

Seeking Sanctuary

For years, this church has hosted the transgender day of remembrance. It is a day when people remember those transgender siblings who have been murdered in the last year. The service is very solemn. Candles are lit for usually over 200 people around the world who's lives who taken away through violence. There are usually at least 50 people that attend that service.

There are those who have been here before and feel very comfortable at Central, knowing all that we stand for and all that we are. There are others who attend, who you can tell are extremely apprehensive entering into our sanctuary. I imagine some of them are traumatized by how the church has treated them in the past and this is the first time they dare to enter the sanctuary again.

And there are others unfortunately who will not attend the service specifically because it is held in the church. They don't feel love and acceptance when they attend a church service and they are not going to give us a chance either. And that's ok, but its sad that the church has been the one that has harmed them before.

Today we are talking about sanctuary, and not sanctuary as this room that we are in right now. Not sanctuary that we gave to Ded and Flora and the boys, or to Pierre, Noella and Daisy now.

In her commentary, Vilmarie Clinton-Olivieri talks about a song by Carrie Newcomer called Sanctuary. The lyrics say:

“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.

In the song, Newcomer lists places, experiences, and metaphors to define sanctuary. “Rest here in Brown Chapel” she sings, “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, Elder Olivieri writes “ includes 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? For me Sanctuary is my home on Christmas morning, with sausage rolls and New Years Eve with ham sandwiches and chex mix? Wherever it is, a place where God's love dwells freely and abundantly is sanctuary.

Hearing the news of her pregnancy, Mary sought such a place. As a pregnant teenager, poor and unwed, dangers and uncertainly – both physical and societal – surrounded her. She hurries to Elizabeth's house. 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.”

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 she needed as she prepared for the important call ahead. Mary would give birth to Jesus and would educate him in his formative years. The world saw the imprint of this young woman in the life and teachings of her son, Jesus. Mary herself was sanctuary and Jesus' first home.

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.

When Mary seeks and finds refuge in Elizabeth's embrace, she, in turn, becomes a sanctuary for God. Also known as the theotokos, Mary is the "God-bearer," the dwelling place of God. When we receive safe refuge, we have the capacity to provide sanctuary for others.

Think about how this church, not just this building but this church has become sanctuary for others. Think of the hundreds of people who come here each day through the NOAH project, stopping first for a lunch, but then realizing this is a safe space and the people who are in this building are here to help and get to know them. Before long, clients aren't calling this NOAH, they are calling this "their church."

Think about giving Ded and Flora sanctuary. Yes we protected them at first, but they learned that we were a safe place. They would come to call us family and depend upon us to keep them safe and secure as we worked for justice in their case.

Think about Welfare Rights, that fights poverty and not the poor housed here on the 4th floor. People find sanctuary there when they are listened to and helped with their electric and water bills and given a voice, here in this safe space.

The United Tenant Council of Councils and Westside Mothers, helping people stay safe in their homes with their families, securing their rights to have a place in this world and getting sanctuary as those two organizations fight for justice on their behalf.

The Methodist Federation for Social Action on the third floor, educating United Methodists on what it means to be a Peace with Justice congregation and fighting for people to feel safe, in their own skin, in their cities, states, countries etc. MFSA is sanctuary to people.

And we can't forget the Swords into Plowshares Peace Center and Gallery. Think of the artists and poets and visitors who have found sanctuary in the art speaking for itself and the spoken word and the peace café where music was our sanctuary in this crazy world.

And I would say if we are really talking about how sanctuary is not just a place, that zoom has been our sanctuary when we couldn't connect any other way. We are able to see each other's faces and talk to each other.

When we feel safe, we are equipped to give sanctuary to others. Mary needed to find her sanctuary with Elizabeth. Think about that for a moment. Mary was an unwed teenager who could have been killed by stoning. She doesn't know how Joseph is going to react. She doesn't know where to turn. But she remembers her cousin, Elizabeth. She remembers she has felt safe with her before, and so Mary decides that she will go to Elizabeth where she will find sanctuary in the midst of her storm.

