

Christmas Day 2011
“Into the Thin Places”

Luke 2:1-20

This sermon was preached by Pastor Kurt Jacobson at Trinity Lutheran Church, Eau Claire, WI

Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ, may the good news of the angels and the hope that comes to earth in God’s only Son inspire you with grace and peace. Amen.

In recent days I have listened to several people speak about the time leading up to Christmas. For some people it’s a time of anticipation with visions of gifts to open, reunions with family and time away from school and work. For others the days leading up to Christmas include stresses over the busyness, the long-to-do list and all the commercialization. For others Christmas comes with the desire for something more. They’re the people who say “we should have Christmas all year long” and I don’t think they’re talking about the busyness, stress or commercialism. Rather, I think they’re expressing the desire to sense each day the wonder of heaven come to earth.

However you have viewed the days leading to Christmas, for this time of worship my hope is that we might find a thin place.

A thin place is where heaven meets earth -- where you sense the presence of God. There’s a Celtic saying that heaven and earth are only three feet apart, but in the thin places that distance is even smaller. A contemporary poet gives this description:

“Thin places,

Both seen and unseen,

Where the door between the world

And the next is cracked open for a moment

And the light is not all on the other side. (*Sharlande Sledge, “Thin Places.” Nonpublished*)

Let me illustrate a few thin places that you can visit. Get out your passport – you’ll need it for three of them. But not for the last one.

First of all, we visit an isolated, rocky, windswept island off the West Coast of Scotland. In the sixth century Christians built an abbey on the island of Iona. The Iona Abbey is one of the oldest and most important religious centers in Western Europe. It served as the focal point for the spread of Christianity throughout Scotland. The Scots call Iona a "thin" place. What they mean is they sense that heaven and earth come close together in this place. The result is that at the Iona Abby people are touched with the holy presence of God.

The next "thin" place you can visit is down from Scotland in Rome. There in the magnificent Sistine Chapel you find a classic depiction of a "thin place" on the ceiling. In the majestic work of art by Michelangelo, God is seen intently reaching with a strong, outstretched arm toward Adam, the first human. Adam, with elbow bent slightly, is also reaching back to God but ever so tentatively. Their fingers do not quite touch. What the artist re-creates, however, is a reminder of another thin place: the time when God began creating humanity in God's image.

To visit the Sistine Chapel and be reminded of God's intention to be close to humanity is to be ushered into the truth of the Word. Throughout the Old Testament we read

of God continually reaching out to humanity across the ages creating thin places in many and varied ways.

Today, I'm glad you've come to worship, because central to our purpose on this Christmas day we visit the third thin place - Bethlehem in Israel. After the Bible tells us that for centuries God had been searching for ways to reach humanity God went to Bethlehem to make a thin place between heaven and earth.

So it was that history's most significant thin place arrives in the birth of God's child in a stable in Bethlehem. A most unpredictable setting became the means of discovering heaven coming to earth.

In this thin place in Bethlehem, lowly shepherds were first to hear the news announced. It was an angel who brought heaven to earth first for these shepherds. Through the angel God told them:

"Do not be afraid; for see -- I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."

The shepherds were awed by the appearance of the angels. Having been visited by God in this "thin" place, they went to find out more. They said to one another:

"Let us go now to Bethlehem to see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.. So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger." (Luke 2:15-16)

The obedience of the shepherds was rewarded. They searched around Bethlehem to find the baby – heaven come to earth.

Where have you experienced the thin places? Where has God reached out to touch you? Perhaps thin places are elusive for you. But like the announcement the angel gave the shepherds "Don not be afraid" - God does provide us all an easily encountered thin place.

Which takes us to the final "thin place" - the one where you don't need a passport. It's here - at the Lord's Table. From his birth to his last night on earth, Jesus created thin places for people to experience the mercies of God. In the Lord's Supper to which you are always welcome, God reaches out to us in the here and now with the body and blood Jesus given for you. In the Lord's Supper there is a thin place between heaven and earth. Watch this: <http://sermonspice.com/product/39715/Christmas%20and%20the%20Last%20Supper>

Thin places, heaven and earth coming together offer us refreshment and renewal for the living of these days. I hope having an eye for the thin places in life will provide you awareness of God's presence with you and then maybe the spirit of Christmas will last all year long. Amen.