

## **There Are Altars Everywhere**

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,  
on Sunday, February 8, 2026, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [Psalm 84](#) and [Exodus 3:1-5](#)

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I was still in my 40s (barely) when I arrived at the Taizé community, somewhat near Lyon, France, and yet I was, like the Protestant and Catholic monks who call the community “home,” an old man. The Taizé community was created to serve and nurture youth and young adults. I forget what the cut-off was – something like 25 or 30. Older than that and you needed to get special permission to visit.

The monks and all the visitors gathered for prayer three times a day. Much of the prayer is sung, which is right up my spiritual lane. Still, three times a day? Really? My first days there, it felt like every time I turned around, the bells were ringing calling us back into the church for prayer. By the end of my week there, after morning prayer and breakfast, I found myself checking my watch to find out how much longer I had to wait until we gathered for prayer again.

The grounds – not just the church building, but the grounds where we met for learning and conversation, the tents where we ate, even the shop where I purchased some souvenirs, had become for me what it was for hundreds of thousands of others: Holy Ground.

The early Christian Celts had a name for locations like that: thin places. The name makes some sense if your cosmology places creation on the earth and God in the heavens. Thin places are where the fabric that separates the earth below from the heavens above has become worn, and the spiritual light from heaven shines a little more brightly into the earth. Thin places are where connecting with the divine More that I tend to call “God” is easier.

6th century Celtic monks thought the Isle of Iona was a thin place and they built a monastery there. I found it to be a thin when I visited a bunch of years ago. I found it easy to connect with God when we gathered inside the 20th century reconstructed abbey church for daily prayer. In fact, I found the whole island to be a thin place. Walking down to the south end of the Isle, hiking across the moor on a quest to find a circle of rocks that may have been a retreat the monks used over a millennia ago, climbing the highest peak on the island (which isn’t saying much: Mission Peak is over seven times taller) – wherever I went on the Isle, I felt like I was on holy ground.

Holden Village is Holy Ground for me, too. Located 15 miles up a dirt Forest Service road from the Lucerne dock on Lake Chelan, up in the north Cascade Mountains in Washington, Holden Village is a collection of building erected around a copper mine that was active from 1937 to 1957, and that have been converted into a Lutheran retreat center.

There are two things that I immediately notice these three places have in common. First, they are all places where people have intentionally gathered for prayer for generations. Second, I didn’t have internet or cell phone access while I was visiting each of

them. I don't know for certain if that second thing made a spiritual difference, though I have my suspicions.

I'm quite sure that Moses didn't have internet or cell phone service while he was out tending the flock of his father-in-law. I'm not sure if that made a difference in Moses discovering that he was in a thin place, since he didn't have internet or cell phone service in Egypt either.

On the other hand, I like to imagine that Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, prayed on the mountain regularly. After all, Jethro was a "priest of Midian," so we can assume regularly performed rituals and prayed. Why not there on that mountain? And if he prayed on that mountain, maybe the generations before him did, too. The Bible doesn't make any claims about any of this, so I'll just imagine.

What the Bible does say is that something caught Moses' attention. It looked like a bush was blazing even though the bush didn't burn up. I'm not going to try to explain it, because, as a matter of physics and chemistry, it makes no sense. That said, I do know that I've had a sensation like my heart being ablaze without burning up when I've been aware that I am in the presence God.

That's the experience Moses had when he was at the burning bush. He felt God calling him. He noticed he was in the presence of God, that the ground he was standing on was holy ground.

While I believe there are thin places, I don't think they are "thin" because the veil between earth and heaven is thinner there. That only makes sense if the dwelling place of humans and the dwelling place of God are separate from each other. And I don't think they are. If you do, that's fine. If your cosmology has God separate from creation and that's working for you, that's fine. All I'm saying is that that sort of cosmology doesn't work for me anymore.

For me, God is no longer up there in the heavens. For me, God is that in which all is. I see creation itself is the first incarnation of God. God holds creation and God permeates creation. Which means all creation is holy, and every place in creation is a thin place – if we pay enough attention.

I think Wendell Berry was right when he observed that we can't separate creation into sacred places and profane places. All of creation is sacred. The ground we walk on, the food we eat, the air we breathe and the water we drink – it's all sacred. And the ground squirrels who scurry away when I get out of my car and the crows who yell at me when I step out of my house – they're sacred, too. And the people in our families and in our church and who live down the street and across the country and around the world are sacred.

And this means that when we make someone an enemy, we are desecrating a part of sacred creation. When we pollute a body of water, we are desecrating the sacred. When we fight wars or when we simply mock people, we are desecrating the holy.

Here's the thing I've come to learn: There are altars everywhere, for everywhere is holy. Some altars are built with human hands. Sometimes people intentionally build an altar by purposefully creating a sacred space, a place where they hope they will (and where they hope others will) connect with the holy. Some of the altars are built by other species,

whether those species understand them to be markers of holy ground or not. I've stood by beaver dams and walked along deer paths and felt the presence of God. And then there are those altars that happen naturally. Sometimes they're easy to recognize. The Grand Tetons is an example for me. And sometimes we treat them so poorly they become desecrated ground.

All of creation is sacred. Every place is sacred. It's just that one species sometimes chooses to desecrate some of those holy places. And this means that when we remember that where we stand, no matter where we stand, we are standing on holy ground. And this is an act of healing, both of the earth and of our own souls.

Wherever we are, no matter how ordinary looking, we are at a place where we can meet that divine More, that something often called "God."

Amen.