

1 Where to find a “Thin Place?”

2 Isle of Iona

- The Isle of Iona in Scotland is a tiny, windswept island in the western Hebrides off the western coast of Scotland.
- It's a skinny little island, only about 3.5 miles long and 1.5 miles wide, but it's the destination of hundreds of people each year who brave a long journey involving trains, boats, and busses just to get there.

3 Map of Western Scotland

4 Isle of Iona

- At first glance it's hard for people to tell what the big deal is about Iona.
- Sure, it's a quiet place where you can get away from the sounds of civilization.
- Only about a hundred people live on the island, given its remote location.
- And while it's a beautiful place with emerald green grass, old stone buildings, and a landscape dotted with sheep that far outnumber the people, it's also a place where the rain and wind off the North Sea can drive right through you no matter how good your rain gear might be.

5 A Thin Place

- And yet, there's something mystical about this place -- the place where Saint Columba landed sometime in the sixth century to establish a monastic community, having fled his native Ireland.
- The old, 12th-century abbey still stands on the east side of the isle and acts as a sentinel of the island's past.
- It was there the monks welcomed many visitors who came to the island, searching for something missing in their souls.
- They were people who knew the early reputation of the place as what the native Gaels called a "thin place."

6 What is a Thin Place

- Unlike so many Westerners who think that heaven is some place far away and far removed from Earth, the Gaels (Scot-Irish) believed that heaven and Earth were really about three feet apart.
- Sometimes, they thought, that such a distance was even smaller --small enough for those on Earth to get a glimpse of the glory of heaven (See Halloween).
- The Gaels believed that Iona was (and still is by many) a place where people could feel that thinness and experience the kind of revelations and feelings that one might have when so close to the holy.

- They believed that was true of other places as well, usually places far away from the crowd and wrapped in both mist and mystery.

7 Looking for Thin Places

- The famous 20th century Trappist monk Thomas Merton once wrote that thin places are even more prevalent than the ancient Gaels believed, but we just don't see them.
- "Life is simple," he wrote. "We are living in a world that is absolutely transparent, and God is shining through it all the time ... if we abandon ourselves to God and forget ourselves, we see it sometimes ... the only thing is that we don't (let ourselves) see it."

8 Thin Places in the Bible

- A common example of a "Thin Place" in the Bible is when Elijah unexpectedly experienced the Lord's presence in the "gentle whisper," when he was depressed and looking for answers.
- Then a great and powerful wind tore the mountains apart and shattered the rocks before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind.
- After the wind there was an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake.
- After the earthquake came a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire.
- And after the fire came a gentle whisper. When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave. (1 Kings 19:11-13 NIV)

9 Bethlehem

- Each year during Christmas thousands of pilgrims come to Bethlehem to worship the Lord and remember a time when this small and insignificant village was for, a moment in time, a "Thin Place."
- The Temple in Jerusalem was the ultimate "Thin Place," for Judaism.
- It was here Yahweh lived. All sacrifices, worship, and prayer were to be offered only at this special "Thin Place."
- In fact, it was a sin to worship Yahweh at any other place other than the "Thin Place" at Jerusalem.
- Even today, Jews offer their prayers at the site of its ruins by writing their prayers on small pieces of paper and sticking them between the stone blocks.

10 Thin Places in the Bible

- Peter, James, and John experienced a "Thin Place," on the Mountain of Transfiguration where they were eyewitnesses of Jesus' majesty.

- After six days Jesus took Peter, James and John with him and led them up a high mountain, where they were all alone. There he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them. And there appeared before them Elijah and Moses, who were talking with Jesus. (Mark 9:2–4 NIV)
- Peter said to Jesus, “Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us put up three shelters — one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.” (He did not know what to say, they were so frightened.) (Mark 9:5–6 NIV)

11 Thin Place

- A lot of times when we do come across a “thin place,” we don’t know what to do.
- Peter, because he was so frightened, thought that the best thing to do was to construct a tabernacle and make the ground sacred.
- [But] Then a cloud appeared and enveloped them, and a voice came from the cloud: “This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!” (Mark 9:7 NIV)
- The significance of this event is not that the ground was special, but that Jesus was special and one whom we should give our special attention.

12 Finding “Thin Places”

- If “Thin Places” are where we come in contact with the Divine, where can we find these portals right here in Lexington, Kentucky.
- Do we have to go to Iona, Canterbury, Lourdes, Jerusalem, or Mecca?
- In my study of God’s Word, there are “Thin Places” all around us.
- However, we must ignore the pagan definition of “Thin Places.”
- Thin places are not some time and space portal in nature, but promises that God gives us to draw near.

13 Promise of Thin Places

- Surely his salvation is near those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land. (Psa 85:9 NIV)
- The LORD is near to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth. (Psa 145:18 NIV)
- Who may ascend the hill of the LORD? Who may stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to an idol or swear by what is false. (Psa 24:3–4 NIV)
- The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit. (Psa 34:18–19 NIV)
- For this is what the high and lofty One says — he who lives forever, whose name is holy: “I live in a high and holy place, but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite. (Is 57:15 NIV)

14 Promises of Thin Places

- Those who are far from you will perish; you destroy all who are unfaithful to you. (Psa 73:27 NIV)
- Salvation is far from the wicked, for they do not seek out your decrees. (Psa 119:155 NIV)
- The LORD is far from the wicked but he hears the prayer of the righteous. (Prov 15:29 NIV)
- Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near. (Is 55:6 NIV)

15 The Promise of Thin Places

- How many here tonight have ever been at the place in your life where you were downcast, confused, and discouraged to the point of wanting to give up?
- At the time, how many realized that you were at a very special place,—a “Thin Place,” where heaven and Earth come together?
- How many took advantage of this unique opportunity and poured out your soul to the Lord and experienced an epiphany of divine grace?
- Did you not know that God is close to the brokenhearted, humble, and those that are contrite in heart?
- If we slow down and listen, we might just hear His voice speaking to us because there at that place and point in time is a “Thin Place.”

16 Immanuel

- Today, it's not the Bethlehem of modern-day Israel that we need to pilgrimage to in order to experience the thin place of Jesus' birth.
- We can do that right where we are by simply focusing on the promises of God's intimacy with those who are upright in heart.
- He doesn't come with chariots rolling or guns blazing, but in the soft skin and helpless posture of a baby, born to a family who number themselves among the poorest of the poor.
- Nevertheless, this baby born in Bethlehem was someone very special, who by virtue of His name means “Thin Place.”
- As the prophet Isaiah's says, “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” — which means, “God with us.” (Matt 1:23 NIV)
- If God is with us then he is also near. So, let us call upon His name while He can be found.

17 Conclusion

- So, as you prepare for Christmas, perhaps the best preparation is to take some time to go to a quiet place and consider that God is not far away, that the king is quite near and his kingdom is at hand.
- Allow yourself to live in the reality of who God is and what God has done in Jesus.
- Take a pilgrimage into the heart of the biblical story of Christmas and read it as if you're seeing it for the first time.
- Serve someone who needs to experience the reality that God has come to give them real hope.
- May your Christmas be thin!