

The ancient Celts spoke of thin places; those holy, liminal spaces where heaven brushes against earth, where time bends, where the sacred presses so close you could reach out and touch the divine.

Thin places are the moments when the veil lifts, when the ordinary dissolves into the extraordinary, when God is so near that breath catches in your throat.

For some, thin places are geographical. The island of Iona, the holy land of Jerusalem, the worn stones of Santiago de Compostela.

For others, thin places exist in nature; a glacial lake at sunrise, a forest alive with the chorus of creation, a majestic vista that carries your gaze across rolling hills and open water, where sky and earth seem to breathe in tandem, or the crest of a hill where wind and spirit tangle together.

Or in music, where a single chord can crack open the heart. Or in books, where stories tell the truth that illuminate life in ways that invite you to greater understanding of this world.

A thin place is where we are exposed to the weight of glory, where grace and beauty overwhelm the routine and mundane. It is where joy and suffering are held in the same breath.

And in response, we worship, not because God demands it, but because beauty does.

The old Anglo-Saxon word for worship, “worth-ship,” speaks to this truth. To worship is to acknowledge the worth of something, to stand in reverence before the weight of beauty, to recognize holiness when it leans in close.

Irish poet and theologian John O’Donohue once said that beauty is “that which makes you feel fully alive.” Maybe that’s why Peter, James, and John wanted to stay on that mountain.

They had seen beauty in its rawest form, and they felt fully alive. They wanted to remain in that radiance because they knew how often God feels distant. They wanted to hold onto that light because they knew how quickly the shadows return.

Maybe that’s why you came here. You came seeking something beyond the ordinary. You came hoping to glimpse something of God.

You came wondering if there’s more than the days that bleed into each other, more than the tired routines, more than a job that drains you, more than relationships that have lost their fire, more than dreams swallowed whole by obligation. You come hoping for a thin place.

I know that's why I come to church. Other than the fact that I get paid to. I come longing for the veil to lift, for the light to shine, for a taste of the divine.

Some say this is foolishness. A fantasy. A self-imposed delusion. Maybe they're right.

Or maybe worship is training for the soul, a way to prepare us for the long nights, the hard losses, the moments when beauty is buried beneath despair. Maybe remembering beauty gives us the courage to seek it in the places we least expect.

I know the longing for the mountain. I have felt its pull. I once nearly stayed there.

In March 1996, I spent a week in a monastery—St. Augustine's House in Michigan. I was convinced I was meant to be a monk. It had been three years of discernment, of reading and praying, of waking in the dark to chant psalms, of falling in love with silence.

When I arrived at St. Augustine's, I felt like I had arrived home. The rhythm of work and prayer, the steady heartbeat of monastic life spoke to my soul. And I felt fully alive.

I stood in the monastery chapel and let the incense wrap itself around me. The statuary quietly proclaimed the gospel story. The stained glass flickered in the candlelight.

The silence was thick, and I breathed it in like air after a storm. Like Peter on the mountain, I thought, “It’s good that I be here.”

I almost stayed. I really wanted to. But I also wanted to finish my semester. So I packed up and left, believing I would return.

That night, I stepped off the bus in Kitchener, walked straight to the Station Hotel; a dingy dive bar with cheap beer, bikers, sex workers, and the ghosts of lost dreams.

My friends and I had been doing what we jokingly called “mission work” at the Station Hotel for a church history class. The assignment was vague, something about connecting with the community. We decided to baptize our usual Friday afternoon beer-drinking ritual into a ministry of presence.

In clergy circles, a “ministry of presence” is when a chaplain sits with a family in the waiting room, when a volunteer holds the hand of someone fading into dementia. It’s about showing up, about being with.

But some clergy take it a step further, believing that their mere existence in a space somehow sanctifies it. That their holiness will radiate, that just by sipping a coffee at Tim Hortons, the kingdom of God will inch closer and they are a quiet healing presence by virtue of just sitting there.

That was the version of ministry my friends and I chose. And so we put on our clerical collars, walked into the Station Hotel, and ordered a round of beer. If nothing else, we figured we'd get an A for effort.

The regulars took notice. Some were intrigued, others suspicious. But doors opened. Stories spilled out. Confessions happened in the bathroom stalls. Pool games turned into theology debates.

And that night, freshly back from the monastery, I found myself sitting with a man who claimed to have once been a professional hockey player. Now he said he was a professional drinker.

We talked. He told me his life story. And then, quietly, he asked me to pray for him. So I did. Right there in the middle of that grimy bar, with the jukebox playing and the smell of stale beer in the air. He didn't care who saw. And neither did I.

And for a moment, the light flickered in his eyes. A glimpse of something beyond the alcohol, beyond the loneliness, beyond the regret. A thin place. A mountain top.

And suddenly, I knew I had been wrong. Just as Peter was wrong when he wanted to stay on the mountain. God didn't want me cloistered away in a monastery. I wasn't

meant to dwell in silence and candlelight and contemplative reading.

I was meant to be HERE, in the noise, in the grit, in the mess of human connection. This was where my mountain met the valley. This was where Jesus was waiting.

On the mountain, Jesus was transfigured. His garments gleamed white, his face shone brighter than the sun. And Peter, James, and John fell to their knees, overwhelmed with wonder and terror. A voice reminded them who Jesus was. And so they worshipped.

That worship prepared them for what lay ahead. For the road down the mountain. For the suffering and the sorrow. For the weight of the cross.

Because thin places do not exist for their own sake. They exist to prepare us for the valleys. They exist so that when the beauty fades, when the light dims, when God feels distant, we will remember.

Where is your mountain top? Where do you meet God in the beauty of holiness? Where is your thin place? Where do you feel fully alive?

Because it is there, in that place, where the sacred and the ordinary collide, where the veil lifts, where the fire burns. It is there where the mission begins.

Because the beauty of God is not meant to be hoarded. It is meant to be carried down the mountain, into the streets, into the broken places, into the hurting world.

So go. Go from here and take the light with you. Go and find the thin places in the unexpected corners. Go and be fully alive.

And when you do, someone else just might be too.

Amen.