

Bold in Vision

Sermon 101 | Greystone Baptist Church | May 23, 2021

Acts 2:1-21

There's an old Celtic saying that states, "Heaven and earth are only three feet apart, and in the thin places, that distance is even shorter."¹ We are not really sure if that phrase, *thin places*, existed before the Celts used it to describe places like Iona, where the land itself sings the praise of God reminding us of Jesus saying, "If they keep quiet, even the rocks will cry out." (Luke 19:40) We aren't sure where the term originated, but for centuries (at least) people of all kinds of faith, and even some with no faith at all, have used the term to describe those mysterious places where heaven and earth seem a little closer than usual, places where God doesn't seem so distant and out of reach, places where we are taken aback by a supernatural awareness of our humanity and God's divinity.

Mindful travelers have noted that thin places do not always happen to be religious places. One might think the medieval cathedrals of Europe, the Vatican City, or perhaps even the local church Sanctuary would be the thinnest places of all; and sometimes they can be! But sometimes the assumed thin-ness of such places can be obscured by difficult histories, prejudiced doctrines, and painful memories locked away in the past. Sometimes once-thin places grow thick with the best of human intentions that fell a bit short of faith when God started *doing a new thing*, as the prophet Isaiah would say.

So how does one go about finding a thin place?

Travel columnist, Eric Weiner, who writes for the *New York Times* has some tips that might help us out a bit. For starters, he says, "You don't plan a trip to a thin place; you stumble upon one. But there are steps you can take to increase the odds of an encounter with thinness. For starters," he continues, "have no expectations. Nothing gets in the way of a genuine experience more than expectations...And don't count on guidebooks – or even friends – to pinpoint your thin places. To some extent, thinness, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. Or, to put it another way: One person's thin place is another's thick one."²

I wonder how many people walked past the bush in the desert before Moses saw it lit up in flames, approached it carefully, and found that it was indeed holy ground? A thin place in the wilderness.

I wonder how many pilgrims walked the dusty paths between Egypt and Canaan, before the pillars of cloud and fire appeared, displaying the nearness of God, guiding and directing the journey from captivity to freedom?

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/11/travel/thin-places-where-we-are-jolted-out-of-old-ways-of-seeing-the-world.html>

² *Ibid.*

I wonder how many ordinary travelers took refuge in the cave on Mount Horeb waiting for God to pass in the wind, a quaking of the earth, or a showy display of fire... just like Elijah did.

These are the ways God was known to draw near to God's people, through pillars of cloud, dramatic beams of fire and smoke, and if not that, then in the still small silence that followed. Sometimes these scenes unfolded where one might expect: in the tabernacle, atop the Arc of the Covenant or later in the Jerusalem Temple. But other times God showed up in the wilderness catching a prophet, or God's beloved people, on the run and unaware. It seems the only thing predictable about these biblical *thin spaces* is that they are utterly unpredictable.

Take today's reading, for example. The disciples are all gathered together in the same room. We are to assume they are simply following orders as Jesus had instructed them to stay in Jerusalem until they were, "clothed with power from on high" (Luke 24:49). We might imagine them in this room, much like Elijah on Horeb, waiting on God to show up. Faithful disciples, followers of Jesus, following every instruction, in search of a *thin place*. A place where God would draw near, an experience of Heaven touching Earth even if only for a moment.

This time, God does not disappoint. The guidebook was right! On this Pentecost day, 50 days since the Passover, perhaps just as the disciples were getting tired of waiting, a violent wind blows open the doors, filling the entire house where they were sitting. Then divided tongues, as of fire, appeared and rested on each of them.

This is about as *thin* as it gets, folks: wind filling the room, fire resting on each person, and then the disciples start participating in the theophany as the visibly evident presence of God starts pouring out of their own mouths.

The space between heaven and earth seems to have vanished completely as the Holy Spirit is now inside the lungs, the bodies, the breath, the voices of the disciples!