Let's look at our art for today. It is entitled Dances for Joy by Hannah Garrity. She writes this "As I worked through the creative process for this image, I was talking to my mother and showing her my inspiration board: images of babies in the womb, spinning or cuddling. She said that John dancing for joy in his mother's womb is one of her favorite biblical images. I thought back to my study abroad in Glasgow, Scotland, at the Glasgow School of Art. I spent every day in a studio designed by Charles Rennie Mackintosh. Through windows the height of almost two stories, light poured into the room.

I was interested in childbirth that year. I asked the local hospital if I could view one. They said, no, legitimately citing privacy concerns. Childbirth is rightfully a protected and private time – a time when

women, the possessors of the womb, choose to use their bodies for the delivery of the children of God. As a woman in my early twenties, I had no plans of having children anytime soon. Truly, I was intrigued by the way we hide the earthly, natural, bloody parts of the process. All semester I painted fetuses, newborns crowning, mothers birthing alone.

They were dancing in the womb. They were emerging from the womb. They were patterns in a collage of orphaned children due to the AIDS epidemic. They were an American flag interwoven with articles of the strain of American military action on children overseas. They were newborns, still bloody, painted on patterned fabric with the stories of Peter Rabbit and the cow jumping over the moon.

I even made a paint by number children's book, explaining the stages of childbirth. The clash of a façade of perfection and the tangible reality was an is ever-present in my every day.

Here the globe is drawn as the background flow of the image. This long view of the world acknowledges the earthy, bloody, tangible, pouring out reality that Mary and Elizabeth will soon embody to bear their sons. There is so much liquid everywhere. The central story of the text emerges as John dances with joy in his mother's womb of this world. Around him the patterns of his baptisms flow outward into the miracles of Jesus, woven into the flow of landforms and waters on the map.

Comparison is the thief of joy, my cousin tells me. God's children need us to dance for joy when we encounter one another. Where in my daily routines can I remove the façade of perfection, or break through it, and embrace the tangible reality of a beautiful and wonderful earthy joy.

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.

That is what Mary found with Elizabeth. A place where she could feel safe to be her true self. A place where she felt secure sharing her doubts and her fears. A place where she could truly understand that God was speaking directly to her.

I want to close with some excerpts from "She said, "How do you know when you are hearing from God?" by Amena Brown.

She said, "How do you know when you are hearing from God?"

I didn't know how to explain.

It is to explain the butter grit of cornbread to a mouth that just discovered it has a tongue.

The sound of jazz to ears that only ever thought they'd be lobes of flesh.

The sigh of sunsets to blinded eyes that in an instant can see

To fail at the ability to give words to how the scent of baked bread can make the mind recall a memory.

Every detail...

my words never felt so small, so useless, so incapable

I wanted to say

Put your hand in the middle of your chest

Feel the rhythm there..

You don't have to be inside the four walls of a church to cry out to the God who made you because no matter where you sing or scream or whisper, God's ears can hear you...

God's ears are here for the babies
for the immigrant, for the refugee
for the depressed, for the lonely
for the dreamers
the widow, the orphan
The oppressed and the helpless
Those about to make a mess or caught in the middle of cleaning one up
Dirt don't scare God's ears.
God is a gardener
God knows things can't grow without sun, rain, and soil.

I want to tell her to hear God
You have to be willing to experience what's holy in places many people don't deem to be sacred
that sometimes God sits next to you on a barstool
spilling truth to you like too many beers...

I want to tell her God is pleading with us
to trust
to love
to listen
that God's voice is melody and bass lines and whisper and thunder and grace.

Sometimes when I pray, I think of her
how the voice of God was lingering in her very question.
How so many of us just like her
just like me
just like you
are still searching.
still questioning, still doubting
I know I don't have all the answers
I know I never will
That sometimes the best thing we can do is put our hands in the middle of our chest
feel the rhythm there.
Turn down the noise in our minds, in our lives and whisper,
God whatever you want to say
I'm here, I'm listening.

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. Amen.