

“Thin Places”

John 1:1-14

Many of you know that my husband Danny and I were privileged to travel to Scotland this past summer. One of the most beautiful places that we went was the island of Iona. I was particularly excited about our time there, not only because it is known as the "Cradle of Christianity" in Scotland but because it is often described as a THIN PLACE. That is, a place where Heaven is so close to earth that the two almost meet.

Everyone here probably has their own thin place. Perhaps it is on the pier at the beach as the white foam of the ocean rushes to the shore or perhaps it is in the mountains where the clouds are so close to the tops of the trees that it is hard to see where one ends and the other begins. Your thin place may be around the table that is filled with loved ones or sitting in the pew of your church listening to the choir deliver God's message in music. I believe that ANYWHERE we feel the presence of God more vividly and understand the message of His love and grace more fully can be our own private thin place.

The more I have considered this beautiful concept, the more I have been thinking that Christmas Eve is a thin place. Heaven meets earth and past meets present and we are all connected in the timeless, limitless love of God. You see, for some of us, Christmas Eve may be so thin that we are transported back in time to Christmases past and the way life used to be.

Christmas Eve make invoke joyful memories of the stockings full of walnuts and the oranges stuck with cloves. Can you almost smell the pine boughs that mother decorated the mantle with? We may remember the excitement we tried to contain as we

lie in our beds waiting for Dad to tell us that we can FINALLY get up and see what Santa has left us. Or perhaps our memories are more mature and we can just see the twinkle in the eye of a child who peers into the living room on Christmas morn or we recall watching with pride the daughter who got to be Mary in the church pageant one year.

For some of us, being in the thin place of Christmas past is a difficult time. Perhaps our memories are of disappointing Christmases like the year that our daughter Katie got chicken pox on Christmas Eve and has since declared “fourth grade to be the worst Christmas ever!” Or maybe for you there is that memory of the death of a loved one that will always be associated with Christmas as you remember the first time of dealing with the empty chair or the stocking that remained folded.

That is when the hope that being in the thin place of the present can bring us God’s amazing comfort. John tells us that the Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. God’s love for us literally met us on the earth and His whole universe became a thin place. John’s report of the birth of Christ is to me the most beautiful account because, while Luke places Jesus in the manger, John places him in the world where we need him most. And he does not just come to the world but he DWELLS here with us. In fact, the term dwelt or lived would be more accurately translated as “pitched a tent”.

The Word became flesh and pitched a tent among us. God made the passage between Heaven and Earth so thin that he was willing to pitch a tent and live right in the dirt with us – right in the middle of our existence. Rolling up his sleeves and getting in the mud and dust and rocks of our lives.

By the birth of God as a man the thin place of Christmas Eve becomes almost completely transparent. God became a baby so that he could grow up and experience all

of the growing pains that you and I have experienced. The Word became flesh so that when you are grieving over the loss of a loved one, God can say to you, "I remember, my child, how I wept when my dear friend Lazarus died." God became a man so that when you are pulled in so many directions and can't make a decision, he can remind you, "Yes, my love, I remember the struggle I faced in the garden when I said not my will but yours be done." The Divine became Human so that when you are feeling disappointed because someone has let you down, the once human God can say, "Oh, the pain that I felt when Judas betrayed me." Tonight, Christmas Eve is a thin place because **by** God dwelling among us, this sanctuary becomes our Bethlehem and we can lay our hopes and fears at the foot of the manger that holds a human baby who is just like us.

But the MOST amazing thing about Christmas Eve is how it is a thin place between now and the future. I really believe that, as Christians, we cannot really see the manger unless it stands beneath the shadow of the cross. The birth of the baby IS miraculous but the miracle is not complete until the empty cross of resurrection reminds us of our Eternal life. And that promise is that Jesus will come again. And because of the manger of Bethlehem and the cross of Calvary, we are assured that God will fulfill this promise too.

There is a version of the beautiful song "O Holy Night" that contains a verse that is not often heard in our churches. I wanted to share it because it describes this future thin place so well. "O day of joy when in eternal splendor He shall return in His glory to reign. When every tongue due praise to Him shall render, His power and might to all nations proclaim. A thrill of hope the longing heart rejoices for soon shall dawn that glad eternal morn. Fall on your knees, O hear the angel voices. O night divine!" Surely on

this day as no other, we are reminded that God's love for us makes the space between this life and eternal life a thin place.

Coming to the table of the Lord is another thin place for me because it TOO emphasizes that God's love cannot be contained in time or space. We come to the table to remember the past love of God when Jesus gave the gift of this meal and then later the gift of his body and blood so that our sins could be forgiven. The night that Jesus struggled between his will and the will of the Father becomes vividly clear to us and covers us with awe that he CHOSE to sacrifice life's loveliness for everyone here.

The table is also a gift in the present as we celebrate this meal as a COMMUNITY. We know that God did not intend for his children to live solitary lives so He made us members of the one body of Christ and therefore members of one another. As one body, we become a living witness of God's immense desire to bring all peoples and nations together as the one family of God. We know that we have received a special blessing by this and that we are loved as brothers and sisters of Christ as we receive our spiritual nourishment together. What a joy to experience the current hospitality of God at his feast of love.

But most of all, coming to the Table is a thin place because it takes us to the future – Eternal life in the kingdom of God's grace and glory. Paul's words that "as often as we eat the bread and drink the cup, we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes" reminds us that the Lord's Supper is a symbolic act of joy and obedience whereby we remember the death of our Lord Jesus Christ and anticipate His second coming. And each time we come to the Table the thin place of Eternal life is visible because we are

reminded that Jesus died and was raised from the dead. Therefore we are assured that he is coming again one day.

So as we celebrate God's coming into the world and recognize His coming into our hearts through the bread and the cup, we realize that all of our Christmases, past, present and future are woven into the mystical, beautiful tapestry of God's love. For our God is not a God who watches from the sidelines but creates for us thin places – holy moments when we feel His love and know that we are His cherished children. Indeed, "Love WAS when God became a man . . . Love that we can see that reached down to you and me." (1) And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, full of grace and truth. Amen.

The Rev. Julie Schaaf
Nazareth Presbyterian Church, Christmas Eve, 2017

(1) "Love was When", Don Wyrzten, Singsiration, 1978