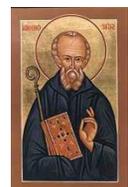


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There's a little island off the western coast of Scotland, only 3 miles long and 1-1/5 miles wide. Although it has a population of about only 120 people, over 130,00 people visit the Isle of Iona each year.¹ Maybe it's the white sandy beaches that attract people there, or the ancient ruins of monastic buildings and a nunnery. The old marble quarry still contains abandoned machines used to mine the stone, and the Hill of Iona stands 333 feet above sea level and allows visitors to view a panoramic scene of the whole island.



Besides the beautiful scenery, the island has a rich Christian history, beginning with Columba, an Irish priest who arrived in 563 and engaged in missionary work for 34 years from the island in a movement known as Celtic Christianity. In this mysterious and sacred place, people experience what's often called a "thin" place, which has nothing to do with the width of the island.

Celtic Christians believed that the distance between heaven and earth was very thin—only three feet. In thin places, the distance between heaven

and earth is even less, and it's here that we catch a glimpse of God's presence, where one can sense God's revelation and feel God's holiness. A thin place is usually located away from the crowds and chaos of life, a place where one can find solitude and quiet.

Some may be thinking, "I don't have the money to travel around the world to experience God in such a thin place, so what's it mean for me? The



20th century American monk Thomas Merton suggested that thin places are all around us,

"Life is simple," Merton wrote. "We are living in a world that is absolutely transparent, and God is shining through it all the time ... if we abandon ourselves to God and forget ourselves, we see it sometimes ... the only thing is that we don't (let ourselves) see it."²

One contemporary writer asks:



So what exactly makes a place thin?

It's easier to say what a thin place is not. A thin place is not necessarily a tranquil place, or a fun one, or even a beautiful one, though it may be

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all of those things too...Thin places relax us, yes, but they also transform us — or, more accurately, unmask us. In thin places, we become our more essential selves.

The writer suggested that a thin place may disorient us. “It confuses. We lose our bearings, and find new ones. Or not. Either way, we are jolted out of old ways of seeing the world.”³



I wonder if that’s the experience that the prophet Micah had as he encountered God in one of these “thin” places. He lived 2700 years ago during a time of chaos, when the Assyrian armies had invaded the land of Israel and Judah. The Assyrians invaded the northern capital city of Samaria and captured thousands of people. The armies then began to move south to where Micah lived, and thousands of his fellow citizens were slaughtered or taken captive. The Assyrian armies created a blockade around the capital city of Jerusalem, but amazingly the city escaped destruction.

In the midst of the chaos, Micah spoke out against those taking advantage of the people

struggling to survive. Some were seizing the property of others, women and children forcibly removed from their homes. Others were spreading fake news and lies about what was happening, and those in the roles of carrying out justice were corrupt. Micah knew that God was not happy about what was going on.

But then Micah seemed to enter a thin place as he spoke a word of hope, about a time when all people will stream to the mountain of God. People will turn their weapons into tools of peace— swords into the plowing blades to till the fields, and spears into pruning hooks to trim plants and reap a harvest. No longer would nations fight with one another, and no longer would people be afraid.



And then Micah envisioned how God would create a thin place in an insignificant little town called Bethlehem, for from this place a ruler would emerge, one who would feed the flock of people and bring peace, one who would bring heaven and earth closer together. Generations later, when people encountered Jesus, they remembered Jesus

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had been born in Bethlehem and connected Micah's hopes to Jesus.

As part of this vision for a new life, Micah exclaimed that God expects something of the people as well. Micah reminded them of how God had cared for the people, had led them out of slavery from the Pharaoh, and now God expected something from the citizens.

An unnamed person responds, "What shall I bring to you? Burnt offerings and one-year-old young calves?" The ritual offerings of sacrifice of animals had been a long-standing practice, one that we may have a hard time relating to today, but we could revise this question into our setting by asking, "What shall I bring you, God? My regular tithes that I always bring on Sunday? Is that enough?"

I'm guessing the speaker sensed this was not what God had in mind, so the person asked, "How about a thousand rams, with ten thousand rivers of oil?" Here the speaker exaggerates, for how could one bring a thousand gallons of olive oil? Or

imagine bringing a thousand animals into the sanctuary.

Today we might say, "Could I bring you millions of dollars' worth of stock? Or thousands of gold bars?"

And then the speaker offered the ultimate sacrifice: "Can I bring you my firstborn child to alleviate my sins?"

Micah cut through the hyperbole and exaggeration by offering a three-point solution to what God desires: Do, Love, Walk.

The first is **Do Justice**. As the *Message Bible* translates this phrase: "Do what is fair and just to your neighbor." Even at a young age, children begin to discern what's fair, as was the case of

a young man who was helping his mother serve pie to his father and their guests at the dinner table. [He understood the ideas of fairness and thinking of one's neighbor]. Each time the boy brought another piece of pie to the table, he would set it in front of his father, who would then pass it on to the others at the table. After



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watching his father do this several times, the boy leaned toward his father and whispered, “It’s no use, Dad. Mom cut all the pieces the same size.”⁴

The second thing Micah suggested is that we **Love Kindness**, or “be compassionate and loyal in your love.”

That’s something the Sikh couple Singh and Khalsa knew as they fed hungry people in their neighborhood. They said, “We have a lot of friends who are from different faiths, and in all honesty, it’s in in all of our faith to help others. I can tell you that in Sikhism, our simple point of being here is to help everybody, regardless of their personal faith, regardless of their sexual orientation, regardless of their personal circumstances. That is our job, and I think it’s a human’s job to do something like that.”⁵

And thirdly, Micah said, **Walk Humbly** with God, which can be translated as “don’t take yourself too seriously—take God seriously.”⁶

Have you ever found it difficult to listen to someone else’s idea? Walk humbly and listen.

Ever think you’re always right and that no one else seems to get it? Walk humbly and be willing to admit your mistakes.

Being humble means we realize we don’t have all the answers. Being humble means trusting God when life falls apart.

It’s not your wealth. Not your power. Not your status. It’s: Do justice. Love kindness. Walk humbly.



¹ <http://www.welcometoiona.com/>

² Thomas Merton, as quoted in *Homiletics Online*, December 23, 2002.

³ Eric Weiner, “Where Heaven and Earth Come Closer,” March 9, 2012, www.nytimes.com/2012/03/11/travel/thin-places-where-we-are-jolted-out-of-old-ways-of-seeing-the-world.html

⁴ Hodgin, Michael. *1002 Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, Compelling Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers* (Kindle Locations 3423-3427). Zondervan. Kindle Edition, #512.

⁵ Gary Warth, *The Elkhart Truth*, 11-9-18, A5.

⁶ *The Message Bible*, Micah 6:8.