



# Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina  
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

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THE NINTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

## In the Desert Places Genesis 32:22-31; Matthew 14:13-21

It was an island of sorts, made so when the creek bed below our house changed directions and cut a new path, leaving a crescent-shaped spit of land between a deep but dry creek bed and the shallower stream on the other side. Tucked into a thickly wooded valley, this tiny oasis was hidden by the oaks, birches, maples, and sycamores that towered above. It was a special place of my childhood.

It was a place to play, explore, catch crawfish, tadpoles, and lizards, laugh, dream, cry, and wonder. Though not even a hundred yards from my house, it was for me and my friends a deserted place where we could play and ponder and wonder. Without really knowing it, my friends and I, like Thoreau, “went to the woods because [we] wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if [we] could not learn what it had to teach . . . .”<sup>1</sup> Obviously, we did not build a cabin and live off the land, but we found in that little island buried in the woods a place where the rest of the world fell away and we could better discover ourselves—the good and the not-so-good.

There were certainly other places over the years where remote spots provided temporary refuge from the busier, noisier world and I could explore the questions, hopes, and wonders that sometimes swirled within me. There was the shelf of rock we called “Indian Fort” that towered above the Green River at Scout Camp, the path that meandered around the lake at Furman, the hills of Southern Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky where I spent many an afternoon riding a tractor, the backyard shop in Savannah, lonely roads that connected the small towns in Warren County, and a tranquil backyard here where I hear bullfrogs and crickets in joyful chorus.

In short, over the years I have found it necessary and beneficial to find places where I could get away to think or not, to struggle for answers or not, to pray or not. I have learned that a good deserted place—wherever it may be

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<sup>1</sup>Henry D. Thoreau, *The Illustrated Walden*, J. Lyndon Shanley, ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 90. The added brackets are mine.

found—is good for my soul. I suspect that you have found such places, too, in familiar or unconventional places.

Jacob and Jesus each knew a thing or two about deserted places. On the night before he was to meet up with his brother for the first time since he had stolen his birthright and run away, Jacob sent his wives and children and all of their worldly possessions on ahead while he remained at the River Jabbok. He had a lot to think about. Was Esau still angry? He had every right to be. What vengeance would he take upon Jacob and his family? Would he demand property or blood? Would he forever disown his deceitful brother or would he somehow forgive Jacob? Jacob had a lot of questions to mull over. He needed to prepare to meet Esau. He needed some time in a lonely place to himself.

When he heard that his cousin, John the Baptist, had been beheaded by Herod at the request of his daughter, Jesus needed to get away by himself. Matthew tells us that he took a boat and went alone to a deserted place. He needed to grieve the prophet's death and his own approaching death which he was certain now was in the works. He had some questions and hopes and wonders that were swirling around inside him that he needed to address.

A deserted place is a good place to be when we need to sort things out. A deserted place is a good place to catch up with ourselves. A deserted place is a good place to meet God.

The ancient Celts discovered many desert places in the hills and coastlines of Ireland and Scotland. Numerous of these locations came to be known as “thin places,” spaces where the divide between heaven and earth is measured in inches, places where the holy is tangible and is readily experienced.

I do not know from experience whether there are specific locations that are truly thin spots which always allow one to experience the holy more readily than anywhere else. I do know that on occasion I have been in certain places where I felt as if the gap between heaven and earth had definitely narrowed. The places I mentioned earlier were, at times, such spaces, but there have been many more, including this sanctuary where, I believe, God regularly makes the holy known to those who seek it.

In the deserted place by the River Jabbok, Jacob finally confronted who he was and how he had behaved toward this brother and father. He also took stock of God's promise to him and the ways in which he had or had not lived

worthy of that promise. Surely he reflected on just who this God of Abraham and Isaac was and what God wanted of him. He wrestled with the competing ideas in his mind. He struggled with his nature to be cunning and creative in order to get what he wanted and God's apparent demand that he be honest and forthright in order to serve him faithfully. All night long Jacob wrestled as if he were locked into battle with a formidable foe. At daylight, however, when the sun awakened the world, Jacob had his own illumination and realized that he had been wrestling with God as he wrestled himself. He demanded that God identify himself which he did with a blessing for grace is always the name of God. Wounded by his night-long struggle, Jacob limped away from that desert place, but he was healed of the wrong mindedness that had placed him at odds with his family so many years before.

Grief-stricken and shaken to the core, Jesus needed to get away and be by himself. He had long known the course his journey would take him, but the brutal, senseless death of John the Baptizer brought his own impending death into stark relief. He had some questions of God: Why John? He was such a good and gentle man. Why was Herod such a tough talker and a weak leader? Why had God not prevented John's death and would God do anything to protect him? Why did such a profound message as God's love have to be met with such cruelty and death? Jesus needed a deserted place to meet with God.

