

4th Sunday of Advent
December 19, 2021
St. David's Church 8 am and 9.15 am
Rev. Emily Zimbrick-Rogers
Close to Home

This Advent, St. David's shared a devotional titled Close to Home with the parish. This beautiful devotional, created by the Christian non-profit A Sanctified Art, maybe made it into your hands through the Advent mason jar candle packet or in the Advent email, or just picked up in the narthex. (We've got a few copies left if anyone wants one.) Emily Given, the director of Christian formation, and I chose it because of the lovely theme Close to Home and the longing we heard in the parish to be close to one another, the church, and God. For the last 3 weeks, a group of us have gathered on Zoom using the Close to Home devotional together—physically distanced yet so close to one another from each of our homes. The scripture readings, art, poetry, and prayers have prompted much reflection on how church, our faith, and our community can be home for one another.

Home. In the best sense, home is the place of safety, love, shelter, peace. An embodiment of the 4 advent theme words of the Advent wreath—hope, peace, joy, and love. That place where you are known and loved. Sometimes home is not a physical location, but a person or community where you can truly be yourself.

In our Gospel reading today, we see two prophets, an older woman Elizabeth and a young woman Mary live out the call of every Christ follower— to proclaim

the radical message that God makes a home with us, to offer sanctuary for one another, and to welcome Jesus into our very selves, to be a mansion for the Christ-child.

First—God making a home with us.

I was struck this week by the pageant preparations in the Chapel—the building of a stable in the midst of the sanctuary. Right here, right now, the reminder of Emmanuel—God with us. I hope we can take a moment to ponder the symbolic meaning of a stable being set up in our sanctuary. Unfinished wood, bales of hay offer their outdoors perfume, later animals will rub shoulders with shepherds and us. In some church traditions, the word sanctuary stands for the whole worship space—the whole church or chapel. In other church traditions, the sanctuary is just the area around the altar and is often separated with an altar rail or screen. In the Jewish temple, the Holy of Holies was the sanctuary, where almost no one could enter because God’s presence was so holy and awesome. And right now there’s a stable frame in the midst of the sanctuary—reminding us that God is breaking in, unexpectedly, in ways we can’t even imagine—the king of the universe born not in a palace or Hollywood or the Hamptons but in a stable. God is close—and draws us home to God. We see Elizabeth and Mary recognize and praise God’s inbreaking into ordinary lives—pushing in through the Holy Spirit into their very beings. They are the first two prophetic voices to speak in hundreds

of years the prophetic reality of God coming close to God's people, bringing to light the promises long ago given in Micah and other prophets.

Don't read but perhaps to use again--[Elizabeth's prophetic speech empowers and emboldens Mary to sing what is the most significant prophetic hymn in the Bible—the praise of a God who is close to humanity, who is mighty but uses that might for mercy for the poor, marginalized and oppressed. A God who remembers a young unwed girl and a people hard pressed by the brutal occupation of Rome.]

Of course we know that God has always dwelled among the people, but Mary's welcome to God into her body is a little new perspective on sanctuary. The word sanctuary is from the Latin, a combination of the words holy and container. I preached last year about this time about Mary as a container of the uncontainable God and that concept continues to inspire me—Mary as sanctuary for Emmanuel, God with us. A very big and cosmic symbol. But this year I'm thinking much more about the concepts of the close, the intimate, the warmth of home and sanctuary, looking at the stable in the midst of the sanctuary.

Sanctuary is both this religious word, a container of the holy, but it has other meanings as well and offers us connotations of protection, shelter, safety.

Throughout many cultures from ancient Hawaii to North Africa and the ancient Israel, sanctuary cities or temples were set up for fugitives, criminals, enslaved

people running to freedom. We still need this idea of sanctuary today with immigrants seeking asylum or teens coming out as LGBTQ and needing places of safe space. We hope and pray and work out our faith so that we can be like Elizabeth a sanctuary for those who show up at our door, our church, our community.

We see how Mary and Elizabeth offer us a model of what it means to be home and sanctuary to others. Elizabeth opened her door when Mary knocked. Welcomed her into her home for shelter, safety, love, sanctuary. Each confirmed and encouraged the other in the midst of this moment of profound revelation, uncertainty, and transformation.

Elizabeth can offer this radical hospitality because she's been filled by the Holy Spirit. Her faith in God's faithfulness has enabled her to be radically open to sharing that transformation.

Finally, we ponder Mary's model of welcoming Jesus into herself, as it says in our collect, to be a mansion for the Christ-child. In the Close to Home devotional, Presbyterian Elder Vilmarie Cintrón-Olivieri writes, "Mary herself was sanctuary and Jesus' first home." Where God's love dwells is sanctuary and Mary opened herself to that love and God looked with favor on her radical hope that Gabriel's message was real. Christ came into the world through Mary's womb. And Mary provided home for God in herself and models that for each of us.

We see this model too in Christmas pageants, where members of the congregation envision themselves as shepherds or Magi, angels, or innkeepers, children of the world bringing gifts to the baby.

I also especially like the Mexican tradition of Las Posadas, another way to bring the symbols of Jesus at home with us to life. In Las Posadas, which goes on in some communities for 9 days, is a version of a Christmas pageant in procession, where Mary, Jesus, and others go around and knock on doors, asking for a sanctuary so Jesus can be born. Door after door is not answered, or devils scare them away, or excuses are made as to why the Holy Family cannot be welcomed in. Finally, on Christmas Eve, the last door is opened and everyone rushes in. Jesus can finally be born in our midst.

Our invitation today is the same—will we welcome Jesus into ourselves? Will we follow in Mary and Elizabeth’s examples to open our lives to the inbreaking of Holy God into our very beings, our very selves? Might we offer sanctuary to another in need of hope, peace, joy, or love—whether a close friend or family member who needs an open door, or a stranger, the person who has not yet connected to God or refugees seeking asylum and safety. Might we see God breaking in among the sheep and the poor shepherds, in the stable in the midst of the sanctuary. We pray with hope and expectation, Come Lord Jesus, welcome home.