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Where Do We Experience God?

If God wants our friendship, where do we experience God drawing us into such a relationship? So far, I have suggested taking time to pray in an effort to recognize such experiences, but it may also help to spend some time reflecting on where you have experienced God. In this chapter, I will explore with you various places where people have found God. We will together discover, I hope, that God can be found wherever we are. All we need to do is pay attention. Let's begin with some biblical moments of finding God.

While tending his father-in-law's sheep, Moses noticed something extraordinary: a bush burning but not being consumed. When he went for a closer look, he heard a voice saying: "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground" (Exodus 3:5). This is one of many incidents in

the Bible where people felt the closeness of God—where, in a sense, heaven and earth met. This meeting happened again and again—at Mount Sinai, where God gave Moses the Ten Commandments; in the tent containing the Ark of the Covenant, which housed the commandments; and in Solomon’s temple, with its Holy of Holies containing the Ark. As long as the temple stood, the Israelites felt some assurance that God was with them. The remaining wall of the destroyed Second Temple is called the Wailing Wall because the place of God’s presence is no more, and Jews mourn God’s absence.

God’s place and our place were not totally separate for the Israelites; somehow they overlapped, and at certain times and places, human beings realized this overlap. God is not “out there” beyond this world, although at the same time God is not so “here” that creation and God are one. Theologians have coined the term *transcendence* to describe the “not-here-ness” of God and *immanence* to describe God’s “here-ness.”

For Christians, Jesus of Nazareth is now *the* place where heaven and earth meet, where the holy is present uniquely and forever. The baptism of Jesus (Luke 3:21–22) and his transfiguration (Mark 9:2–13) exemplify how heaven and earth meet in him. In Jesus, God is so present that he is, in some mysterious way, both fully human and fully divine. To meet Jesus is to meet God. Jesus is “holy ground” par excellence.

This chapter asks the question, where do we experience God? Where is our “holy ground”? The Irish speak of “thin

places,” where the border between heaven and earth, sacred and secular, seems especially porous and God is believed to “leak through” more easily. Because I believe that God can “leak through” anywhere, I prefer to say that in such places people find the presence of God more easily. Where are the thin places in your life? What makes a place thin? I want to reflect on these questions with you in this meditation.

Thin Places

The Jesuits of the New England Province have a retreat house at Eastern Point, on the rocky coast of the Atlantic in Gloucester, Massachusetts. For fifty years, people have been coming to this place to “find God,” or to let themselves be found by God. The setting is magnificent. The main house is a stone mansion constructed in the early twentieth century. It faces the Atlantic Ocean just outside Gloucester Harbor. Sunrises are often stunning, and on clear days there is a special glow over the ocean at sunset. After a heavy storm at sea, the waves crash against the huge rocks at the edge of the property, sending water and spray fifty feet into the air, a thrilling sight and sound. The atmosphere of the retreat house itself is warm, silent, and peaceful. I have been privileged to direct young Jesuits from around the world in the thirty-day Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola in this setting for the past ten years. These retreats take place at the beginning of autumn, for many the most spectacular season of the year in our region.

Many have experienced Eastern Point as a thin place. I mention it to encourage you to recall your own thin places. Where have you been “surprised by joy,” to borrow the words of C. S. Lewis—surprised by the desire for God?

I believe that all of us have experienced such thin places in our lifetimes. Since medieval times, people have been drawn to the great cathedrals of Europe, especially to the cathedral in the small French town of Chartres, because they give promise of being such thin places. Millions of people over the centuries have walked famous pilgrimage trails, such as the five-hundred-mile pilgrimage from the French-Spanish border to Santiago de Compostela in Spain, because of stories of how others have found God on these pilgrimages.

What is it about these places and the ones you have found that makes them special?

