**SERMON Luke 9:28-36**

**Opening**

In times of uncertainty, of crises abroad, and at home, at times of fear and anxiety, it is important for the community of faith to gather. To weep together, to share our burdens with one another and crucially to remind one another that there is a different vision for life and humanity, there is goodness, and there is a higher power, a loving, justice-seeking, force. And, though it may appear or feel distant, it is in fact both transcendent AND at the very same time deeply intimate.

The concept of ‘thin place’ is one that we will hear a lot more of as Pastor Lori goes on Sabbatical, but it’s profoundly relevant of us today…both in terms of our lectionary text, as well as the events of this past week. But before we dive in, let’s bow our heads in prayer:

To our God who became flesh and yet is high over all,

We come to you this morning with anxious hearts and a thousand questions.

And so, as we gather to offer praise to you, to share our burdens,

to seek guidance and to encounter you a-new this morning,

may this sanctuary become a ‘thin place,’

a place where heaven and earth meet.

Open our hearts and our minds to hear your word,

Amen

**Intro**

If you have heard the term “thin places” before it has likely been because someone was recounting a visit to an inspirational site or sharing about how being out in nature always draws them closer to the Divine. Or…they might not have even been talking about a place at all, but instead a Sacred moment, perhaps spurred on by spiritual practice or a deep conversation. Whatever the circumstance, a thin place is a location or moment in which our sense of the Sacred is more pronounced, where the space between the transcendent and the commonplace is exceptionally narrow, and it can be as unique as one person is to another. Many of you know that the term originally comes from the mystical world of Celtic spirituality and the Celtic Christians, who were deeply connected to the natural world and considered every aspect of life to be infused with the presence of the Divine, even (or perhaps, especially) the ordinary elements of everyday life.

**Link**

Some thin places have been well-known to seekers for centuries and have become popular places of pilgrimage, such as the Isle of Iona in Scotland where Pastor Lori will visit during her Sabbatical or Lourdes in France. Other thin places are particular to our own experience of God, or I want to suggest, a moment of existential threat that puts our earthly experience in sharp relief with God’s hoped-for Kindom. This notion of ‘thin place’ is relevant for us today as we journey with Jesus, Peter, James, and John to the mountain where Jesus is transfigured.

**Passage Context**

We have been following the gospel narrative found in Luke– for the most part –through the season of light, of Epiphany, following the celebration of Christmas. Our lectionary however jumps a few chapters from last week, from Luke’s account of the Sermon on the Plain in chapter 6 when Jesus calls the fisherman (and us) out into the deeper water, and last week reminded us again to, “love our enemies,” to chapter 9. So, I want to bring us up to speed on what has happened in the intervening chapters.

After the Sermon on the Plain, Jesus continues to travel through the cities on the northwest shoreline of the Sea of Galilee. He first arrives in Capernaum and heals a Centurion’s slave (7:1-10), then he goes to Nain and brings a widow’s son back to life (7:11-17)–which is something that will garner a degree of notoriety and attention. The followers of John the Baptist get wind of all that Jesus is doing and report back to John who affirms *again* that Jesus is indeed “the one who is to come” (7:20), the One they have been expecting. Then we get this scene at the end of chapter 7 where Jesus’ status as a *friend of sinners* (7:34) is on full display. He affirms a woman who interrupts a meal with some religious leaders to honor Jesus by washing his feet. In chapter 8 Jesus, friend of outcasts, now continues his travels through cities and villages with his Twelve male disciples, and a growing group of women including Mary Madgalene, Joanna, and Suzanne. He tells parables, controls the elements of wind, and waves, performs exorcisms, and resurrects another person, this time Jairus’ daughter. In chapter 9, he feeds the 5 thousand men, not counting all the women and children…and after a moment of solitary prayer, Jesus shares with his closest friends and followers…those that have been on this whirlwind tour of extraordinary power, and hope and healing…that he will suffer, be rejected, and ultimately killed. This news is harrowing, and it’s just the start, he also lets his disciples know that this same fate will be theirs as well, if they choose to follow him. If they choose life, healing, and wholeness, if they bring food, shelter, and health to others, if they too want to be ‘friends to sinners,’ and live in solidarity with the outcasts of society. They must prepare themselves for significant push back, and real sorrow, real loss.

