

Sermon – Thin Places

Scripture– Exodus 24:12-18, Matthew 17:1-9

Transfiguration Sunday, February 19, 2023

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On this Transfiguration Sunday, our first scripture reading found in Exodus 24:12-18, recalls Moses coming into God's presence on the cloud filled mountain top of Mount Sinai before leading the Hebrews on a 40- year sojourn through the wilderness to the Promised Land. As the church moves into Lent, the 40 days commemorating the number of years the Israelites journeyed and the number of days Christ spent in the wilderness, we are offered one more glimpse of the glory and majesty of God. Hear now God's Holy word.

12 The Lord said to Moses, "Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction." 13 So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. 14 To the elders he had said, "Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them." 15 Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. 16 The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the seventh day God called to Moses out of the cloud. 17 Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. 18 Moses entered the cloud and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights. Amen.

Our second scripture reading is Matthew 17:1-9. On this last Sunday before Lent when the church begins the journey toward the cross and remembers Jesus' suffering and death, the story of the transfiguration is a pledge of God's commitment to resurrection. The presence of Moses and Elijah on another cloud filled mountain top connects Jesus with a long history –the rich legacy of God's deliverance from Egypt, the giving of the law at Sinai, and of God's sending prophets to call people to grace. Hear now God's Holy word.

1 Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and his brother John and led them up a high mountain, by themselves. 2 And Jesus was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white. 3 Suddenly there appeared to them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus. 4 Then Peter said to Jesus, "Lord, it is good for us to be here; if you wish, I will make three dwellings here, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah." 5 While he was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" 6 When the disciples heard this, they fell to the ground and were overcome by fear. 7 But Jesus came and touched them, saying, "Get up and do not be afraid." 8 And when they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus himself alone. 9 As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus ordered them, "Tell no one about the vision until after the Son of Man has been raised from the dead." Amen.

The title of the sermon: *Thin Places*

The text: While Jesus was still speaking, suddenly a bright cloud overshadowed them, and from the cloud a voice said, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" Matthew 17:5

Let us pray: Holy and loving God, thank you for the thin places where heaven and earth come together, and we meet you in new and surprising ways. And now, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

Thin places are spaces where heaven and earth nearly touch; where the distance between the transcendent and the commonplace is exceptionally narrow, offering a glimpse of the Divine. Thin places are moments and locations where our sense of the Sacred is more manifest.

Some thin places have been well-known to seekers for centuries and have become places of pilgrimage, such as the Isle of Iona in Scotland. *Other thin places are particular to our own experience of God and serve as touchstones as we seek to encounter the Divine. For pilgrims in search of Sacred Encounter, thin places serve as direct portals to the Divine, offering moments and locations in which we can more readily dwell in the presence of God and cultivate the transformation we desire,* according to Lacy Clark Ellman, Spiritual Director and Adjunct Faculty at The Seattle School of Theology and Psychology.

A phrase used for millennia, the term “thin place” comes from the mystical world of Celtic spirituality and the Celtic Christians, who were deeply connected to the natural world and considered every aspect of life to be infused with the presence of the Divine, even or perhaps especially the ordinary elements of everyday life.

Each of us encounters thin places along our life journeys, spaces and experiences that transform us, deepen our faith, and strengthen us for the tasks and responsibilities to which we are called.

This past August Peter and I journeyed to Bermuda, a place I had wanted to visit for many years. Two weeks before our departure, Presbyterian minister and author, Frederick Buechner died at the age of 96 which inspired me to re-read his memoir The Eyes of the Heart during our sojourn. In his memoir, Buechner invites his deceased grandmother into the sacred space of their library, and the two of them reminisce and contemplate life together. As we were approaching the year anniversary of my mom’s death, I delighted in this imagery since she and I have had many conversations reminiscing together in the sacred space of our library since her passing.

As I read Buechner’s memoir overlooking the shores of Bermuda, my fascination with the amazing and everchanging maritime cloud formations grew, awakening a sense of the Sacred and a mindfulness of the splendor and wonder of God’s presence in the beauty of ordinary clouds.

I also learned fortuitously that Bermuda was a “thin place” for Frederick Bueckner after purchasing his paperback The Sacred Journey in a local bookstore. When Bueckner was 10 years old, his mother brought him and his younger brother James to Bermuda for a respite and time of healing following the tragic suicide of their father. In Bermuda surrounded by water and precipitous clouds, Bueckner found a sense of being rooted and a place of belonging. In retrospect, it was here that faith began to form within him. Faith is the assurance of things

hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Faith is giving thanks for all God's blessings, known and unknown, remembered and forgotten.

In this way, Bueckner compares faith to the dream of Caliban in William Shakespeare's play The Tempest: Faith is like the dream in which the clouds open to show such riches ready to drop upon us that when we wake into reality, we cry to dream again. Faith is the assurance that the best and holiest dream is true after all.

In Shakespeare's words:

Be not afeard; the isle is full of noises,
Sounds, and sweet airs,
that give delight and hurt not.

Certainly Peter, James, and John's experience on the mountaintop with Jesus when they witnessed the cloud and transfiguration of Christ was a "thin place" for each of them. It not only changed their lives, the memory of this dream-like experience sustained them to be true to the mission long after Christ's death and resurrection, when they faced their own Via Dolorosa.

The story of Jesus' transfiguration has many parallels with the story of Moses on Mount Sinai. Both are encounters with God on a cloud-covered mountain. In both, God's voice is heard from within the covering cloud. Jesus' face shines like the sun as Moses' did on his descent. Perhaps most poignantly, in both, being in the presence of God is not a casual, but an awesome and unsettling experience. In this "thin place," the presence of the Divine is a powerful reminder of their vulnerability, mortality, and God's grace.

On this Transfiguration Sunday before the beginning of Lent, when the church prepares for the journey of Jesus' suffering and death, we are offered one more glimpse of the glory and majesty of God as Christ's face shines like the sun. The transfigured Jesus who is stunning in majesty is the same Jesus who walks down that mountain through the Via Dolorosa, the way of sorrow. There lies the beautiful irony of the One in whom suffering and glory, darkness and light, death and life belong together.

Let us understand the thin place of the transfiguration as a dreamlike foreshadowing, a vivid, up close, and personal confirmation of the Sustaining God who walks with us through the dark and silent valleys we travel and the Resurrection God who brings life out of death.

When darkness surrounds us, when love evades us, and when God is silent, may the experience of the thin places etched in our memories and the glimpse of the mystery of our redemption sustain and inspire us to shine the love of our Transfigured Redeemer, Amen.