

Transfiguration A
Peace, Seattle
February 26, 2017
Matthew 17:1-9

THIN PLACES, THIN PEOPLE

After a trans-Atlantic flight, a four hour train ride, and two ferry crossings—and one harrowing bus ride in between—we'd arrived at our longed for destination—the Isle of Iona off the west coast of Scotland.

Iona is the name given both to the island itself and to the community which traces its spiritual roots to the monastery founded there by St. Columba in the year 563.

A century after Rome's empire crumbled and a thousand years before Luther stalked the streets of Wittenberg, Iona was gaining a reputation as a center for Christian learning, craftsmanship, and mission.

Being on that soil not only put us in touch with latter day writers and composers whose work we knew; it linked us to the Celtic heritage that has made Iona a pilgrims' destination for centuries.

Met by new friends at the ferry landing, we walked together to MacLeod Center for a warm reception over tea and biscuits. Our assigned room, we delighted to discover, looked north over rough pasture toward Dun'i, the highest hill on Iona, and a place that promised a splendid view.

That afternoon, Kai and I went walking up the road and found a gate that read: PATH TO DUN'I. Opening it, we took the trail past a few amply horned Highland cattle, and began to climb.

Scrambling up the treeless hill, we found our way to a rocky prominence above grazing sheep. But the summit still beckoned, so on and up we clambered until we arrived at the beehive shaped rock pile which marked the island's highest point.

The wind blew steady and strong as we looked west into the North Atlantic. We leaned into it and felt it holding us up. Then, looking south, we saw the whole island laid out before us in its entire rugged splendor.

When we turned west once more, we saw sunlight streaming through a hole in the clouds down to the ocean below, illuminating the surface with glistening light.

**LOOK DAD! Kai exclaimed, HEAVEN! HEAVEN'S COME DOWN TO EARTH!"
Indeed it had, and we were its witnesses!**

In some ways, the story of the Transfiguration doesn't make sense here in the middle of Jesus' journey to Jerusalem. Six days after he asked his friends, WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM? Six days after he told them the road ahead would be marked by opposition, suffering, and death, this story doesn't seem to fit very well.

Some have called it a misplaced resurrection story. Others claim that Matthew, Mark, and Luke weren't sure what to do with this account in which Jesus, suffused with dazzling light, talks with Moses and Elijah while Peter, James and John huddle in befuddlement nearby.

The three of them do know something awesome is unfolding before their eyes; that this mountain has become a holy place. It's Peter who hatches the idea of setting up camp to stay—and I get that.

There are special moments, places, encounters in our lives that we don't want to let go of—that we wish could go on and on and on. That moment with Kai on Dun'i was one of them for me.

I'm curious what stories you have of close encounters with the divine. What tale you could tell about heaven coming to earth; of when God captured your full attention, if only for a fleeting moment?

These epiphanies do happen. And you don't have to be Jesus, or go to Iona in order for that to be true. For God is always breaking into our world.

In today gospel that breaking in is manifested as glorious light illuminating the mountaintop. But it's also true, as the life of Jesus reveals, that God will show up veiled and nearly hidden in the bleakest of places.

Recognizing that latter truth; discovering God-with-us in the worst of times: in the midst of suffering and opposition, trial and abandonment—even death, this is also what Jesus is trying to train his disciples—and us—see.

George McLeod, who founded the new Iona Community in 1938 when he brought crews of unemployed craftsmen and pastors-in-training to rebuild the island's 12 century Abbey, famously called Iona “a thin place where only tissue paper separates the material from the spiritual.”¹

There are “thin places” like Iona around the globe. Peoples have recognized this for millennia. And there's something instinctive, I think, about wanting to mark these sacred places and moments in our lives; to extend our encounters with holy ground as far as we possibly can.

It can be tempting to set up camp there; to build an altar of sorts. But that is not where God would finally have us stay.

We must listen deeply to these experiences, yes. Let them inform and even reshape our lives, yes. Plumb the encounters for all they might mean, yes. But making them into shrines is not where our energy is needed. Instead, we must take our experiences with us as we go back down the mountain.

After the glorious light had faded and the Divine Voice had gone silent once more, the disciples look up and see no one except Jesus himself alone. As they begin going down the mountain, Jesus makes a curious command: TELL NO ONE ABOUT THE VISION UNTIL AFTER THE SON OF MAN HAS BEEN RAISED FROM THE DEAD.

None of what you've just experienced will make sense, he's saying, until after my cross and my empty tomb.

There are THIN PLACES in the world. And we, sisters and brothers, are called to be THIN PEOPLE; people in whom both the suffering and resurrection of Jesus are manifest.²

That is the holy ground God calls us to inhabit. And this Meal we share is nourishment for the way. Amen.

¹ See this website for more on George McLeod: <http://www.livingchurch.org/thin-place-iona>

²For more on “thin people” see my blogpost from our week on Iona: <http://sabbatical.peacelutheranseattle.org/2014/04/21/easter-week-at-iona-thin-place-or-thin-people/>