**Invitation**

This is the context of our text today, and it’s heavy. We can imagine all the questions and concerns and fears and adrenaline rushing through the veins of the disciples. It’s one thing to have a sense of what’s ahead, it’s quite another thing to have it named and confirmed. This week we have witnessed the Russian troops invading Ukraine and reaching its capital and the deployment of US and European troops to neighboring nations. In our own country, we’ve heard the mounting discrimination towards transgender siblings in Texas, verdicts in the George Floyd trials, and the nomination of the first African-American women to the Supreme Court. It. Has. Been. A. Week. And so…as we consider the posture of the disciples, their emotional state, their fears and questions, as they hiked up Mount Tabor, and stood at the summit looking at the Sea of Galilee some 15 miles away, I invite you to imagine how the moment of the Transfiguration might have felt for them…and imagine what significance it might have for you today.

**Link**

In our text, Jesus takes a few of his disciples, still shell-shocked by the prediction of Jesus’ death, to have a Sacred encounter with the Divine. An encounter where the physical world, rife with news of death, destruction, and discrimination of all kinds, may collide with a world where peace reigns, where wholeness and holiness just *are*. Our rather abstract artwork on the bulletin this morning tries to depict this ‘thin place’ moment. The artist uses a golden line to symbolize the point of contact between the physical and the spiritual world. The 3 vertical lines are to illustrate the characters we meet on the mountain.

**Passage: Cosmic/Transcendent**

While Jesus is praying on the mountain, his appearance begins to change, his face changes, his clothes become as bright as flashes of lightning. And in the presence of his inner circle of friends, Jesus’ identity is revealed in glorious splendor. Then, he is joined by two other men, two key figures in the Hebrew Scriptures. And in the company now of Moses and Elijah, patriarchs of the Jewish faith, Jesus is revealed as the One whom God has chosen. Over the years, Christians have attributed much meaning to why it was these particular figures that appeared. It is often said that Moses represents the Law, and Elijah represents the prophets. I like this interpretation because like the moment when Jesus first unrolled the scroll of Isaiah in synagogue at the very beginning of his ministry, Jesus takes his place among the prophets of old, among those who understood their lives to have Divine purpose. He stands among and alongside these ancestors of the faith, and it gives further context to his words and actions. They, and he, are a part of the whole narrative arc of scripture. A story about human beings and their encounters with their Creator, their Liberator, their divine Guide and Source. Jesus’ life and ministry only make sense in the context of God’s ongoing work throughout history and in this world. And that same God continues to invite us to participate, to take responsibility for our part in the divine story of healing, freeing, and bringing life and hope to a world that is more accustomed to hurt, to oppression and to death and hopelessness.

**Today**

Now, though there are times when God breaks through in the midst of our wildest or hardest or most routine days, it’s often the case that we don’t have the mental or emotional capacity to recognize or remember God-with-us in those contexts. Sometimes we have to step away from the chaos to encounter the Sacredness of God. The Presence of the Sacred, that is actually, always, as close as our own breath. In these coming weeks, as the cycle of news continues and especially as we enter the season of Lent, take time to pause, pause intentionally…to pray, to be still in amidst the chaos (it will be there when you get going again). For it is often only in those moments of stillness that we can see more clearly what is always true. God has not abandoned us. The eternal Spirit of Life, the unending embrace of Love, the power and potential of God made manifest among us is, actually, close. So close. In us. Around us. And among us. We occupy a ‘thin place,’ a place where the presence of God can reassure, comfort and revitalize the ministry and work we still have yet to do in this messy and suffering world.

