

Luke 1:39-55

Preached at Stone Church of Willow Glen by Rev. Samantha Evans

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Seeking Sanctuary

As I was preparing my sermon for this week, I really wasn't sure where to begin. I knew ultimately what I wanted to say about this text. I knew that I wanted to talk about Sanctuary: what it means and how we might experience and create it.

But I was having a hard coming up with a clever or interesting way to begin. So, I decided to just come sit right here in this sanctuary and see what might come to me.

And I just began thinking about how these past two years have been and continue to be so full of unease and fear and anxiety about the state of our world and the unknown of our present and future. And typically, when any of us experiences a time like this, we come to church. We come to the sanctuary, seeking refuge, shelter from the storms of life, protection from suffering, and comfort during times of hardship.

When we are having a hard time, we seek sanctuary.

And so, I am feeling immensely grateful that even though we're navigating COVID restrictions, we are able to be present in this sanctuary. And even if we're not all physically here, through the magic of zoom, we are able to remain connected to one another and connected to this sacred space.

I am grateful for these moments of Sanctuary, when we are able to find rest and refuge in this holy and beautiful space. I am grateful for it, and as I sat alone in this sanctuary, I really came to be attuned to the fact that this place is holy and sacred, a place of sanctuary, because it is a place of community, of gathering. It is a place of connection.

You see, when we were are seeking sanctuary, it is often about physical space, but that is only part of it. For Sanctuary is found truly found in relationships where we feel known, supported, and loved. Sanctuary is found when we feel a sense of home.

One of the wisest and most insightful writers of the experience of home, belonging, and love is author and activist bell hooks, who this past week died at the age of 69. Though she is now physically gone, her contributions, her imagination, her insights remain with us. Her writings are eternal, timelessly instructive, for they contain profound and transformative truths about life on this planet.

Our theme of exploration this Advent has been Coming Home. And so, I've been reading a bell hooks' book called *Belonging*,¹ which chronicles her journey back to her native home of Kentucky. She left as a young woman because of the oppressive systems of racism and exploitative capitalism. And she sought out queer and racially diverse communities throughout the country, but always felt some sense of draw back to her first home.

In reading about her journey, it struck me how she was able to parse out what made Kentucky feel like home, how her relationship to those hills helped foster a deep connection to land and to family, but she also sets this in contrast with what made it an untenable place of home, for there was also deep dysfunction in her family and community due to segregation, centuries of racial exploitation, mountaintop removal, and an overall distrust of the "other."

She desired to reconnect to her land of her birth, but she also desired to be in just and loving relationship with the land and the people. She ultimately found her way back to Kentucky, to Berea College, in the town of Berea, because despite being in Kentucky, she found this town to be progressive, racially diverse, and committed to anti-racism.

This town allowed her to live more fully into her sense of belonging in Kentucky. Though imperfect, there was a communal commitment to naming and dismantling the structures and mentalities of what she calls "imperialist white supremacist capitalist patriarchy."

She could live fully into her sense of belonging, her sense of home, even in Kentucky, because in Berea among her neighbors, they were committed to creating and living in a more just and equitable and beautiful city for all of them. One where everyone could belong and thrive and feel and be at home.

The hills of Kentucky were her Sanctuary, but she was really only able to enter into that Sanctuary once she discovered and created relationships and community that was committed to making that place a Sanctuary for all.

I find deep resonance between bell hooks' story and the story from our gospel reading today, where we encounter Mary travelling to the hills of Judea, to the house of her relative, in search of Sanctuary.

¹ bell hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place*

I imagine that she must have had some deep connection to that physical land. Perhaps she ran around in those hills as a child and celebrated festivals there. Perhaps that's where she first encountered God. First felt a sense of belonging. A sense of home. In Jewish tradition, all of the experiences of worship and festivals, belonging and home are all deeply tied to the actual land. And so, I don't find it hard to believe that those hills were a sanctuary for her.

I imagine that as she came upon Elizabeth's house, as she glimpsed the land and the foliage and the animals, as she remembered the gatherings and the festivals, I am sure that as she took this all in. That she felt home, that she felt sanctuary.

And I imagine that that sense of refuge, of sacred connection, protection and peace, it was felt even more fully and completely when she encountered Elizabeth. Whose own baby flip-flopped in her belly, perhaps attuned to the profound sense of home and love that Mary's arrival spurred.

Here we find two marginalized women, one thought to be old to bear a child and one who conceived her child out of wedlock. Two women who must have been terrified, but who in their terror and anxiety and uncertainty, found sanctuary and deep, transformative love in their relationship with one another.

These two, usually voiceless women become the creators and proclaimers and preparers for the incarnation of Christ. The coming of Emmanuel, God with us, God for us, God comes to bring true Sanctuary—belonging, home, peace, and love—for all of Creation.

I am always moved by this encounter between Elizabeth and Mary, because their experience of love and belonging and sanctuary with one another has the power to cast out all of their fear and anxiety, and they become freed to praise God and to prophesy what God is about to do.

Mary and Elizabeth provided sanctuary for one another in the Judean hills. And from that sense of belonging and home, that profound experience of loving and being loved, Mary was freed from the fear and anxiety of her predicament, she was freed to sing God's praise and proclaim the good news.

Her song, the Magnificat, is perhaps the most subversive and controversial song in all of Scripture. It is a bold and radical proclamation of what God's love looks like in the world and what makes it possible for God's love to be felt by all. Mary sang this song from her own lived experience of dwelling freely and fully in the love of God.

And out of that experience, she becomes attuned to God's desire for all of Creation to enter into this same love and sanctuary. She becomes attuned to God's intention dismantle systems of oppression, to topple rulers, and send the rich away, so that all might find true sanctuary in the love of God.

I know this can sometimes feel overwhelming. There is so much suffering and oppression in the world that it sometimes feels like this vision of all dwelling in God's love is simply not possible. But that's of course what the princes and principalities want us to believe.

Mary and Elizabeth believed it was possible. bell hooks believed that it was possible. They all realized that we are called to live into and extend a profound, revolutionary, no holds barred kind of LOVE for all.

bell hooks says, "Cynicism is the greatest barrier to love. It is rooted in doubt and despair. Fear intensifies our doubt. It paralyzes. Faith and hope allow us to let fear go ... That which is rendered separate or strange through fear is made whole through perfect love."²

She believed that when we choose to live in right relationship with land and neighbor, when we choose to love deeply and fully and radically, when we choose to seek Sanctuary not only for ourselves, but for the whole world, these choices have the power to transform all of us. This experience of love has the power to transform us.

On this final Sunday in Advent, we gather in this sanctuary, among this church family to light the candle of love and to feel and proclaim the love God that has for us, for the world, for all people and creatures and holy places. We gather to feel this love, my friends, and to allow it to change us.

For this love has the power to carry us through grief and loss, suffering and despair. This love has the power to drive out all fear and make it possible for all of us to feel home, to feel safe, to feel loved.

This love frees us from the appeal to control and dominate and shows us instead how to love freely and seek that love for all of Creation.

We have come to this place seeking sanctuary. Let us trust enough to open ourselves and allow God's love to flow into our beings.

² bell hooks, *All About Love*, Harper Collins (2000), pgs. 219-20.

Let us then be instructed by this love that we might heed our call to go forth to break every chain, dismantle every law, and bring down every ruler who stands in the way of any person, plant, or animal in all of Creation from dwelling in the love of God.

Let it be so, my faithful friends, in the name of our Triune God, who creates, sustains, and redeems us all. Amen.