

“Close to Home: Seeking Sanctuary”
Luke 1:39-45

At the height of the refugee crisis a few years after the 2011 war in Syria, there were many different responses in European countries to the massive human needs they were facing. Germany became a sanctuary for thousands of refugees despite the challenges they faced with this kind of welcome. But even Germany could not cope with the enormous human needs that were coming their way. Here is a clip from a video where Angela Merkel, Germany’s Chancellor at the time, provided an emotional sanctuary to a young refugee woman, even when she could not offer a physical sanctuary: https://youtu.be/BxbEaKzq_Fc.

We know that in our own state, a few months ago there was the question of what to do with the immigrants who were sent to New York from Texas. There was even a ban in our county on sheltering (providing sanctuary to) these immigrants. There were many political views on the issue. When presented with the question of whether we would help or not, the spiritual leaders of this congregation responded this way:

"We, the spiritual leaders of Batavia First Presbyterian Church, are very concerned. While we can't solve the country's immigration issues, we are a church that helps people, all people. Our Christian beliefs and mission compel us to show compassion and dignity to all of those in need and don't believe that should conflict with any laws in our country. We will continue to help others, all others, who are in need and thus we will respond as Jesus has taught us, "for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." Matthew 25:25-36."

I am so grateful that our leaders are so clear about their faith that they are able to rise above the fray of politics and human divisions and fears to connect to the heart of what God calls us to do.

In the part of the Christmas story for this week, we hear about someone who followed what God has called her to do, despite the fears of the people around her. This is the part about Elizabeth, the cousin of Mary, who provided Mary a spiritual, emotional, and physical sanctuary at the hour of her need.

Mary was Elizabeth’s younger cousin. Elizabeth could have taken on the role of judgment against Mary. She could have warned Mary about all the possible dangers ahead. But Elizabeth was deeply grounded in God’s love herself and thus was able to see God in Mary’s life and pregnancy. When Mary got the news of her pregnancy, she went to visit her relative/cousin Elizabeth for three months. This would have been a long journey of about 80 miles. One would not take that kind of journey lightly. Mary spent the first three months of her pregnancy with Elizabeth. We know that the first three months are the most

critical in any pregnancy. Without the support of Elizabeth, Mary could not have made it through this challenge in her life. Her ability to carry out the mission of her life depended on Elizabeth's love which was manifested in deep listening, support, and mentoring. Elizabeth was the best support Mary could have had. We know this from the story of Elizabeth herself and from the greeting she gave Mary when she first saw her.

Elizabeth knew about faith, life, and brokenness in her life. She was unable to get pregnant for many years and struggled with the shame of that in her community. She was especially ashamed as she was the wife of a priest. Infertility would have been seen as a sign of God's punishment. Her shame was great. Yet, her faith was even greater. As the wife of a priest, Elizabeth certainly would have had a long life of prayer. In fact, just before we are told about Mary's pregnancy, we are told about Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah and their mystical experience of a divine messenger. This made Elizabeth ready to believe Mary and to validate her vision of God. She saw in the brokenness of Mary the very Spirit of God. It is interesting that the two women are the main speakers in this part of the story while, Zechariah, the priest is kept silent according to Luke 1:20, "But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur." Let's listen to the scripture from Luke 1:39-45

³⁹In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴²and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

Who are the people we are called to bless and to love? Who needs an emotional sanctuary around us? Who needs a spiritual sanctuary? Who needs a physical sanctuary? Who do we go to when we need that kind of sanctuary?

Last week when we had the Christmas pageant, the part that really struck me was when the Innkeeper played by Essayas, said to the traveling couple of Mary and Joseph, that there was no room for them, but then something changed his mind to say there is room in the barn and that is where the love of God became flesh. From the simple and humble act of love, God became flesh and dwelt among us. The Christmas story would not have been possible without all the people who provided sanctuary for God through love, even when they didn't fully understand what they were doing at the time: Mary consenting to give sanctuary to the Christ child, Joseph giving social sanctuary to Mary, Elizabeth giving sanctuary to her cousin, and the innkeeper opening a space for the poor child to be born. The Christmas story is truly about seeking and providing sanctuary for love to be born. May we continue to seek and to provide!

We will close with a poem by Sarah Speed called "Come on Home"

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.” Amen.