

Psalm 84
Week 4
Little Altars Everywhere

Scripture: Psalm 84 (NRSV)

How lovely is your dwelling place,
O Lord of hosts!

²My soul longs, indeed it faints,
for the courts of the Lord;
my heart and my flesh sing for joy
to the living God.

³Even the sparrow finds a home
and the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may lay her young,
at your altars, O Lord of hosts,
my King and my God.

⁴Happy are those who live in your house,
ever singing your praise. *Selah*

⁵Happy are those whose strength is in you,
in whose heart are the highways to Zion.^[a]

⁶As they go through the valley of Baca,
they make it a place of springs;
the early rain also covers it with pools.

⁷They go from strength to strength;
the God of gods will be seen in Zion.

⁸O Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer;
give ear, O God of Jacob! *Selah*

⁹Behold our shield, O God;
look on the face of your anointed.

For a day in your courts is better
than a thousand elsewhere.

I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God
than live in the tents of wickedness.

¹¹For the Lord God is a sun and shield;
he bestows favor and honor.

No good thing does the Lord withhold

from those who walk uprightly.

¹² O Lord of hosts,

happy is everyone who trusts in you.

One of my favorite parts of the day is walking into my house after being gone all day. It doesn't matter where I've been that day, whether I've been at work or out having fun, I am always glad to be home. If our dog, Shadow (who is turning 5 years old today), hasn't been with me, he greets me with the smile and tail wagging Labs are known for. But even before Shadow rescued us, coming home gave me a feeling of safety, well-being, and gratitude. What I've noticed is, the older I get, the more pronounced that feeling is, the more I look forward to home. I often joke that I am the person who makes plans to go out and do something fun and when the time comes to do the something fun, I want to cancel. If I don't cancel, I am almost always ready to go home before any other reasonable person would be. If I can't be in Jamaica, home is my happy place for sure.

I've learned that there are certain things that make our home feel homey to me. I've given up on the trendy neutral color palette realtors encourage. I've learned that having some vibrant colors around brings me joy and makes me smile. So, I brought some of my favorite splashes of color with me today in the form of the bottle brush trees on the communion table. And I asked the rest of the staff to bring something from their homes that makes them feel comfortable or "at home."

(note who brought what)

If you had been asked to bring something for the communion table this morning, what would you have brought?

There is a member of our family for whom coziness is very important. She loves soft blankets and comfy couches. The couches in her home are packed with pillows and there is almost always a candle burning in the living room. She likes soft, warm lighting (like fairy lights) and sorts all things into two categories: cozy or not. We joke with her about her desire for all things cozy, but really, the attention she pays to her surroundings is good for her mental health and truth be told, the rest of us like being in her cozy home.

Places and what our places are like matters. If we asked the ancient Israelites if place was important to them, they probably would have talked to us about

Jerusalem. Jerusalem, you see, was the place to go to be close to the Holy. The temple was in Jerusalem and the Divine was in the temple. Psalm 84 celebrates the incomparable power of the city of Jerusalem to stir the religious imagination of the faithful. This psalm, and the other psalms called Psalms of Zion, are expressions of the longing the Israelites had to permanently reside in the sacred space of their beloved Jerusalem. Pilgrims would sing these songs as they made their way to and from the temple, confident that whatever they encountered on the road was worth it, for they were under the care of the One they were traveling to honor.

The psalmist's words, "...a day in your courts is better than thousands elsewhere" (Psalm 84:9b) were more than just poetic words in a song.

The people of ancient Israel would not have known this term, but what they experienced in Jerusalem, specifically at the temple, was what we call a thin place. A thin place is a place where the distance between this world and the Mystery beyond the here and now world is collapsed, this Mystery sort of seeps into ordinary life. Of course, this definition assumes the belief that there is something beyond our present reality. Even if that's not something that resonates with you, a thin place is a place in which you feel especially connected to your roots and to who you really are and were meant to be.

The idea of thin places is rooted in Celtic spirituality and the Celtic Christians, who were deeply connected to nature and believed that every aspect of life is infused with the presence of the Divine, even (or perhaps, especially) the ordinary elements of everyday life. Theologian and spiritual director, Dr. Lacy Ellman writes, "While historically the ancient Celts viewed thin places as locations or moments in the cycle of the year where the veil between the world and the spiritual realm diminished and they could encounter those who had gone before them, today thin places are more commonly considered locations in which there is an undeniable connection to the Sacred."¹ In his *Spiritual Message to the World* in 1931, Mahatma Gandhi spoke about the way in which he perceived his connection to the Sacred, "There is an indefinable, mysterious power that pervades everything. I feel it, though I do not see it. It is this unseen power that makes itself felt and yet defies all proof, because it is so unlike all that I perceive through my senses." For Gandhi, that mysterious power was God, but it doesn't have to be. After all, mystery is mystery.

¹ <https://www.asacredjourney.net/thin-places/>, accessed 2/10/23.