Something in these places surprises you, captures your attention, and makes you forget your own concerns and worries. For a moment or longer, you become a contemplative in the primitive sense of the term: you pay attention to something or someone outside yourself. In fact, in some way you lose yourself in that something or someone. The sunrise over the ocean captures all of your attention, for example, and for that time you are not aware of the pain in your buttocks or how cold your ears have become or anything else. In such moments, God has a chance to break through the “problems insoluble and problems offering / their own

ignored solutions” that “jostle for my attention,” as Denise Levertov put it in “Primary Wonder.” This ability to grab our attention is what makes certain places thin.

When people tell me that they have a hard time praying, I often suggest that they do something they like to do to take their minds off their ordinary cares and concerns. I recall one elderly nun who told me that she hated retreats because they were so boring. When I asked her what she liked to do, she mentioned crossword puzzles and walking in the woods. I suggested that she do this and see what happened. After a few days, she said with a wry smile that she was enjoying this retreat, and then, more shyly, she said that God seemed to be enjoying it, too. In another example, a young seminarian found himself very distracted in prayer. He told me that he liked to look at the architecture of the city in which he lived. When I suggested that he do this for his prayer, he said that he would feel guilty. So I said, “Well, pray any way you want to, but the next time you look at the architecture of the city, ask God to go with you, and tell me what happens.” It was the beginning for him of a new way of relating to God. Both of these people found thin places, places where they forgot themselves for a time and gave God a chance to break into their consciousness.

We should be aware of the thin places in our lives, because they make experiences of God’s creative desire for each one of us, and our correlative desire for God, more

possible by capturing our attention and pulling us out of our ordinary routines and concerns. Let's look at some thin places where we may have such experiences.

Scripture as a Thin Place

Scripture, either heard or read, can be a thin place if you let the words capture your imagination and attention. Scripture will not be a thin place if you read it for meaning. In the humorous poem "Introduction to Poetry," Billy Collins captures the frustration of the poetry teacher whose students want to make a poem mean something, rather than let it be what it is. We may see some analogy to our approach to Scripture in his words:

I ask them to take a poem
and hold it up to the light
like a color slide

or press an ear against its hive.

I say drop a mouse into a poem
and watch him probe his way out,

or walk inside the poem's room
and feel the walls for a light switch.

I want them to water-ski
across the surface of a poem
waving at the author's name on the shore.

But all they want to do
is tie the poem to a chair with rope
and torture a confession out of it.

They begin beating it with a hose
to find out what it really means.

I can imagine God saying the same thing about the way we often use Scripture. Frequently, we don't let the Scriptures do what they were written to do—namely, to give the Mystery we call God a chance to be heard and met. The Bible is not a theological textbook designed only to feed our minds and provide intellectual insight. Most of the Bible is imaginative literature meant to draw us into its world so that God can touch us. Even the historical books are written as stories to touch our imaginations. The biblical writers want to help us encounter God; ultimately, they want to move us to engage personally with God. The story of Exodus, for instance, was written to capture the imaginations of the Israelites so that they would know in their bones how much God loved them; thus, they would learn to rely on God in

the here and now and to call on God to remember the covenant God made with them at Sinai.

Liturgy as a Thin Place

When people gather together to celebrate their communion with God, it can be experienced as a thin place. There is something about the gathering of people for prayer, especially if they come from diverse families and backgrounds, that sets off sparks in those present, giving them a sense that they are on “holy ground.” For Christians, of course, the Eucharist is the gathering that most often is experienced as “holy ground.” Even ordinary, seemingly humdrum Eucharistic liturgies can touch those present with a sense of peace and communion that is both awesome and delightful, and they feel one with the Mystery we call God. This is all the more true when the Eucharist is celebrated with striking beauty and prayerfulness. If, in addition, the congregation is large and culturally and racially diverse, the experience can be even more moving, because we sense that God’s dream—for a world in which all are one in friendship with God and one another—is being fulfilled.