Sometimes we need those thin, deserted places to wrestle, to grieve, to prepare, to yield. Yet, we need not think that God meets us only when we struggle or are heartsick. Sometimes the thin, deserted places where God meets us are teeming with people, loud with laughter and music, and thick with goodness and grace.

So it was with the place where Jesus met the crowd of people who had followed him around the Sea of Galilee. Matthew tells us that there were about five thousand men there, not counting the women and children who were spread across the hillside. All day long Jesus taught and answered questions. He healed bodies and spirits. He sat with the people and took short walks with them and spent the day with the throng that had sought him out. Because of the crowd, it was not at all a lonely place; it was, however, a deserted place, far from the towns and cities of the region.

Surely it was a thin place for the divide between heaven and earth collapsed because Jesus himself was there. And when, compelled by compassion, Jesus sought out food and blessed it for the people, they sensed the holiness of the moment. They were filled with food, but they were also

sated with the presence of God. They went home having spent the day with God.

The point is that from time to time, we need to find places—lonely or crowded—where we can meet God. It requires desire and openness on our part because God has always demonstrated a willingness to meet with us in a fruitful garden or lonely creek bed, on a windy beach or colorful mountaintop, in a crowded mall or the produce section of the grocery store. God will meet us even here, if we so desire.

Molly Wolf speaks of a most interesting twist on the subject she discovered as she was learning more about thin places and their effect on us. She was visiting a place where long ago a woman had established a ministry of service and prayer in what was surely a thin place in the Canadian Shield. She spoke with an elderly priest named Father Emile about the nature of thin places. She wrote:

But, he said, while there are places that call us toward holiness, maybe it's a two-way street. Maybe there are places that we can help make holy . . . Maybe—I don't know—if we could be completely open to God's love, as we never seem to be able to do, maybe we could make more thin places. Maybe by love and prayer we could clear some of the rust and debris that evil has left spotted on the face of this earth, the scars on the faces of God's children, by facing them front-on and loving them as best we can.

A more radical thought: maybe we could work on becoming ourselves the thinnest places we can manage to be. Not thin in the sense of meagerness . . . but thin in the sense of transparency: being as full as we can hold of the love of God, and leaking it like crazy . . . .<sup>2</sup>

As I think about it, that is exactly what happened to Jacob and to Jesus. Their experience in the desert places where they met God, those thin places where we sense God immediately present, enabled them to become thin places themselves. Perhaps that is our opportunity and calling. Around this table, in the breaking of the bread, we become bread for the world and conduits for the grace of God, leaking God's love all over the place! May it be so for us all. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup>Molly Wolf, "Thin Place," *Sabbath Blessings* (June 3, 2000); available online at: <http://justus.anglican.org/sabbath-blessings/1999/sb31.html>.

August 6, 2017

## Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

O God who hears us, heals us, loves and restores us, receive the deepest prayers of our hearts, for it is your mercy that we seek. We are tired, Lord. We are tired from many days of anxiety and worry, worn out from the challenges and fears around and within us. We are overwhelmed by messages and images of bad news and suffering throughout our community and around the world. We try to work and to give to help our neighbors who are in need, our friends who are facing challenges, and family members who depend on us, but often we feel as if our resources are depleted and our efforts are inadequate. We are daily bombarded by harsh words, angry accusations, and growing suspicions as opposing views and strident positions divide our families, our community, and our nation. We have been battered by the stress of schedules and finances, of uncertainty and doubt, of broken relationships and broken dreams, of illnesses and sorrows. O God of infinite mercy, too often we find ourselves feeling lost and alone in a parched and desolate places with which we are all too familiar but out of which we cannot find a clear path. We are tired, Lord, and with all the strength we can muster, we cry out to you to hear us, heal us, love and restore us once again.

But even as we acknowledge that we are worn out and bruised by the strain of life and confess our inadequacies in the face of so many challenges, we also come giving thanks that even in the midst of such pain, we can rely on your presence to comfort us and your grace to uphold us. As quickly as needs are made known, you move the hearts of neighbors and friends and even strangers to respond with compassion to offer prayers and resources and support. Even as pundits crowd the front pages and airwaves with confusing messages and grim predictions, songs of peace, words of assurance, and acts of kindness punctuate the din of voices with glimmers of hope and messages of reconciliation. Even as we pace hospital corridors, agonize over solutions to perplexing problems, or struggle through difficult circumstances, your Spirit nudges us, fills us, surround us, offering peace which passes our understanding and light to illumine the way out of the wilderness and into your loving presence. We thank you, Merciful God, for every good gift which, in troubling days, sustains our weary minds and bodies and calms our anxious spirits. Out of your abundant resources and your infinite grace, continue to hear us, heal us, love and restore us, not only for our own sake, but also and especially for the sake of the neighbor who depends on our compassion, the stranger who longs for welcome, and the world in need of the love you have called us to share. In the name of Jesus the Christ, who is Love Incarnate, and by the power of your Holy Spirit who abides with us through all of life. Amen.

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