

“Torn”
Isaiah 64:1-9; Mark 1:14-15; John 1:1-9
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It was a time of disenchantment. More than fifty years before, Judea had been conquered. Many of its people had been taken into exile in Babylon. Their temple--where they understood God was present in a special way--had been destroyed. The exiles were far from their holy city of Jerusalem, far from all that was familiar. In the strange and hostile land of Babylon, God seemed far away too. What kept them going was the hope that someday they would return home.

By the time this passage was written, their hope had been fulfilled. The exiles returned home with great joy and expectation. They were soon sorely disappointed. Over the generations, the people who had remained behind had developed their own ways, and the two groups found themselves at odds. The prospect of rebuilding the temple was overwhelming. God had seemed distant when they were in Babylon, and that was hard enough. Now they were back home, and God still seemed far away. That was devastating.

“O, that you would tear open the heavens and come down.” Isaiah’s cry is heart-wrenching. His words echo beyond that time and place, for they highlight a common human experience. Whoever we are, whenever and wherever we live, we all have moments, even years, when God seems far away. Isaiah conveys our anguish with a vivid image-- the heavens as a fabric separating us from God. Oh God, Isaiah prays, tear that fabric open and come near.

This image is not unique to Isaiah. The ancient Celts drew upon a similar metaphor to describe their experience of distance and closeness in relation to the Holy. They imagined a veil separating heaven and earth. In some places, they believed, the veil was opaque, but in other places the veil was like “gossamer,” so transparent it almost didn’t exist. The Celts identified these as “thin places,” where the holy came near.

As Christianity took root in that region, early Celtic Christians incorporated this view of the world into their new faith. In the fourth century Pelagius wrote about thin places, where “narrow shafts of divine light pierce the veil that separates heaven and earth.” In more recent times, Christians from around the world have sought to reclaim the richness of this early Celtic Christian concept. Poet Sharlande Sledge describes thin places in his poem:

“Thin places,” the Celts call this space,
Both seen and unseen,
Where the door between this world
And the next is cracked open for a moment
And the light is not all on the other side.
God shaped space. Holy.

If you google Thin Places, you will find groups offering pilgrimages through the isles of Scotland and Ireland and Wales, journeying to spots that, over thousands of years, have been identified as thin places. Some are distinguished by natural beauty--the Cliffs of St. David. Others are marked by unusual human activity, like Stonehenge.

Thin places aren't only found on the British Isles, and sometimes they aren't places at all. American author Amy Julia Becker, in her book, *A Good and Perfect Gift*, describes her experience raising a child with Down's Syndrome. In her preface, she writes: "having a child with a disability bumps up against the edges of what it means to be human, teaches us about brokenness and beauty, takes us into thin places." For Becker, when human brokenness and beauty come together, it is a thin place. Light shines through; God comes near; holy and ordinary become one.

Thin places are often times of transition--between summer and winter, day and night, childhood and adulthood, sorrow and joy. Thin places may be moments of vulnerability, in which we face our own limits and feel the pain of powerlessness. Sometimes thin places are experiences that leave us stunned by beauty, that make us feel small, that pull us outside ourselves or draw us deeper inside.

My favorite hike in the Rocky Mountains leads me to Sky Pond; in the crisp clean air, beside the stunningly blue water, I sense God's presence --a thin place. Every once in a while, in the middle of a choir anthem, when the tenors soar from right behind me, I hear God's voice--a thin moment. Sometimes it happens when Ellie and I are meditating on Tuesday morning--a hint of God's peace. Occasionally a poem moves me to tears--in those tears is a thin place. Where do you find thin places?

However we experience them, thin places offer a glimpse of God's presence. We treasure them because they are rare. Other times the veil seems thick, even impenetrable. The fleeting nature of those glimpses point us back to the yearning expressed in Isaiah's cry. "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down."

In our gospel readings for today, both Mark and John proclaim that Jesus is God's response to Isaiah's anguished plea.

For Mark, God's response to Isaiah comes in the message Jesus proclaims: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near." The kingdom of God, the realm of God's love, is breaking in, Jesus declares, right here and now. God is already at work transforming our world. Jesus' healings are signs of God's realm breaking in. Jesus' meals with outcasts are evidence that God is already turning the world upside down. The heavens have been torn open, Jesus proclaims. The barrier between God and humanity has been breached. God's realm has come near.

While Mark focuses on Jesus' message, John sees God's response to our human yearning in who Jesus is. The gospel opens with a poem. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God." The poetry crescendos to its climax: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us." In Jesus, John proclaims, God came to dwell with us. While 4th century Pelagius writes about narrow shafts of divine light piercing the veil, 2nd century John speaks of the light that shines in the darkness. The light pierces the veil and overcomes the darkness; God walks among us.

The imagery in Mark and John is vivid and also perplexing. What is the kingdom of God anyway? How can Jesus be both God and human? If we try to pin down the images and turn them into dogma, we become trapped in the limits of our own reasoning.

It helps me to remember that Mark and John, like the ancient Celts, are using words to try to convey something words cannot convey. Of course there isn't really a veil separating heaven

and earth; the image, though, expresses a profoundly human experience of distance and closeness in relation to the Holy. God is not really a king, but in Jesus' time, the image of the Kingdom of God offered hope that there is a force more powerful than the kingdoms of the earth. I can't begin to understand how the Word of God can become flesh, but the poetry reassures me that God shares in my human living.

Using powerful and perplexing images, both Mark and John proclaim that, in Jesus, God comes near. Should we then understand Jesus as just another thin place? Does Jesus simply represent a 33-year-long hole in the fabric separating God from humanity? No. Jesus is much more than that. In Jesus, Mark and John boldly declare, the veil is not just torn; it is destroyed. Or maybe, it is revealed to have always been an illusion. God is with us--then, now, and always. The realm of God is still breaking through. The Word of God still dwells among us. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it. Jesus is not a thin place; Jesus makes all places thin.

And yet the cry of Isaiah still rings true. No matter how deeply we take the words of Mark and John to heart, we still, all too often, experience God as far away, hiding behind a veil. It's not because our faith is too weak; it's simply that our perception is limited. To be human is to yearn for God.

Our faith in Jesus doesn't change the reality of our human limitations and yearning. It changes how we understand thin places. They are not exceptions to the rule; they are not the occasional piecing of an otherwise impenetrable veil. Instead, the thin places offer us a window into a truth that is always there, even when we cannot see it. God is with us--all the time. My sense that God is near Sky Pond reminds me that God is just as near when I am at the grocery store. The thin moment in the middle of an anthem challenges me to trust that God is also singing with us when we're just a little off key.

God is with us. We are never alone. It is a glorious thing to glimpse that truth in a thin place. It is even more glorious to trust in that truth when we cannot see it or feel it.

The season of Advent invites us to awaken to the thin places in our lives. Advent calls us to notice the realm of God breaking through in a moment of understanding, to rejoice in the Word of God revealed in a stranger's smile. Advent challenges us to trust that God's realm is at work in our world even when all we see is the realm of greed or indifference. Advent challenges us to trust that God dwells in every person we meet.

Let us awaken. Let us notice and rejoice. Let us dare to tru