us that waiting is part of this blessed journey. He waited six days before he was called to that thin place in the presence of God. If we rush ahead too soon we might miss the holy. If we are impatient and do not linger long enough, we might miss the holy. Come, wait . . . be ready, be willing, be patient. Then listen . . .listen for what God would have you hear. Listen to the angels, listen to your friends, listen to your enemies, listen in the silence. Listen. Part of what will change you in the thin place is what you are willing to hear. Listen to how you respond, to what makes you angry, to what changes a long held attitude or opinion.

Sometimes we are impatient, even thoughtless and we don’t take the time to wait or listen. I remember such a moment last summer on our mission trip to Philadelphia. I had asked the director Ellyn, how the camp was funded each year. I assumed they must receive some sort of grants. Instead, she told that this was her mission to the community and she pays for the entire camp herself. Immediately I blurted out, (without thinking, before thinking) “Oh, we need to get you a grant.” I knew immediately from the look on her face I had said the wrong thing. WE didn’t need to do or get anything. WE needed to be gracious and thankful for the invitation to this thin place. WE needed to take our foot out of our mouth and be humble. My insensitivity led me to a thin place, where I was changed, where the veil was thin and where in Ellyn I could see the face of God. The quote on our shirts for the mission trip read “The soul can split the sky in two and let the face of God shine through,” by Edna St. Vincent

Millay. Ellyn taught me what that really meant. She was thoughtful, ever gracious in her response and I was blessed by her goodness.

Come...wait...listen. If you have made it through a crisis and felt stronger in spite of what happened. If you have been a reluctant traveler and been changed by the journey. If you have found yourself leaving a familiar place with a new sense of awe, you have been in a thin place. They are many, they are all around us.

Dorothy Bass is a historian of American religion who tries to bring the life of faith close to home in practical ways. She notes how often we ask one another, "How was your day?" I imagine all parents of school aged children have greeted their child with that question "so, how was your day?" or one very much like it. It is a kind of question that usually comes from someone who really cares, who really wants to hear more than the usual vague response of "not bad."

"Most days," Dorothy Bass remarks, "we probably forget to notice." Then, she tells the story of a mother she knows who has quite a different way of asking that question. As she tucks her children into bed each night, their teeth brushed and their hair still damp from the bathtub, she asks them this question: "Where did you meet God today?" and they tell her, one by one: a teacher helped me, there was a homeless person in the park, I saw a tree with lots of flowers in it. She tells them where she met God, too. Before the children drop off to sleep, the stuff of their day has become the substance of prayer. They enter a thin place and the presence of God is very near.

Today's stories are about more than bright lights and ancient mysteries. They are invitations to the thin places where we all may encounter the Holy. "Where did you meet God today?" It is in the thin places, those ordinary places where the veil is thin and God is just beyond our reach. It is neither mystical nor mysterious, it is right outside your door. May it be so. Amen