

“Walking in a ‘Thin’ Place”  
 1 Kings 19:4-13  
 May 3, 2015 Scottish Reformation Sunday  
 W. Glenn Doak, Preaching

I first ran across the idea of a ‘thin’ place when Ginny and I visited the Isle of Iona off the west coast of Scotland. You drive by Glasgow and Loch Lomond and keep bearing west and eventually drive into the lovely seaside village of Oban. If you get there in time for the setting sun on a cloudless day as we did you will see the miracle of the sun’s last rays of the day bouncing off the Firth of Lorn, a horseshoe bay, and giving all of the cottages up the hill a golden glow. What Oban is known most for at least among those seeking holy ground is the ferry boat taking pilgrims, tourists and spiritual seekers to the isle of Iona. Iona is part of the Outer Hebrides. Legend says that over 50 Scottish kings including Duncan and MacBeth, Ireland and Norway are buried in this sacred ground. Today the tombs have disappeared from a thousand plus years of wind and storm all that remains is a grassy patch of ground that holds their dust.

There are lots of ‘thin’ places on this earth it is not clear who first uttered the term but they almost certainly spoke with an Irish brogue. The ancient Celts used the term to describe the mesmerizing places like the wind-swept isle of Iona or the rocky peaks of Croagh Patrick. Heaven and earth, the Celts saying goes, are only three feet apart, but in thin places that distance is even shorter. Thin places are not necessarily tranquil places, or a fun place, or even a beautiful place, though they may be all of those things. Disney World is not a thin place. Nor is Cancun. Thin places relax us on the one hand but they also transform us—or unmask us.

Thin places are often sacred places—St. Peter’s Basilica in Vatican City where one can connect with the grave of St. Peter under the great altar, the altar set with communion ware, the dome that covers the table and grave and the heavens above. It is one vertical connection between earth and heaven/church and kingdom/the vicar of Christ on earth with the heavenly Christ. The Blue Mosque in Istanbul or temple Mount in Jerusalem where the Abraham/Isaac encounter occurred and later Solomon built the Jerusalem Temple and now stands the Dome of the Rock Mosque.

Mircea Eliade wrote in *The Sacred and the Profane*, that “Some parts of space are qualitatively different from others.” An Apache proverb takes it a step further: “Wisdom sits in places.”

One does not have to go to a Cathedral to find a thin place. The poet Kathleen Raine wrote,  
*Yet I have glimpsed the bright mountain behind the mountain,  
 Knowledge under the leaves, tasted the bitter berries red,  
 Drunk cold water and clear from an inexhaustible hidden fountain.*

Long before the birth of Christ Iona was a center of Druid worship. For as long as humans have known of this place it has spoken to us of the things of the spirit. Fiona Macleod wrote, “In this little island was lit a lamp whose flame lighted pagan Europe from the Saxon in his fen to the swarthy folk who came by Greek waters to trade the Orient. Here learning and faith had their tranquil home. From age to age lowly hearts have never ceased to bring their burden here. Iona

herself has given us for remembrance a fount of youth more wonderful than that which lies under her own boulders or Dun-I. And here hope awaits, To tell the story of Iona is to go back to God and to end in God.” (St. Columba of Iona, Lucy Menzies, 1974, pg. 24) She also shared the story of a visitor to Iona talking to a highland gardener asking, “Where have you been?” The visitor told him Iona. “Ay! Iona is a very thin place.” When asked what he meant he replied, “There is not much between Iona and the Lord.” (IBID, footnote, pg. 24)

St. Columba the Irish monk arrived at Iona in 563 with twelve disciples. They established a small monastic community. It was a place where one would study, pray, and work together; and when strong enough, go out 2 by 2 to the mission field in Scotland and convert souls for Christ. When exhausted they would return to the monastic community to regain their spirit and their strength.

Columba knew that success lay in convincing the King of the Picts. So he and two others made the wild journey from Iona to the court of Brude at Inverness. “So wild a region, with its dark, brooding mountains and primeval forest, could be traversed only on foot, and the whole adventure must have involved all the ‘perils of water, perils of robbers, perils by the heathen, perils in the wilderness’ known to the Apostles of old. They reached their destination without hurt, but Brude refused them admittance. At the sign of the Cross, however, legend has it, the bolted gates flew open and the awestruck king capitulated.” Brude was won by the message of Columba and embraced Christianity. As one wrote, “Thus did the powerful King of the Picts, the race which had withstood the legions of Rome, succumb to three soldiers of Christ.”

His Celtic Church would last for two hundred years. Its great strength lay in this, “That it linked sacrament with service, altar with hearth, worship with work.” Its best work was done as a missionary church; later, as civilization advanced, and the need of the times tended toward an organized religion, it was found lacking, and inevitably went down before the disciplined forces of Rome.

