

THIN PLACES

Sermon for Epiphany Last C—Ex 34:29-35, Lk9:28-36

LPC, 2/10/13

I believe I have, in previous sermons, made reference to the Celtic idea of “Thin Places.” According to the traditional spirituality that developed in the British Isles, a Thin Place is where human experience and divine existence converge, and the presence of God seems especially clear.

Mountaintops are the archetypical thin places. Moses encountered God on a mountaintop. Jesus went up mountains to pray, and, as we hear in today’s Gospel lesson, was uniquely manifested to his disciples as diving upon a mountaintop. There is also the caricature of the pilgrim seeking the holy man at the top of a mountain.

I too have experienced mountains as holy places. This may be partially attributed to the thinner atmosphere playing tricks with the mind, of course, but there’s more to it than that. Being on top of a mountain, particularly on a sunny day, makes me feel light and free. This has been true all my life. There was a time when I lived in Charlottesville, Virginia, that just glimpsing the Blue Ridge Mountains on my way home from work would lift my heart, every time. It never failed.

Mountains are not the only sites that have evoked that sense of heaven’s proximity. In the high desert around the Great Salt Lake in Utah I had the same awareness. There was something about the depth of the silence, and the scrubbed purity of the landscape.

Thin places can also be places that have been hallowed by prayer. Often, when I enter an ancient oratory or church, I feel like I can almost hear the whispered prayers of a thousand years.

But the building doesn’t have to be old. There is a chapel on Mt. Ventoux in France that is located along the Santiago pilgrim trail but is dominated by a huge modern weather observatory nearby. The squat, homely windowless chapel was built in the 1930’s and looks like a bunker or a stone work shed. What I loved about it was although there was a sign prohibiting the leaving of personal articles, the altar was covered with artifacts: slips of paper with prayers and poems, books, scarves, messages, flowers. For whatever reason, visitors had been compelled to make offerings of themselves or on behalf of loved ones. Here was tangible evidence of a place hallowed by prayer. For me, this was a thin place.

Thin places are usually not crowded, although when I visited the Sistine Chapel and clapped eyes on Michelangelo’s frescoes, I felt like time stopped, even though the place was thronged with tourists. Interestingly, I don’t remember anyone speaking above a whisper. Everyone seemed to understand instinctively that reverence was called for, no matter what their religion, or lack thereof.

Despite the term, thin places don't have to be places. There have been times listening to music, for example, where I have sensed "thinness," or closeness to God. Times of surpassing happiness can be thin places too. The day my younger son was married was one of the happiest of my life. Heaven has never seemed closer to me than on that day.

I hope my telling of thin places has evoked something to which you can relate. Furthermore, I hope your own experiences of thin places gives you a frame of reference from which to understand today's lessons from Exodus and Luke about Moses and Jesus and their mountaintop experiences.

One thing that was clearly true for both Moses and Jesus was that they had to come down the mountain again. And when they did there was work for them to do. Hard work. Moses had to provide spiritual, judiciary and practical guidance for an entire nation. Jesus had to set his face toward Jerusalem, knowing that his life was in danger. In the meantime there were the frustrations of dealing with lack of faith on the one hand, and on the other, the short-sightedness of folks who expected Jesus to stick to faith healings instead of saving the world.

But in both instances, there is a sense that the thin place represents reality, not, as one might suppose, an escape from reality. Moses wasn't taken out of himself in his thin place, he became more truly himself. It's in God's presence that the veil comes off. It's in God's presence that Moses is most genuinely himself. Jesus' true status as a heavenly being is manifest to the disciples in one brilliant and unmistakable moment. In other words, for Moses, for Jesus, and for the disciples, the thin places are not illusions or hallucinations. They are glimpses of what is really, ultimately real.

The realness of the thin place does not mean that life as usual is illusory. Life as we know it with its hard work and frustrations is real too. But in the thin places we see a fuller, more complete reality. We get glimpses into heaven, which is always there, but in this life, usually veiled from sight.

God, in God's mercy, gives glimpses of heaven in those fleeting moments when our senses are heightened, or we feel fully, ridiculously happy, or our spirits unaccountably lift. We speak of "losing ourselves" in such moments, but in fact it is in these moments that we are most truly ourselves. This is when we see face to face instead of through a glass darkly. The moments pass quickly for us in this existence, but we look forward to when the thin places are more substantial, or perhaps to when our vision is developed enough to see the closeness of God on a regular basis.

Our fleeting experience of thin places does not mean they are not real. God is real, and God is near. When we know that to be true, then is our vision most clear.