

**FIRST PARISH CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH  
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST  
East Derry, New Hampshire**

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Trinity Sunday

11 June 2006

Isaiah 6:1-8

John 3:1-17

I remember the first time I went to Scotland, in 1982, and we visited the Jedburgh Abbey, which is much more a ruin than anything that might be called a church. My friend Cathy Barker and I stepped inside the walls, took one look at each other and burst into the Mozart *Alleluia*

*Sing:* Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia...

Twenty-four years later and I still can't begin to put words on why, standing there on the wet grass where there used to be a floor, surrounded by towering walls of stone, walls with a jagged and uneven roof line, if you can call it that because there was no sign whatsoever of a roof, no pews or even lines of chairs for worshipers – just a few benches tucked along the side. Why, in that shell of a building, I felt the presence of the holy in a way so intense that I still tear up at the thought of it. But it was real and it was overwhelming, and all I could do was sing praise to God and then stand in awesome silence.

And then there's the day a few years ago, when we brought a friend from Zimbabwe into this sanctuary. We had walked Chipo through the building. She'd seen the classrooms downstairs and the historic displays in Macgregor and marveled at the kitchen in Currier. When we walked in to the back of the sanctuary, she caught her breath, looked around the room and looked at me, and said God is so great! God is so great! And then she said, I just want to kneel and pray. At which point, she walked up here near the front, slipped into a pew, and knelt down – nearly disappeared from my sight. And when she stood up, her face was streaming with tears – all for the joy of being in love with God, and of being in the presence of the God she loves with all her heart and soul.

And then there's Isaiah. While Cathy, Chipo and I are all apt to say we felt the presence of God, Isaiah said that he saw God – high and lofty atop a throne. The hem of God's robe became the longest train anyone had ever seen and it filled the entire temple. Angels danced in attendance around God, covering their faces and their feet in reverence while they scurried about setting things right. The whole building shook with the thunderous voices that called out, the room swirled with smoke and Isaiah trembled at the power of the presence that surrounded him. Hair raising, breath-taking splendor, and all Isaiah could know for sure was that he fell short. He didn't measure up. He couldn't possibly do enough, be enough, learn enough, love enough to deserve a place in the midst of all this splendor. At which point Isaiah was touched by a live coal that burned away whatever tarnish and stain he might have carried and left him stamped with God's holy seal of approval, ready for service, in line for his first assignment.

You might or might not know it, but when we put our order of worship together, we try in some way to replicate Isaiah's experience. The very top of the bulletin most Sundays says that we come into the presence of God, and I hope that in the music, in the call to worship, in the fabric of this space, you feel some of that sense of the holy. Once we're in the presence of God, we pray; and sometimes it's a prayer of confession, because you can't be in the majestic, holy splendor of God's presence without becoming aware of the ways in which you fall short. So we confess and we seek the cleansing fire of that coal and of God's gracious touch of forgiveness. And then we're ready to hear God's word for us. Once we've heard the word, we can respond: with prayer, with our offerings, and by being sent out for service and mission.

That's the plan. Now you tell me. How often do you feel a sense of the holy? How often are you aware that you are in the presence of God, that something bigger than you or us is here, now and at work in and through and among us? Does it happen in this place when we gather to worship? When the children gather around and push and shove and question and answer and follow the rainbow as it moves around the room? When the dancers dance? When the songs are sung? Or maybe in the echoing moment when the song has ended and the room pulses with the power of what we've just experienced. In the moment when we all fall silent and catch our breath and simply let the wonder of it all hold us in a sense of mystery and awe? I know it doesn't happen every week. And I know it doesn't happen for all of us at the same time, or triggered by the same piece of worship. And I know it may never happen for some. But I really do hope that there are times and ways in which each of us can feel some sense of the holy, some whisper of the presence of God, some spine tingling, hair raising, breath stopping sense that we're a part of a mystery and a majesty that is far larger than us. Some awareness that even if we can't see it, taste it, measure it, dissect it, control it or comprehend it, it's real and it's here and it's now and it's God.

This winter when some of us were studying Marcus Borg's book *The Heart of Christianity*, I met the Celtic phrase "thin places". There are at least two aspects of life that most of us are aware of: one is the visible world of our everyday, ordinary experience, and the other is God, the sacred, Spirit. Thin places are those moments and times when the space between those two levels of reality is very thin, maybe they even intersect or meet in some way. Thin places are the times when we can almost touch and feel and know something of the truth of God. The veil momentarily lifts and we behold God, we experience the one in whom we live, all around us and within us. (pages 155-156) Thin places are the time and ways in which we catch a glimpse of who God is and how God is present and real and at work in our midst.

You may or may not experience those moments in worship or in a building. I know I almost always bask in those thin places when I'm on top of a mountain, feeling the wind of God's Spirit cool my face and embrace my body. I've known the mystery of the hand of God on the sailboat when the wind fills the sails, not too full but just enough to send us gliding along the water's surface. I recently saw the glimmer of God in a waiting room outside a pediatric intensive care unit as family and friends and pastors and hospital chaplain gathered together and embraced the great good news of a youth stirring back to wakefulness. I felt the presence of God and the mystery of a thin place as we worked together in New Orleans tearing out sheetrock, weeping at the story of lives uprooted by wind and water, as a woman with a shattered home and a dispersed family was wrapped in a shawl of prayer and comfort from a congregation far away. God comes

to us. When we serve funeral receptions, when we teach church school lessons, when we drive others to appointments, when we make phone calls and deliver meals and offer a hand, God is among us. God calls to us to know and feel and give thanks and respond. Some of it is just us doing what we've been taught to do. And yet at the very same time, there's this mysterious truth of something more, something bigger, something holy, something God.

Marcus Borg tells the story of a three year old girl who had enjoyed being the only child in the family for three years. And yet, when her mother got pregnant, the girl also grew very excited about having a new brother or sister. Eventually the baby brother was born, and within a few hours of the parents bringing him home from the hospital, big sister made a request: she wanted to be alone with her new brother in his room with the door closed. Her insistence on being alone with the baby with the door shut made her parents a bit uneasy, but they also were aware that they had installed an intercom system in anticipation of the baby's arrival, so they decided that they could let their daughter have what she was asking, and if they heard the slightest indication that anything strange was happening, they could be in the baby's room in an instant. So they let the little girl into the baby's room, shut the door and raced to the intercom listening station – and held their breath. They heard their daughter's footsteps moving across the baby's room, imagined her standing over the baby's crib, and then heard her saying to her three-day old brother, "Tell me about God – I've almost forgotten." (*The Heart of Christianity*, pages 113-114)

There's something in that story that's compelling and powerful for me. It suggests that we come from God, that perhaps at some point in our lives we have known God, maybe even seen God. But we grow up, we get busy, we are distracted by the ways and wisdom and worldliness of our everyday lives, and we forget. And so we're given thin places. We're invited to worship. We're gifted with the presence of one who is so holy and wondrous and awesome that all we can do is stand back and soak it in. I wish for all of us times and places in which we can be reminded of God, we can feel embraced by God, we can know the presence of God.

*Sing:* Alleluia, alleluia, alleluia, alleluia...