But Iona would continue to call people forth. Its history continued to be that of a place where men and women would go for contemplation and to listen to the voice of God. The Vikings came in the 8th century, the Benedictines came in the 12th Century, and the Reformation had an impact in the 16th Century.

What is a ‘thin’ place? It is a place of energy. A place where the veil between heaven and earth is thin. A place where one can walk in two worlds—the worlds are fused together, knitted loosely. We can feel that we are close to something beyond mystery but we cannot see it. We know another world exists just beyond what we can feel and touch ... you may call it heaven or paradise or the unknown. Whatever you perceive it to be, a thin place is a place where connection to that other world seems effortless and signs of its existence are almost palpable.

Truth abides in thin places; naked, raw, hard to face truth. Yet the comfort, safety and strength to face that truth also abides there. Thin places captivate our imagination, yet diminishes our existence because we become very small, yet we connect and become part of something much larger.

Barbara Brown Taylor writes, “I’ve known thin places all my life, but I didn’t have a language for them until I took a trip to Ireland. Thin places are transparent places or moments, set apart by the quality of the sunlight, or the shadows, or the silence, or the sounds. Sometimes I know that I am in a thin place because it feels like the floor just dropped two or three levels beneath my feet and set me down in a deeper place. They can open up almost anywhere but the most reliable places are on a farm near running water or near sleepy animals.

“She says, you don’t have to go on a pilgrim to a sacred place. One of the thinnest places I’ve been lately was in line at the Clarksville, GA post office. There was this red-headed child ahead of me, waiting for her grandmother to finish buying stamps. I could see she was bored, so I smiled at her. That made her bold enough to pick up my right hand and turn it over in both of hers, looking hard at all the dings and freckles on both sides. ‘How’d you get that hurt?’ she asked, touching an old puncture wound near my thumb. I told her I had hurt it on a piece of chicken wire. Without saying another word she leaned over and kissed the hurt place. Then she found another hurt place to kiss, and another. I thought I’d fall straight through that thin place.” (an interview in *Flycatcher Journal*, April 2012)

Now back to our reading from 1 Kings. Elijah the prophet of God has just had his greatest day—a victory over the 450 prophets of Baal. That event alone made him a legend in his own time. Legends however, can have a very short shelf life as Queen Jezebel was not amused that all of her prophets were dead and she threatened Elijah’s life.

The prophet’s panic was symbolized by his bolting for the desert and ultimately hiding out in a cave. It wasn’t any old cave it was a cave on Mount Horeb, the mountain of God. He fled to what I would call a ‘thin’ place . . . a place where heaven and earth almost meet. A place one is more likely to encounter the holy.

After days of brooding in the cave God became angry with Elijah and ordered Elijah out of his cave. “Go stand at the entrance looking down the mountain.” A great and mighty wind came up the mountain and broke the rocks into pieces . . . but the Lord was not in the wind; after the wind, an earthquake, then a fire, but the Lord was not in the earthquake or the fire. “. . . and after the fire a sound of sheer silence.”

What do you hear in that story? The Lord said to him “What are you doing on this mountain, after you have heard my voice? Go down there and do something to help the people of the world.” The Lord said, “Go down the mountain and help the people.” The people of Nepal have just suffered a devastating earthquake what are we going to do about it? The mountains surrounding the little country is thought by some to be a “thin” place where people go for comfort and solace and adventure. The Presbyterian Disaster Relief Fund, part of our Easter One Great Hour of Sharing Offering, is already sending help, we can too.

Also the idea lingers with me that Elijah found the Word of God, not in the busy hum of human events, not in noise or clatter, but in the sound of sheer silence. Too many of us go off another way and miss the simple presence. Each of us comes equipped naturally with a small receptor for the sound of sheer silence. Jesus went off alone, usually to the hills to talk to God. We become so attuned to the sounds all around us in this fast-paced and hectic life, and we do not often enough take time to listen to the voice of God.

A friend of mine would take a full day off and do nothing. He called it his “Day to think.” He later told me that almost every creative idea he ever had originated in one of those days. A Think Day! Bill Gates, now and then, takes “A Think Week.” I invite you to reflect on ‘thin places’ in your own life. Where is a place that refreshes your spirit and opens the door to the threshold of the sacred? You too can return to this place in your imagination and once again experience God’s Presence and receive the peace of this Celtic blessing.

*There is the bay—where the little, sea-tossed coracle drove ashore.  
There is the hill—the hill of Angels—where heavenly visitants shone before him.  
There is the sound—across which the people of Mull heard vespers  
sung by hooded monks—heard the Lord’s song sung in a strange land.*

*There is the narrow strip of water across which holy people come  
to take counsel, sinners to do penance, kings to be crowned.  
The little island speaks with a quiet insistence of its past—  
for was it not at once the fountain and the fortress of the faith,  
at once the center of Celtic learning and of Christian charity?  
(Unknown)*