In the past when God showed up in wind or in fire it was usually to deliver a specific message, like with Moses and the bush. There God gave Moses a message that he was to liberate the people from Egyptian captivity. When God passes by the cave where Elijah waits, God's message sends him back to his people, reminding Elijah that he cannot abandon his vocation. Again with Elijah, God takes him up to heaven in a chariot of fire!

When the nearness of God doesn't deliver a message, the wind and fire signify a dwelling place for God. Think about the pillars of cloud and fire that led the Israelites through the wilderness and reminded them of God's constant presence with them. Or the inextinguishable fire that burned over the altar of the Tabernacle as instructed in the book of Leviticus, representing the eternal presence of God there, in that most holy place.

These were *thin places*, holy places, places where God came near, places where Heaven and Earth didn't seem so far apart.

Here, though, at Pentecost, it seems the wind that filled the room and the fire that lit atop the disciples bears a bold new vision for the disciples. Is this the “clothing of power from on high” that they were waiting for? If so, they are not to wait in Jerusalem any longer, they are to go, and speak the good news, sharing the Gospel with the wind of the Spirit filling their lungs and the fire of the heaven igniting their speech.

God is now in the lungs, in mouths, in the bodies of the disciples who will carry the Gospel of Jesus Christ within them wherever they go.

This is just the beginning of the story of Christ’s church. Here, in this room that became a *thin place*.

“Travel to thin places does not [always] lead us to anything as grandiose as a ‘spiritual breakthrough,’” [like the rushing wind of the Holy Spirit breaking down doors, filling rooms, and igniting fiery tongues of disciples], the *New York Times* contributor reminds us, “but it does disorient. It confuses. We lose our bearings, and find new ones. Or not. Either way, we are jolted out of old ways of seeing the world.”³ And therein lies our transformation.

After the disciples’ had their doors blown open (literally speaking) by the Holy Spirit, they allowed themselves the freedom to move as the Spirit was leading them. They spoke in languages they didn’t know they knew and the residents of Jerusalem began to hear in their native tongues.

Sure, it was a festival day in Jerusalem, so there were probably travelers and pilgrims from all over who were there as well, but the text says that there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven *living* in Jerusalem. Those who first heard and understood had been there, all along, just outside the door where the disciples were gathered. They just had a language barrier.

It makes me wonder who might be right outside our doors, just waiting on a little divine translation to occur so that the thin-ness of that closed room could be expanded and shared **with** those waiting outside.

And what kind of *thin place* experience might we need in order to discover the gifts to transcend those differences?

The possibilities are endless, really, once we start thinking about all of our neighbors, all who live in our city who speak different languages. Languages like Swahili and French, Spanish and Polish. Languages like golf and tennis, bridge and skip-bo. Languages like Tik Tok and Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. Languages like podcasts and Sunday school curriculum. Languages **like** theology pub and recovery groups, mission work and music class, dance and visual art, earth care and car care, there are so many languages and so

³ *Ibid.*

many people who could benefit from a *thin space* brought near to them *in their native tongue*.

Wouldn't it be a glorious time for God to use us in such a way as the disciples were used that day?

Can't we, too, find a *thin place* and allow the Holy Spirit to disorient and reorient us to a new and bold vision today?

How can we find it? How can we get there? How can we now go to the thinnest of places and tell God that we are ready, ready to be transformed, to be used, to be empowered with the languages of our neighbors so that we might live the Gospel in a way that is meaningful and relevant to everybody we meet?

The *New York Times* says that "The divine supposedly transcends time and space, yet we seek it in very specific places and at very specific times." (*maybe that's been Sunday mornings, 7509 Lead Mine Road, etc.*) But, "If God is everywhere and 'everywhen,' as the Australian aboriginals put it so wonderfully, then why are some places thin and others not? Why isn't the whole world *thin*?

Maybe it is but we're too thick to recognize it.