

The Rev. Alanna Sullivan:

Good morning, and welcome to morning prayers. Today's service will begin with the responsive reading from the Black Appleton Selter book, Psalm 121. Please stand as you are able as we read by full verse."I will lift up mine eyes onto the hills from whence cometh my help."

Congregation:

"My help cometh from the Lord, which made Heaven and Earth."

The Rev. Alanna Sullivan:

"He will not suffer by foot to be moved. He that keepeth thee will not slumber."

Congregation:

"Behold, he that keepeth Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep."

The Rev. Alanna Sullivan:

"The Lord is thy keeper. The Lord is thy shade upon my right hand."

Congregation:

"The sun shall not smite thee by day, nor the moon by night."

The Rev. Alanna Sullivan:

"The Lord shall preserve the from all evil. He shall preserve thy soul."

Congregation:

"The Lord shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in from this time forth, and even for evermore."

Choir:

(Singing)

The Rev. Alanna Sullivan:

Today's lesson comes from the Gospel according to Mark chapter nine, beginning at the second verse. "Six days later, Jesus took with him Peter and James and John and led them up to a high mountain apart by themselves. And he was transfigured before them. His clothes became dazzling white, such as no one on earth could bleach them. And there appeared to them Elijah, with Moses who were talking with Jesus. Then Peter said to Jesus, "Rabbi, it is good for us to be here. Let us make three dwellings, one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah." He did not know what to say, for they were terrified.

Then a cloud overshadowed them. And from the cloud there came a voice. "This is my son, the Beloved. Listen to Him." And suddenly when they looked around, they saw no one was with him anymore, but only Jesus." Here ends the lesson.

Scott Russell Sanders opens up his wonderful memoir, *The Private History of Awe*, recounting some of his first childhood memories. For four year old Scott, there was nothing grander in the world than a huge oak tree by his house growing up. "It was the tallest thing I knew. Taller than a barn, taller than the windmill in the pasture. Taller than the steeple on our church." And then he recalls that during a

thunderstorm, he watched the oak sway, it's fat limbs thrashing as if it were a sapling. And then suddenly a flash and a boom light up the air. Out on the road with great oak tree snapped like a stick and it's top shattered on the road, a charred streak running down the wet gray stub of the trunk. Scott writes "One moment, the great tree there stood by the road as solid as my father, bigger than anything I knew. And then the next moment it was gone. That erasure still haunts me over half a century later. I still ring with the astonishment that I felt that day when the sky cracked open to reveal a world where even grownups were tiny, houses were toys, wood and skin, and everything was made of light."

I wonder if the disciples would have described their experience on the mountaintop that day, that way. Would they say that the sky cracked open and everything was made of light when Jesus was transfigured before them?

And his clothes became so dazzling light that no one on earth could bleach them. In our own lives, how do we describe what in life defies logic and is beyond our imaginations? Or better yet, are we left without words like the disciples to describe what we have experienced? I grew up listening to my grandmother talk about the dramatic wind swept post land and rocky peaks of her beloved home, Ireland. She used to say that there were places where it felt like the distance between heaven and earth kissed one another.

I later learned the Celtic saying, "Heaven and earth are only three feet apart, but in thin places that distance is even shorter." So what exactly is a thin place? A thin place does not have to be a peaceful or beautiful or striking one, although it can be one of those things. I believe that thin places are those spaces and moments when we are unmasked and transformed. Something inside of us is fundamentally altered and we become acutely aware of how connected we are to the world around us. And a thin place is not necessarily but what we see from the outside, but how we are transfigured on the inside.

I love Barbara Brown Taylor's description of thin places. She writes, "You are more a whale of the thin veil between apparent reality and deep reality. You pull aside the veil just for a moment so you can see through." She goes on to say, "Thin places aren't always lovely places. They're not always outdoors. Hospital rooms can be thin places. So can emergency rooms and jail cells. A thin place is any place that you drop down to know that you're in the presence of the really real, the most real God if you insist."

So yes, thin places might be where we expect to encounter them. For instance, on a mountaintop where the air itself is thin. A place that stretches so far into the sky that it seems to be reaching for heaven. And it is telling that we often call what happens in such places, wherever we experience them, mountaintop experiences. But thin places are not only found in rarefied settings.

We can encounter them in places that are thick with anxiety like a hospital room, or places that at first glance seemed far from heaven, like a jail cell. In the end, what causes us to experience a place as thin is not only God's nearness but our own openness to that holy presence, our ability to see and taste, hear and experience the kiss of heaven and earth.

Will you pray with me?

God, open our hearts to see the thin places in our lives. Help us to know Your holy presence on mountaintops, in hospital rooms and jail cells. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

The Rev. Alanna Sullivan:

And let us join together in saying the prayer that Jesus taught us, saying "Our Father, who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not to temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Will you please stand as you are able to sing the hymn O Thou Great Friend to All of Us, the Love. Hymn number 230 found in your crimson Harvard Hymnal.

Congregation/Choir:

(Singing)

The Rev. Alanna Sullivan:

As we go into this day, may the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord's face shine upon you and be gracious unto you. And may the Lord grant you peace and the gathered people said amen.

Congregation:

Amen.