When we experience a thin place, we experience raw, sometimes hard to face truth, but also the peace and comfort of knowing that whatever the truth is, we have everything we need to live with and into that truth. Thin places captivate our imagination and allow us to dream big dreams, yet we tend to become very aware of our relative smallness, and yet again, we somehow connect to and acknowledge that we are part of something bigger than we can fully understand. *Thin places* are different than *thin moments*, which are when we *experience* something that causes us to feel connected to the Sacred because of that experience. In my own life, those experiences have been moments like the birth of a baby, at the bedside of a beloved who is dying, or at times when I have seen human beings perfectly reflecting the character of the Holy. These are all thin moments.

A thin place is an actual place. It is a place that we are drawn to for itself, not because of something that is happening there, but because that place is there. We can search for thin places (and ultimately, I think we all do), but very often the thin places find us. They take us by surprise and maybe even take our breath away. And one of the reasons they surprise us is that, very often, the place is far more ordinary than we might expect. It's under a tree or in a chair by the window or on an old dirt road. To find them, or to let them find us, we must be open to them. Some people pass through a place and find sacredness and others pass through the same place and do not. I would say that we must slow down long enough to notice them, but my experience with thin places has been that it is the noticing of them that causes me to slow down.

John and I honeymooned in San Francisco and Napa Valley. Like typical tourists, we rented bikes and road them across the Golden Gate bridge and then we went on to the hills of Sausalito. It was one of those magical bike rides when we didn't care how far we rode because up around every corner there was something new and beautiful. We just kept going. We were riding up a steep hill, and as we rounded a corner, we were greeted with one of the most incredible views I've ever experienced. We put our bikes down and walked over to the edge. It was a gorgeous, sunny day. When we looked down at the water, there on a big rock, were sea lions sunning themselves and others sort of frolicking in the water. There was something about that place...it felt like the Holy was right there,

coaxing us over to look, saying, “Come over here...I can’t wait for you to see this.” I tell you what, even the Napa Valley wine couldn’t hold a candle to that place.

Travel blogger, Mindie Burgoyne describes her experiences with thin places, “Thin Places,” she writes, “are ports in the storm of life, where the pilgrims can move closer to the God they seek, where one leaves that which is familiar and journeys into the Divine Presence. They are stopping places where human beings [men and women] are given pause to wonder about what lies beyond the mundane rituals, the grief, trials, and boredom of our day-to-day life. They probe to the core of the human heart and open the pathway that leads to satisfying the familiar hungers and yearnings common to all people on earth, the hunger to be connected, to be a part of something greater, to be loved, to find peace.”² If you’ve been paying close attention, you might be thinking the ways in which I have talked about these thin places have contradicted one another. You might thinking, which is it? Is God everywhere, in all of us, or is God in special, sacred places? Yes, I’ve decided.

Two things can be true. It can be true that there is sacredness in and around all of creation *and* that there are places in which that sacredness pulls us in and connects us to something mysteriously beautiful. The world is literally bursting with sacred places. And I think that’s a good thing because we need them. We need to feel small and part of something big at the same time. We need to find ourselves in the truth that thin places reveal and realize that the truth is liberating, even if it’s difficult. Just as the ancient Israelites longed to be with the Holy in Jerusalem, we long for the places in which we find God or Mystery or our Roots. This is why it is good for us to pay attention to the places in which we spend most of our time---our homes, offices, churches, and yards, especially when so much of the world feels dark.

Creating spaces that give us a sense of connection to our true selves and to something beyond ourselves isn’t just a warm and cozy thing to do. It is truly good for us. These spaces, these little altars everywhere, are places to go when we feel adrift, alone, and sad. Science has confirmed that our actions, thoughts, and feelings are not only shaped by our genes, neurochemistry, history, and relationships, but also by our surroundings. Coincidentally, this is the same science that identified the effects of seasonal changes and the amount of sunlight to which we are exposed. Paying attention to our surroundings and creating

² <http://www.thinplace.net/2008/05/what-is-thin-place.html>, accessed, 2/10/23.

spaces that make it seem the distance between us and the Mystery of Love and Life is diminished, anchors us and gives us peace.

I ran into a man this week who used to come to worship pretty regularly. Every time I see him, I tell him I miss him, and in the past, he has shared that he has taken to worshipping outside at Osage Hills. An avid runner and biker, I can't fault him. I tend to feel connected to the Holy outside too. When I visited with him this week, though, he explained that there is a particular place he goes, one that not a lot of people know about, to be with himself and to connect with whatever is beyond this time and place. This place gives him peace and makes him feel at home in the world. In a sense, it his own little altar. And we each need one.

Don't get me wrong, I don't want y'all to find another place to be on Sunday mornings. We need each other. We need this place that has been made sacred over and over again because of the love that is shared here. But we also need our own spaces, places we can go to anchor ourselves in the truth...the truth that we are loved by a force that is more powerful than darkness, a force that is the source of light for all people. So, because of that, our assignment this week is to create our own little altar this week. Allow that place you feel most at home to become that for you. Add to it candles or colors or blankets, whatever makes it feel like you belong there. And then make time to be there, all by yourself. And I bet you will be met there.

I will end this morning with this bit of inspiration written by English mystic and author, Julian of Norwich. In her writings titled, *Revelations of Divine Love*, she wrote simply, "The fullness of joy is to behold God in everything." And I would add, "in everyone." Amen.