

Luke 1: 39-45
December 19, 2021

Sanctuary for All

Rev. Meredith L. Kemp-Pappan

When we moved to Topeka, one of the first things I did to feel grounded in our new home was to get a library card. I love libraries the way some people love going to the hardware store (and, for the record, I love going to the hardware store). It has a sense of possibility, purpose, newness, and familiarity. When I have some time to kill, or when I need something to do with the kids, the library is my first stop. The love of libraries stretches back to my childhood, when going the library was a weekly outing. Libraries are my sanctuary.

There are other places I go, as well, when I need to be around something comfortable, familiar, welcoming, and safe. These places include coffee shops, museums, flea markets, and the zoo. They make up my sanctuary. The literal church sanctuary is a quiet place for me, too, and sometimes during the week I like to slip in, when the room is still and the light filters through the stained glass, and luxuriate in the stillness.

We all have places to go when we want to feel welcomed, embraced, and loved. Take a moment to reflect on your sanctuary(ies). What does it look like? How do you feel when you walk through the door? And, perhaps most importantly, who is there?

This Advent, our worship and preaching theme is Close to Home. This fourth Sunday of Advent, we are Almost Home. As our hearts and imaginations turn towards Christmas Eve, we remember that God desires sanctuary for all. Everyone deserves a place where they, at the very least, they feel welcomed and safe. Sanctuary is the heart of the Christmas Story, even before Joseph and Mary get turned away by every hotel from Marriot to Motel 6. Mary, the mother of Jesus, was not very old, despite most renderings from the Renaissance Masters. She was a teenager, engaged but not formally married to Joseph. Amy-Jill Levine points out that we know nothing of Mary's own parents. It may have been that Elizabeth was the only close relative that Mary had. Or, maybe Mary wanted to share her first trimester in the company of another woman who was in similar circumstances. For centuries, and still to this present day, women have been providing sanctuary for one another. "Perhaps Mary, newly pregnant, needs an older woman, a trusted relative, with whom she can share her feelings, both physical and spiritual."¹

Elizabeth—and the child in her womb—welcome and affirm her. Mary then bursts into a song of praise: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior" (v. 46-7). For three months, that home and the arms that received Mary became her safe haven. Elizabeth's welcome, blessing, and care were safe space, just what Mary needed as she prepared for the important call ahead.²

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. Just as coffee shops and libraries are my safe spaces, I am grateful for

¹ Amy-Jill Levine, "Light of the World," 72

² Commentary from A Sanctified Art

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friends, mentors, and family members who have provided and continue to provide sanctuary. I am also keenly aware that not everyone has this privilege. I have heard from several teacher colleagues that relate that their classes get extra ruly before Christmas, not because of excitement, but because the students dread going home. Their homes, for reason of poverty, abuse, and neglect, are not sanctuaries. Many LGBT people cannot come home for the holidays, because they have no sanctuary with their family. And yes—not everyone feels welcome or safe in a church, despite how friendly we claim to be. This does not include the approximately 2.7 million people who quit going to church annually—and one of the top reasons people stop going to church is because they feel abused or neglected.

Will we be a refuge, someone's haven in the storm, sanctuary? I believe the church has an opportunity re-engage our purpose as a sanctuary for all. One of the biggest struggles of the pandemic has been the loss of community and the loss of physical gathering spaces, especially the early days when everything was in lockdown. I didn't go to a coffee shop for months, and my heart ached for the library. I also desperately missed seeing you all in person. But one thing I've appreciated in this congregation is how during the pandemic, we gathered in new ways, spreading the sanctuary from beyond these walls. We continued to meet on Zoom, we engaged in new mission ventures, and I noticed that we also grew more patient and vulnerable with one another. I have been privy to group discussions that involved humility, grace, and candor and it makes me so proud to your pastor. I have seen you offer yourselves as sanctuary to one another.

In the spirit of these two holy women, Mary and Elizabeth, may we continue to 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. (sanctified art)