

Thin places in this week's readings

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In the Celtic spiritual tradition, people refer to “thin places”—spaces where the veil between the Divine and the earthly is especially thin; places where you can easily have a sense of the holy, a feeling of connection to God.

There are places commonly recognized as thin, as holy. The places where Jesus is said to have been born and to have died. Places where our ancestors in the faith are buried. Magnificent cathedrals. Ancient forests. People seek out such places. They embark on pilgrimages to experience these sacred spaces. Certainly one place noted as holy is Mount Sinai. In this week's scripture from Exodus, Moses is on this mountain for the express purpose of talking with God. And in Jesus' day, the Temple was the place to go if you wanted to connect with God.

Both Sinai and the Temple were places supposed to facilitate Divine-human interaction. So it seems ironic that in the readings from [Exodus](#) and [John](#) this week, these supposedly holy places are actually sites where the people separate themselves from God and God's will. As Moses receives the commandments on the mountain, the people waiting below witness “thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking.” God has drawn near, and the people are scared. They say to Moses, “You speak to us and we will listen, but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.” Mount Siani proves so “thin” that people run in the opposite direction.

In Jesus' day, some people did not take the presence of God in the Temple seriously enough. They had lost the holy fear of encountering the Divine and instead had commodified the sacred space of the Temple. They tried to sell access to God, charging exorbitant rates for sacrificial animals and currency exchanges. Jesus boils over with anger when he sees the sacred space profaned by the merchants who exploit the people's longing for connection to God.

The Bible affirms the existence of sacred places, the idea of holy ground. Yet is also cautions that it is not the place itself that is holy—it is the divine presence in the

place. The scriptures affirm the omnipresence of God, the potential for us to experience anywhere, everywhere, as a thin place.

[Psalm 19](#) proclaims that the heavens and the firmament declare the glory of God; “their voice goes out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world.” The poet of [Psalm 139](#) asks the beautiful, rhetorical question: “Where can I go from your Spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?” In the words of one of my favorite benedictions: We cannot go where God is not.

Beyond thinking about holy places, the Ten Commandments also suggest to us the concept of holy time. “Remember the sabbath and keep it holy.” There is one day a week set aside for honoring God through rest and worship. In my life, it often feels like holy spaces in time are more difficult to come by than holy spaces in place.

Whether we are considering holy place or holy time, we hold in balance the truths of scripture and the truths we experience in life. There are certain places, certain times, when God seems particularly close, where the veil between heaven and earth appears especially thin. We must honor and protect these spaces, making sure they are not defiled. And yet it is also true that God is present everywhere, at all times. We do not need to wait until Sunday or travel to a different place in order to connect with our Creator. God can and does speak in a myriad of places, and our ears and hearts must be always open.

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