**Thresholds and Thin Places** Rev. Dr. Julia A. Carlson
Christ the King Sunday The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
John 18:33-37; Revelation 1:4b-8 Saint Paul, Minnesota
November 24, 2024

George McLeod, the founder of the Iona community said, “A thin place is where only tissue paper separates the material from the spiritual.” John Philip Newell defined a thin place as, “reconnecting with the Light.” Most importantly, both taught that “A ‘thin place’ is somewhere that we can be trained to see the thin-ness that is everywhere.” A thin place is then to see with new eyes, “a lifting of the veil” a place of revelation.

The Book of Revelation then could be described as a thin place. The very name, Apocalypse of John, indicates John of Patmos had a glimpse beyond the veil. It is a vivid book, one of startling, memorable, and violent images, and it carries the irony of being easily misunderstood and exploited. *Apocalypse* means “to reveal.” It does not mean to destroy or bring to an end. As many biblical scholars have stated: “The book of Revelation is not a script for the end of the world.”

Revelation is a primary example of ancient apocalyptic writing. Though the author instructs the reader to look for “words of prophesy,” he first names his writings as a testimony. It is not written in the prophetic style of the Old Testament prophets. It echoes Paul in its salutation and then it becomes a narrative of a personal, spiritual vision in the ancient apocalyptic style of literature.

The lectionary turns to Revelation today because it is a book of endings and beginnings, and this is the last Sunday in this year’s lectionary cycle. It is also one of the places Jesus claims to be the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.

Here, in the post-pandemic world and a congregation in interim, beginnings and endings have been on my mind for more than a year–so the notion of crossing between the old and the new and of thresholds became the theme for our pilgrimage to Scotland. Births and deaths, beginnings and endings, growth and change and the thresholds that come with all of these, for most of human history, were ritualized and central to the life of faith. In our time, we have lost the daily, quarterly, and yearly rituals and practices that sustained our ancestors through shifts.

Irish priest and writer John O’Donohue spoke these words in an interview with John Quinn: “I believe that any notion of balance that is really authentic has to work with the notion of threshold. Otherwise balance is just a functional strategy without any ontological depth of grounding. In the Western tradition, that line, that threshold between light and darkness, between soul and body, God and human, between ourselves and nature has often been atrophied” (*Walking in Wonder*, John O’Donohue and John Quinn).

To atrophy means to waste away or arrest our own development. It means, like Charles Dickens’ Miss Haversham, we leave everything exactly in place with the table set even though there are no guests until it is covered in cobwebs and the estate is sold off after death. Death, then, also becomes revelation. By declining to embrace and be changed by grief and loss or to decline new opportunities and ideas, we short-change our lives.

Many things can shift our reality but perhaps none so inwardly powerful as the death of a loved one; loss and grief sometimes reveal more than we can bear. There are two things of importance in that: first, it is facing the truth that who we were before loss is also passing on and accepting the person we are now becoming as a part of the grief work. And second, we benefit from safe, loving community as we grieve and make this transition. We need each other.

And then I suggest that the great lows and highs of Holy Week and Easter are the thinnest of thin places. Jesus can call to us from either sides of the grave to live life to its fullest, to do our grief work, to practice living and growing in community; to move ahead and try new things; to follow the biblical mandate to embrace the stranger, the foreigner, and our LGBTQ+ neighbors and friends.

Our recent election pulled back the veil on our country to reveal deeply held fears, the will to vote solely for personal gain, and the great harm done by the pervasive lies and misinformation. And now, it seems some are willing to establish and force upon us a religious empire. From what I have seen, Christian Nationalism is the hijacking of the name of Christ, of Jesus’ designation as the Anointed One, in order to give it to Caesar.

Christ the King Sunday was created by Pope Pius XI in 1925 as he saw the world becoming more secular. As much as I love this Sunday and its music, Kings and Queens were largely figureheads even in the last century and perhaps that is what we have done with Jesus. Some prefer the newer lectionary designation for this Sunday as the Reign of Christ. He did, after all, speak of having a kingdom but not of this earth. Even so, the designation leans into what Merriam Webster defines as the “ … dominion, sway or influence of a monarch” (Online Dictionary, [https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/reign 11/20/2024](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/reign%2011/20/2024), 10:11 a.m.). the greater question is, Who is Jesus for you? What calling does he have on your life?