And like the disciples, who were running purely on adrenaline, watching Jesus’ perform miracles city after city, only to come crashing down to reality at the news that Jesus’ anticipates that his ministry will in fact lead to his death, we often find ourselves going, going, going…never hardly stopping for breath. To take stock and sit in awe of the divine presence inside. God doesn’t reside in a distance place, intervening on occasion. The heavens are not “above” - or at least, not “above” alone. They are right here. We have a long history of recognizing the Sacredness of “thin places,” where God, here, now, always, is unveiled. These thin places aren’t a shift in God’s presence, only in our ability to recognize what always is. And that recognition or reminder, ideally, changes us.

The disciples, in the midst of *their* challenging context, are invited into a “thin place.” They encounter God, the eternal cries for Justice that have been embodied in the prophets past, the beauty of Christ’s work in the present, and the challenging but urgent matters to come. In this “thin place,” they are encouraged, given clarity, and given the chance to ground themselves in what is true, before they return to a world that will try to convince them otherwise.

Ideally, this is what we do together on Sunday. Create “thin spaces” where we intimately encounter the God who is always close, the Kindom that is always but a choice away, the history that lives on in our flesh. We pause and we remember, and we listen and we ground ourselves in the truths of God’s dreams for us.

**Passage: Personal/Immanent**

This transfiguration does not serve only Jesus but prepares him to go back to the people and continue his ministry until his departure. And there is a challenge here.

Unless we get out of the fortress of our worship spaces and rebuke the unclean spirits of the powers that be and shed light into the lives of the poor of our communities, we will never know what transfiguration means. Glory will be an unknown word and experience. “Thin spaces” moments where God’s glory, divine hope and peace, will never be shared, witnessed or lived.

The power of the Transfiguration is found in the conviction of the disciples to continue the work that Jesus started. Much has been said about Peter’s impulse to set out shelter for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah. How he wished to stay in this moment when the veil between heaven and earth was transparent. How he wished to delay a return to the world by the sea shore, where rejection, confrontation and now the impending threat of violence waited. But this experience, this encounter with the Divine, this confirmation of Jesus’ divinity and Godly appointment, wasn’t merely something to commemorate but to be inspired by and energized by.

**Today**

When the world feels heavy, when we feel afraid, questioning the choices we’ve made and the path that we are walking, it can be so important to gather with others who make us feel known or safe or nourished or who just don’t require of us any extra work in order to be recognized as equal. It’s important we seek out and protect spaces in our lives where we can have our cups filled. And ideally, the church can be one of these places where our identities need no defense, our experiences of systemic oppression are a shared concern, and our commitment to God is rooted in our commitments to each other. Now whether we have access to this kind of place at church or in our families or a support group or an intentional gathering of friends, these spaces keep us grounded. They are a necessary part of a holistic life. Jesus calls us to these mountain tops. They are Sacred Gift that ought to not only support us in times of stress and uncertainty, but call us to action. Call us to carry on the work and ministry of Jesus who calls us to live in the valleys as well. When we are committed to following Christ, we cannot be true to our faith if we are not working to enflesh, bring about, live out, the realities of God in the hard places and in the hard times. In relationships with family members who say racist things at the dinner table or in meetings where sexism silences the women in the room or over lunch with a friend who has wronged us, or in conversations around transphobic policies and legislation, or as we discern our role in something so overwhelming as international conflict. We are to walk down the mountain side again, in the knowledge and power that we do not journey into the murk and mess alone, but that the sacred presence of the divine goes with us, resides inside us and invites us to continue the work of healing and wholeness, and to share God’s divine hope and peace with others. For our spiritual lives call us to a balance between places and relationships that are rich in unconditional love, acceptance, and nourishment as well as intentionally choosing to engage with messy and complicated realities for the sake of collective flourishing.

**Conclusion**

Friends, we are called to rest and mess, to engage in the struggle and retreat into relationships and communities of care. But this week, and throughout the season of Lent, remember this ‘thin place’ on the mountaintop while you are in the valley. Know that the promise of Sacred encounter is as true today, as it was then, so be of courage church, the God of peace, and of hope is here.

Amen.