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JOINING FLESH & SPIRIT

Dec 24, 2021 CHRISTMAS EVE

A friend recently asked me, “I’ve heard spiritual people talk about ‘thin places’ - what do they mean by ‘thin places’? Is that a phrase you all are familiar with? It’s a good phrase for Christmas, I think, and joins some of my favorite Christmas words like “ponder,” as in Mary pondered in her heart these things the wise men said and did. Well, Celtic people had a saying that heaven and earth are really only about 3 feet apart, but in some special places, it's even thinner. (NY Times, 2/2012) “Thin place” is a brief expression that attempts to describe how certain places or certain times or certain events seem to touch us in our soul, and make us realize that heaven and earth ate right here, almost touchable. It feels like if our eyes just had the right adjustable lens, we’d see the Holy right there. Christmas can be like that.

I did several retreats at a place called Richmond Hill, an ecumenical prayer center located on the highest hill in downtown Richmond, VA. It was previously a convent, and before that, historians think it was where the local native tribes prayed. So as I walked to my room carrying my overnight bag and tired from negotiating Richmond traffic, I got this feeling in my gut, and could almost see a nun kneeling by that bed praying. And ones before her. The feeling of people praying pervaded the whole feel of my room. That’s a thin place. Needless to say, I experienced meaningful and healing retreats there.

Those kinds of experiences aren’t something that get talked about out loud too often. They should be, though. One of the jokes about Presbyterians is that we are an orderly people, people who take seriously the apostle Paul’s call to let everything be done decently and in order. We are also known, however, as a people of strong faith, with a passion or an ardor for serving our God. United Methodists have a background in the English church; Presbyterians have a background in Scotland, among the Celtic folks. We like bagpipes at our big meetings and funerals, our cross has the Celtic circle around the center where the arms cross. Sometimes we come across as introverts and private in our faith, yet at the same time there's a fire that kindles strong devotion and commitment.

What are some other thin places? I’ve experienced them at births, and at deaths, where the limit of consciousness meets the mysterious realms outside the borders of life as we know it. A life coming into being where once there was no life; or a life slipping away from the body into whatever comes after. Sometimes I use the word “liminal,” like something that’s right on the limits of our understanding, right at the edge of what we can touch.

I still remember a communion service when I was a brand new pastor, up in WI. It wasa at a clergy retreat, and our Executive presbyter, who was dying of liver cancer, came especially to celebrate communion for us. As he broke the bread and poured the cup, saying the words about remembering Jesus until we sit together at table in that great day, I started crying (and others did, too), because bar a miracle, the next time we celebrated communion with be with David on the other side with the saints at rest. It was a poignant moment, a thin place, where heaven and eternity felt almost close enough to see. I’ve not forgotten that moment. At the baptism of my daughter who was born hopelessly ill, I felt it, too, that interplay of life and death being so close together, eternity and human life intertwined in that little body that we were baptizing into the family of faith, who would soon complete her baptism in death. Thin places.

Christmas can be one of those thin places where the eternal, the ultimate, the unknown, the mysterious Divine and Holy, is right there entering the door of humanity and physical reality. There’s a poem I heard, by Richard Crashaw, that captures this:

*Gloomy night embrac’d the place Where the Noble Infant lay;*

*The Babe look’d up and show’d his face, In spite of darkness, it was day.*

*It was thy day, Sweet! and did rise Not from the east, but from thine eyes*

*and*

*Welcome, all wonders in one sight! Eternity shut in a span;*

*Summer in winter; day in night; Heaven in earth, and God in man.*

*Great little one, whose all-embracing birth lifts earth to heaven, stoops heav’n to earth.*

See, on one hand, the Christmas story is one whose details we’ve heard and sung from, perhaps, preschool age. We learned simple carols featuring Mary, Joseph, baby Jesus, donkeys, mangers, hay, swaddling cloths, stars, shepherds, wise men, camels and angels. And when we drive around town to look at folks’ Christmas lights, we see many of these details in lights and scenes.

On the other hand, inside those details is a mysterious event: when God, an eternal, spiritual force that we can barely conceive in our minds, is actually conc eived and borthed as a finite, human, fleshly person. The incorporeal takes on corporal flesh. Eternity takes on mortality. Spirit takes on matter, and matter takes on spirit. Opposites merge, a cosmic union is shown, the distances disappear, paradoxes are resolved, two become one.

Religious stories carry so much more than data for trivial pursuit! Our stories carry eternal and existential meaning. The Christmas story is the definitive telling of God’s love for humanity, and what God is willing to do in order to restore the relationship between us.

I often wish that our eyes, which evolved to see the physical reality we need to see in order to survive, actually had a spiritual filter that could see the spiritual reality which pervades our universe - our plants, our trees, our rocks, our soil, our bodies.It’s like, if we could just drop the blinders, if we could have eyes to see and ears to hear, as the Scripture says, then we would see God’s great love, all God’s great truths, all around us. Some are gifted with this ability, very spiritually developed folks who can see God wherever they look.

Jesus is called Emmanuel, which means “with us God.” God has always been nearer than we have imagined; God is here, among us and in us. We are God’s handiwork, and God’s Spirit lives within us. It didn't just happen once at that historic event of Jesus’ birth - the story of Christmas is to tell us the truth that God is here, all the time!

This is what spirituality and true religion is about - being able to see God wherever we look, in whoever we look at, surrounding and filling, and guiding our living. Yeah, people argue about things like where the dinosaurs fall in creation, and whether Jesus was really born on Dec 25, and whether malls should be open on Sundays & the 10 Commandments be hung on government buildings. That stuff isn’t spirituality or religion, friends - faith is bigger than all those things. Christmas’ teaching about God’s real presence among people, God’s love, God’s outreach to us - THIS is what it's all really about: what’s important, what has meaning; what tells us about our existence, what shapes the way we view the world, what undergirds our choices and behaviors. This is the bedrock of spirituality and religion.

So when we sing our carols, see our manger scenes, share our gifts and generosity, partake of nature’s abundance at the table, and especially as we celebrate this communion, take a few moments to ponder, won’t you? Experience the thin place. And celebrate the ongoing Christmas story. AMEN.