

First Presbyterian Church Advent Series: Close to Home
Luke 1:39-48, “Seeking Sanctuary”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 12/19/2021

In this final week of Advent, our Close to Home theme turns to the concept of sanctuary. A sanctuary is a sacred kind of home. Some of us are present here in the sanctuary, others wish they could be here, and some are glad they can join us through the video stream, but I hope we all can remember a time we have found refuge in a sanctuary.

In our passage today, Mary has need of a place of sanctuary because of the strange and concerning news the angel of the Lord shared with her that she would give birth to a son who will be called the Son of the Most High.

If God is giving her a child who will be a king, there are going to be some problems. This angel has predicted a birth that could overthrow an Empire.

If God is giving her a child and she’s not yet married, there are going to be some problems. Joseph and other family members will be alarmed and confused, if not shamed. Mary could soon find herself homeless.

Mary is a person in need of sanctuary, so according to v. 39, she “got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea.”

When we need to find sanctuary, we don’t waste any time pursuing it.

Listen to how Rev. Sarah Are Speed describes this scene:

“After receiving the angel’s extraordinary news, Mary retreats to Elizabeth and Zechariah’s home to digest her new calling. She seeks refuge—physical safety and emotional protection. She receives a safe haven, a home for her heart to soon sing praise. Sanctuary and safe space is so crucial for everyone,

especially the mother of Christ while she prepares to become a home for God. Sanctuary is anywhere God's love dwells freely and abundantly."

Where have you gone when you have needed sanctuary?

It may be within this very room.

Or it may be your garden, the woods, or a dear friend's house.

Sanctuary might be found by getting someone who knows you
on the other end of a phone call, just to listen.

My ideal sanctuary is a conversation with a trusted friend
while walking alongside water.

Rivers, creeks, and ocean waves,

these are the places where I feel closest to God.

Elder Vilmarie Cintron-Olivieri writes that,

"When thinking about "sanctuary,"

the lyrics of a Carrie Newcomer song hit close to home...

*"Will you be my refuge, my haven in the storm,
Will you keep the embers warm when my fire's all but gone?
Will you remember, and bring me sprigs of rosemary,
Be my sanctuary 'til I can carry on, carry on, carry on. . ."*

In the song, Newcomer lists places, experiences, and metaphors to define sanctuary: "rest here in Brown Chapel... with a circle of friends... a quiet grove of trees... between two bookends." We can imagine these as safe spaces, uplifting and welcoming. My own list would include grandma's kitchen, watercolor paints, and the arms of a loved one. What would your list include? If you close your eyes, can you picture yourself there? Wherever it is, a place where God's love dwells freely and abundantly is sanctuary."

Again, Cintron-Olivieri notes that,

"Sanctuary is not only a place. It is also the people who say, "Here I am," striving to create and to become a safe place for others. Will we be a refuge, someone's haven in the storm, sanctuary? In the spirit of these two holy women, Mary and Elizabeth, may we offer ourselves as sanctuary for

anyone in need of one—glorifying, with our actions, the One whose love, freely given, is our sanctuary, our home.”

In that place of sanctuary with Elizabeth,
the words of the angel hit close to home for her.
It's in Elizabeth's home that Mary feels safe enough to respond
to the Word of God with a word of her own.
It's a word of worship, and a word of prophecy.

She says, “My soul glorifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”

King James says, “My soul magnifies the Lord,”
and the Latin uses the word “Magnificat,”
which has become the common title
for this song in the Christian tradition.

Mary's response to the word of God is to make God big in her world,
and the worldly rulers look small in comparison.

Friends, God has spoken to us in our world.
God speaks unsettling truths that shake up our sense of easy order.
And God waits for us in any of 1,000 sanctuaries where we might
find a place to be known, a place to collect ourselves,
a place to respond to the news that Christ
has entered into our world.

Wherever you are, find a sanctuary this week. God is calling you there.
Get to where you feel safe and known.

Then consider what God invites you into this Christmas.
What do you need to say to make God big in your world,
and the worldly rulers look small in comparison?

Let us close with this poem by Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed

Come on Home

Poem by

Poem We all know the feeling—
the shaky ground,
sinking sand,
water-is-rising,
sun-is-fading feeling
that makes steady breathing
an entire miracle,
and holding back tears
a marvel in and of itself.
And when those days come,
I call my parents.
And I call my church,
and I call my friends,
and they say in unison
what God has said
from the very beginning,
which is, “Come on home.”
Is there anything more healing
than an open door?
If you’re seeking sanctuary,
if the waters are rising—
listen.
It may be hard to hear,
but God is always saying,
“Come on home.”