Married and Family Life as Thin Places

My first draft of this chapter did not mention married and family life as possible thin places, which is probably typical of celibate thinking. I realized the lacuna when I read

the essay “Marital Spirituality” by the married theologian Thomas Knieps-Port le Roi. He points out that the usual models of spirituality tend to presume a celibate way of life as the norm and to relegate married life to a kind of second-class status. I invite readers who are married to reflect on your married and family life to see where you have experienced God. Perhaps you will be helped in your reflection by these words of Knieps-Port le Roi:

A spirituality proper to lay people, and especially to married people, will be growing in a different soil and will therefore bring forth different fruits. The soil is the whole range of what the couple experience together: daily routine, moments of intimate exchange, the taking of decisions about the life they will be leading together. There is no need for anyone to go in quest of this reality; in each marital relationship it is immediately there to be seen. The only question is how it can be developed so that it becomes something significant for faith and for the spiritual life. Or, to put it another way: how can the Spirit be discovered within this reality, the Spirit who makes the couple co-workers and friends with God?

A spirituality for laypeople can be developed only by laypeople who work it out in a dialogue with tradition and

their own experience. One way forward is to hear from couples and their children how married and family life provide thin places.

Nature as a Thin Place

The poet Mary Oliver seems to have been born a contemplative. Read any of her many books of poetry, and you will find someone who pays attention to the world around her. Take, for example, “The Summer Day,” with its haunting final question:

Who made the world?

Who made the swan, and the black bear?

Who made the grasshopper?

This grasshopper, I mean—

the one who has flung herself out of the grass,

the one who is eating sugar out of my hand,

who is moving her jaws back and forth instead of up
and down—

who is gazing around with her enormous and
complicated eyes.

Now she lifts her pale forearms and thoroughly
washes her face.

Now she snaps her wings open, and floats away.

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.

I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,

how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the
fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.
Tell me, what else should I have done?
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?
Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

Oliver says that she does not know what a prayer is, but her attention to the tiny details of nature brings her to the posture of prayer: kneeling in the grass, feeling idle and blessed, aware that she has been given only “one wild and precious life.” When I have used this poem in retreats, it has helped people pay attention to God’s creation and, in that attention, find God.

Oliver’s book *Thirst* contains the poem “Praying,” which gives a little instruction on how to pray with nature:

It doesn't have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones; just
pay attention, then patch

a few words together and don't try
to make them elaborate, this isn't
a contest but the doorway

into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.

That's what thin places are all about: they lead us to put a few words together to address the Mystery, and they bring us to a silence "in which / another voice may speak."

Unlikely Thin Places

Mary Oliver's reference to "weeds in a vacant lot" brings to mind some unlikely places for finding God. Not all thin places are places of beauty and light and hope. My sister Mary, a Sister of Mercy, has worked for close to forty years in a home for troubled boys. At the end of a retreat at Eastern Point Retreat House, the retreatants were invited to speak of their experiences. A number of people spoke of finding God in the beauty of the place, in sunrises and sunsets, in the blue of the ocean, and on and on—in other words, in the "blue iris." Mary said that she too had had such experiences, but she went on to speak of seaweed that at first had seemed quite ugly to her. As she contemplated this seaweed, she began to see lovely colors in the ugly mess. It reminded her of how she often found grace and loveliness in the troubled boys with whom she works, who, at first glance, seemed unlovely and unlovable. Mary discovered thin places in seaweed and her boys. I invite you to think of some thin places that stand in opposition to the "blue iris" places.

Some places are so horrible that they grab our attention the way places of great beauty do. I can still remember my visit over fifty years ago to the concentration camp in Dachau, just outside Munich, Germany. What stands out in my memory is the word *Badezimmer* (Bathroom) over the door to the room where men, women, and children were gassed to death. They had been told to leave their clothes outside the room so they could be deloused in a shower. But instead of water, poison gas burst from the pipes. I imagined their horror as they realized what was happening. How could human beings do such things to other human beings?

