

There are times in our lives when we all need sanctuary. Those people and places that are so safe that we are able to let down our guard and allow our whole self to come forth. My mother was a source of great sanctuary to me over the years. Often as a young adult, in college, I would return home and having not cried for months at a time, but then I'd start sharing my heart with her, and suddenly I my tears returned to do their healing work. Who are the people with whom you have find sanctuary?

Mary finds sanctuary in the home and presence of her elder cousin, Elizabeth. Last week we heard Zechariah's song, that by the tender mercies of our God, the dawn from on high shall break upon us. Zechariah and Elizabeth are one of many couples in the scriptures who become unlikely parents after years of infertility, and their place in this story makes sense. Both were righteous in God's sight, descendants of Israel's first high priest, Aaron. Zechariah's priestly duties brought him to Israel's center of power, the Temple. Zechariah and Elizabeth belong to an honorable tradition in Israel's history, and their place in this story makes sense. Then Luke introduces us to Mary, "a virgin who was engaged to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David's house." Who is Mary, now, and why does she belong in this story? From what part of Israel's tradition does she descend? Luke doesn't tell us. She's engaged to a descendant of David, but as for Mary herself, we learn nothing. Like Rey in *The Last Jedi*, before they ruined it in *The Rise of Skywalker*, Mary has no part in this story. She comes from nothing. She's nothing, but not to God.

Unlike Zechariah and Elizabeth, Luke doesn't tell us how uniquely virtuous Mary is. She enters this story with no background, and for reasons that are completely unknown to us, she is chosen by God to bear the child through whom a new dawn will break. There is no precedent in Israel's story for what's about to happen to Mary. She does not take her place in a long line of ancestors like her cousin Elizabeth. No, Mary is the beginning of a new dawn for all humanity. Chosen by God to bear a son who will be Israel's new king, it is vital that we not overlook that Mary consents to God's plan. Just before our reading begins, she says to the angel Gabriel, "I am the Lord's servant. Let it be with me just as you have said." Unlike Elizabeth who had long prayed to God for a child, Mary has not even imagined, much less prayed for, a child to come to her from God. Nevertheless, she consents.

The culture from which the Scriptures emerge is deeply patriarchal, and we see stories of women throughout the Bible whose consent over their own bodies is never even considered. But Mary consents to God's plan. What would have happened if she said no? Would God have compelled her to bear a child against her will? Impossible, for God is a God of freedom, not coercion. In this new world that God is bringing forth, Mary's consent over her own body mattered to God. If we are to speak and act in God's name, then women's consent over their own bodies must matter to us as well. Let the hearer listen and understand.

Upon agreeing to God's plan, Mary, this unlikely servant, continues to act and speak in unexpected ways. She seeks sanctuary not in her father's house (of whom we hear nothing), nor does she go to be with Joseph. Instead, she makes a 70-mile journey, presumably on foot from Nazareth to Judea to see her also blessed cousin, Elizabeth.

Hannah Garrity's Dance for Joy Here

Three months before Zechariah will give his prophetic speech, Elizabeth, filled with the Spirit gives her own speech, saying: "God has blessed you above all women, and he has blessed the

child you carry. Why do I have this honor, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" Elizabeth knows the work of God when she sees it, and apparently so does baby John, who in this third trimester, jumps for joy in his mother's womb, as Hannah Garrity's painting creatively portrays. Long lay the world in sin and error pining, till he appeared, and the soul felt its worth. A thrill of hope! The weary world rejoices, while yonder breaks a new and glorious morn. By the tender mercies of our God, the dawn from on high shall break upon us.

[Lauren Wright Pittman's Mary and Elizabeth here for the rest of the service]

Kids, take a moment and look at this incredible painting by Lauren Wright Pittman of Mary and Elizabeth meeting. Look how Mary's womb is swirling with the Christ child, and how Elizabeth's womb is pouring forth light and joy. That same light and joy shined through each one of you as you grew in your mother's womb, and it still shines in you today. These two women, both blessed of God, one old and married, and one young and unwed, one whose reputation and lineage precedes her, the other a complete unknown, yet according to Elizabeth, Mary is blessed above all women.

The words of blessing that Elizabeth showers on Mary, validated her and strengthened her. It's no surprise that in Elizabeth's sanctuary, Mary finds her voice, and sings her own song, echoing Elizabeth's words to her about herself—From now on everyone will consider me highly favored. We all need people in our lives whose words and presence validate and strengthen us. The gift of the Christ child isn't given simply so that we will praise God and tell God who great God is, as if that's God's greatest concern. The gift of the Christ child dignifies us all and gives us reason to praise each other and let each other know how truly great and incredible each one of us really are.

Carla Mavis was one who did that for me. I met Carla 8 years ago at the Presbytery Fall Gathering. A teaching elder at Circleville Presbyterian and a constant presence in the Presbytery, Carla always let me know how great she thought I was, long before I dreamed of ever taking a call to that church. She called me darling. She showered me with gifts, encouragement, and a warm smile that always let me know exactly how she felt about me. She died last week, and I will miss her greatly, but I am better for having known her. God gives us such people to validate and strengthen us for our journey, and so that we might learn to be a sanctuary for one another. And all of us can be sanctuaries. Why do we hold back our words and love, when instead we can share them freely with those who need to hear it? Instead of holding back, why not give others the love and encouragement they deserve? Christ came for us all, which means every one of us is worthy of love and belonging, praise and adoration.

Mary Oliver's poem "Wild Geese" gives voice to how we can be sanctuaries to each other. She writes:

You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.

Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting -
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.

What if this is what church was known for, not telling people how they need to shape up and come crawling on their knees if they want to belong, but instead being a safe space where people were free to let the soft animal of their body love what it loves, to share stories of despair, and find their place in the family of things.

All of us long to belong, and all of us are terrified that we do not. The good news is that we do belong here, all of us. The world is wide enough for us all, and you have a place in the family of things. The child growing Mary's womb will stretch his arms wide enough to welcome your whole self into God's embrace. In the meantime, may we seek and find sanctuary in each other. Would you sing that song with me? If you know it, sing with me. Once you pick it up, you can join in. Lord, prepare me, to be a sanctuary, pure and holy, tried and true, with thanksgiving, I'll be a living sanctuary for you.