I recently had a conversation with a young man who grew up with an intense exposure to a family member’s experiences of spirit but very little interaction with a congregation. Now, as a young adult, he regularly attends a church, has engaged more deeply with the Bible, and asks many questions of his pastor. He said that there's much he does not know but that he has the one most important thing, “I know that Jesus died on the cross to save me from my sins.” I suddenly had an image in my mind of Jesus as a lifeguard; Jesus pacing beside a swimming pool carrying a rescue tube.

Which is to say that Jesus dying to save us from our sins is both true but too narrow and, even more importantly, too passive. Our reading from Revelation today said: “To him who loves us and freed[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Revelation%201&version=NRSVUE#fen-NRSVUE-30686a)] us from our sins by his blood 6and made us a kingdom, priests serving[[b](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Revelation%201&version=NRSVUE#fen-NRSVUE-30687b)] his God and Father, ….” As I have been sharing since my studies at Luther, “The church does not have a mission, God’s mission has a church.” We are a priesthood of all believers; everyone here has a part in bringing the kin-dom of God through our actions each and every day.

A surge biblical language scholarship came with the Dead Sea Scrolls and other texts in recent decades. It has changed the way we read the book of Revelation. As theologian and professor Adela Collins wrote, “American premillennialists of the nineteen eighties view[ed] the Apocalypse of John as an encoded prediction of God's interventions into history in the last days by means of specific historical and political events.” This is the thinking that is imbedded in some of the Christianity around us. By studying other apocalyptic texts, Collins and many others have learned to read it differently and posit that “The Book of Revelation expresses what is real and what is good from the point of view of a believer in the God of Israel and the God of Christ. It thus provides a story in and through which the people of God discover who they are and what they are to do” (“Reading the Book of Revelation in the Twentieth Century, Adela Y. Collins).

Revelation does not reveal the future but asks us to assess our now. Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection have always been a summons to work beside him in his mission of redemption and love. As Walter Brueggemann recently wrote, “Like the ancient prophets, we are dispatched back to the good work entrusted to us. It is the work of peace-making. It is the work of truth-telling. It is the work of justice-doing. It is good work, but it requires our resolve to stay it, even in the face of the forces to the contrary that are sure to prevail for a season.”

In his book *Jesus Through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture*, church historian and theologian Yaroslav Pelikan found no less than 18 names for Jesus in different eras through history. Here are a few of the more interesting designations:

The Good, The True, The Beautiful; The Turning Point Of History;

The Light Of The Gentiles; The Monk Who Rules The World;

The Bridegroom Of The Soul; The Universal Man; The Mirror Of The Eternal;

The Teacher Of Common Sense; The Poet Of The Spirit; The Liberator;

and The Man Who Belongs To The World.

Just think for a moment about all this potential for growth in understanding and good news! Yet, there remains a great challenge: Through this work, Pelikan also came to believe that cultures through history have “created Jesus in [their] own image.” Ergo, in our time, we have Jesus with the AK-47 and I cannot even begin to unravel my griefs nor all of the ways my heart is breaking. Never in my life have I seen so many initiatives/beginnings that give me so little hope for the greater good.

As people who follow the Way of Jesus, here are a few reminders:

First, Jesus’ mission is broad and deep and it is meant to change the world but **not** by force and **not** by law. Jesus taught a conversion of the human heart. Anything else is not Jesus. Jesus is our teacher.

Secondly, I turn again to Irish priest and mystic John O’Donohue wrote, “ . . . your identity is not equivalent to your biography, and there is a place in you where you have never been wounded, where there is still, a sureness in you, where there’s a seamlessness in you, and where there is a confidence and tranquility in you. And I think the intention of prayer and spirituality and love is, now and again, to visit that inner kind of sanctuary.” I believe O’Donohue is describing the soul, our inner thin place. Jesus is himself a sanctuary. He is our peace

On our recent pilgrimage to Scotland, we spent two days on the island of Lewis and Harris. In the Outer Hebrides, the weather seems to change in fifteen minutes increments. The winds blow fiercely and the clouds and rains come and go quickly. All of this produces an amazing number of rainbows, exceptionally bright, incredibly dense, sometimes fully visible in the wide open space. I dismissed this symbol to my childhood faith long ago but someone on the bus reminded us all that it is a symbol of God’s promise to be faithful to humankind. The Triune God wants us to know how very thin the veil is and how close we are to the Presence we need. God, Christ, and Spirit are with us so let us also be resolute in God’s work.

Amen.