At the time, I was just numb. I believe that I began to cry. I do not remember any sense of God. I wanted to get out of there as soon as possible. Perhaps the ugliness and horror hit me so strongly that I missed the opportunity to let Dachau become a thin place for me. Perhaps many of us miss the thinness of such places of horror because we cannot or do not want to stay long enough to let them become places where we can meet God.

Can you think of times when you found your heart burning with something mysterious while you were in an unlikely place? You may have felt something like this in the presence of someone you love who was dying. Recently, one of my Jesuit friends told me of a visit his sister made to their dying brother, who radiated such peace and joy that she felt lifted up herself. This was an unlikely thin place.

The theologian Belden Lane found an unlikely thin place in the nursing home where his mother was dying of cancer and Alzheimer's disease. When she tried to rip out her feeding tube, he had to call for help, which led to his mother having to wear mittens. He writes:

There she lay—miserable, stripped of dignity, incapable of helping herself in the least way—and now betrayed by a son whose best intentions had only made things worse. I left the room, choking on my own helplessness.

But the unexpected occurred that afternoon when I returned to the nursing home. My mother was resting quietly by then, the gloves removed. She looked up and said to me gently, in an unusual moment of lucidity, "Don't cry, Belden. It's natural to have to do this. It's all a part of dying." With those words a window suddenly opened. By an unanticipated grace, I found healing through the one I'd meant to comfort.

Perhaps you, too, have found a thin place at a time of difficult ministry, such as the terrible day experienced by the chaplain in the acute care unit of the large hospital mentioned in chapter 9. She found herself moved with compassion for a woman who may have shaken her baby to death. In the process of her ministry, the chaplain found herself present with God.

Sometimes an unlikely thin place is revealed by the people there who show the face of God. Auschwitz, the Nazi death camp in Poland, is one such place. Two canonized saints, Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein) and Father Maximilian Kolbe, died there. Edith Stein, born a Jew, refused to try to escape to Switzerland from Holland when Jewish Christians were threatened with exportation to Auschwitz. In compassion for her people, she wanted to share their fate. The Franciscan priest Maximilian Kolbe volunteered to take the place of a man with a family who had been chosen to die in reprisal for an escape. These are only two of many instances of compassion that revealed the presence of God in this place of unimaginable horror. Even today, people who enter Auschwitz speak of experiencing God's presence.

You may recall other horrors either witnessed directly or through the media that became thin places for you. At the end of the documentary *Born into Brothels*, the story of how a gift of cameras allowed poor children of Calcutta to capture in film some of the horrors and joys of their lives, I was devastated to the point of tears by what these children had to endure and, at the same time, moved by their indomitable spirit. A colleague, Linda Amadeo, recalls her reactions to the film *Hotel Rwanda*, which depicts the horror of the genocide in Rwanda and the heroism of a hotel manager who saved so many Tutsi. She watched in numb silence and overwhelming sadness, often breaking down in

sobs. She felt deep admiration for the manager; later, when she learned that the survivors are beginning to forgive those who perpetrated this atrocity, she felt astonished. Still later, she felt profound gratitude to God for loving us enough to redeem us despite what we do to one another. Only then came a little peace.

Of course, the unlikeliest thin place in all of history is Golgotha, where church and state conspired to kill an innocent man. Yet even here the Roman centurion who led the soldiers who crucified Jesus gasped, “Truly this man was God’s Son!” (Mark 15:39). Ever since that awful and awesome day, Christians have contemplated Jesus on the cross and found God and hope and peace there. It is unlikely indeed, yet a fact!

I hope it has become clear how easily one can find places where heaven and earth meet, whether amid beauty or devastation, sorrow or joy. Perhaps these examples will spur you to spend time with your own “weeds in a vacant lot” to see if they have been thin places for you. God, who invites us to friendship, is present and active everywhere. As the Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins put it, “The world is charged with the grandeur of God.” Every place on this earth can be a thin place. All that is required to experience God is our openness to God’s presence.