

August 6, 2017

The Transfiguration

Exodus 34:29-35; 2 Peter 1:13-21; Luke 9:28-36; Psalm 99

“Meeting God in Thin Places”

In the name of God who creates life,

In the name of the Savior who loves life,

In the name of the Spirit who is the fire of life.

Amen

When I was a teenager, during and just after high school, I was in a period of spiritual rebellion. I don't think any one thing led to this, it was likely many things combined with good old fashioned immaturity. I wanted nothing to do with religion, God, church or anything remotely spiritual. Despite my rebellious ways family and friends – almost all of them were devout Christians – didn't give up on me; and very fortunately neither did God.

I had just begun taking classes at the local Indiana University campus; while walking to class one day I passed by a member of the Gideon's who was handing out pocket sized New Testaments. Now, for some reason, despite all my thumbing my nose at God, I took the New Testament and put it in my back pack. Several weeks went by before I found it and took it out, setting it on the

bedside table. One night, and I remember it clear as though it happened minutes ago, I was overcome with the sense that I should start reading it. The Gospels, Acts, Paul's Letters were not foreign to me as I was exposed to it all growing up in the Church and attending Sunday school; what was foreign to me was the encounter, but I'm getting ahead of myself.

I began reading...and reading...and reading. I did not sleep until I had read it all. Good thing I was young then, I couldn't do that kind of all nighter now. When I finished, I remember the prayer that I put up...just two words "I'm sorry"

A few days later, a weekday, I stopped by Saint Andrew's, the church I grew up going to and once served as an acolyte. I knew I could go into the Sanctuary unnoticed, at this point my pride was keeping me from telling anyone what had happened, and I knelt tried to add to the prayer from just a few days earlier.

Before the prayer even took form, something happened. The sense of an embrace – the most comforting, warm, accepting, loving embrace – overtook me. The second part of my prayer was not anything I could add, but it was the assurance that God heard it, accepted it and me, and the encounter, once foreign to me, was now so very real.

I had my first experience with a thin place! A point where God's glory made direct connection with my soul.

Thin place is a term we hear a lot now, especially in Celtic spirituality, but what is a "thin place"? I once heard it described as

a place where the veil between heaven and earth, between the Holy and the creation is thinner than in other places. In Iona, a thin place as my fellow pilgrims can attest to, it is said that heaven is only three feet above the tallest person on the island...Wes and I seemed to be closest to heaven for a week. But how can that be if the entirety of creation is filled with God's glory? And what causes a place to be thick? Or do we cause the thickness?

In a New York Times article *Where Heaven and Earth Come Closer* the author, Eric Weiner, remarks in his thoughts on thin places that in these places "we are jolted out of old ways of seeing the world". I think this is a good starting point to understand moments of gossamer like thinness between God and us.

Thin places are not limited to specific locations though, thin places may be found in space, people and even time; God's glory fills the entire world and so too the opportunities for an encounter with the Divine.

In today's Scripture, the image of Moses coming down from Mount Sinai, his face aglow from his encounter with God, stands out in my mind's eye as so very vivid. Others saw it, Moses seemed oblivious to it. The physical change in Moses from the encounter had a profound effect on those around him.

Many years ago, there was a movement quite popular in the Church, the Cursillo Movement. Participants, called Cursillistas, would attend a weekend retreat; I did mine at Ancilla Domini in Northern Indiana. It's hard to say what you do during your retreat, each Cursillista experienced it differently. Following the retreat,

you would continue meeting in your local Ultreya group. I recall when I came back from my retreat a friend, who did not know what I had gone through, commented “you look different, did something happen” – Why yes it did, I thought, I had an encounter with God! Turns out, our local group, referred to this as “The Cursillo Glow”.

For me this place – the Cursillo retreat –the time –the people – and the Holy Spirit made for a moment, much like Moses’, where the imprint of the encounter with God became evident. My second time of being jolted out of old ways of seeing the world! The encounter I had, much like Moses, set the tone for the relationship with God that evolves over time and is strengthened in other thin places and moments.

However, it doesn’t take a retreat, a trip to Iona, or time on top of Mount Sinai. It does take work on our part. We must make the effort, clear the time and get rid of the clutter and distractions so we can focus on God’s presence. I know it happens as I’ve seen that glow on the face of others following a moving hymn, an intense prayer, when serving the hungry or the homeless. John Neafsey, in his book *A Sacred Voice is Calling*, writes that the most important place we can hear God’s voice is in the cry of the poor. Eventually we must go where God is; in the struggle for justice, among the marginalized, fighting for the poor and upholding the weak. That glow is when God’s love is shining through us. It is when we are transfigured by God’s intense and deep love for us.

Now let's go back to the idea of thickness. In our Gospel reading we hear of the second of three critical moments from Jesus' time with us – the first being his Baptism in the Jordan and the third his resurrection, the end that truly marks a beginning. As the disciples witness Christ's transfiguration, where the Jesus they have known up to that moment, the humanity of Jesus, is opened to reveal the divine, Holy, loving light of God; they too are transfigured. Ah, but not without a stumble...or well a snooze... These devout followers of Christ are overcome by sleep at this critical moment. They are in the ultimate of thin places, yet still thickness sets in.

As we get close to these thin places to encounter God, to form our relationship with Jesus the Son, to open our hearts to our sustainer and comforter the Holy Spirit thickness may set in and, like the disciples, a sleep may overcome our spirit. A sort of spiritual lethargy can keep us from working through our doubts and questions. The ease of our life can be a barrier to considering and responding to the challenging and disturbing demands of a follower of Christ. In our sleep, we don't hear God's call to us and even our sorrow can stop us from seeing the glory of God.

But we must keep moving and chasing these thin places where God's glory shines through us and brings the love of Christ into the world. Kierkegaard once wrote "life is best understood backward and experienced forward". We understand where we have been with God, our moments of closeness and our moments we turned away or fell asleep. God always calls us to new experiences with the Holy, to a relationship that grows in intimacy, and to those times where God's light beams from us like Moses

coming down from the mountain. In Paul's second letter to the Corinthians we are given this charge "We all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree to another; for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit."

Seek out those thin places – where you are surrounded by God's glory found in creation, and be transfigured!

Seek out those thin times – moments in the day where the clutter can be swept away to rest a moment with Christ, and be transfigured!

Seek out others as they come down from the mountain aglow – for God's Spirit shining in them will be a blessing to you, and you will be transfigured!

When we are transfigured through our encounters with God, God's glory shines through us and we become the light of Christ in thick darkness of the world.

May we pray – Lord, keep us always alert and awake to you, to your word, your action, and your presence. God, we want to see your glory. Amen

