

Wesley United Methodist Church
December 11, 2016
3rd Sunday in Advent
Text: Luke 1:39-56
Title: Sacred Space

Being in Israel in 2002 and then again about 12 years later, I was very aware of the places, the spaces, that often carry the label sacred. There are locations that are filled with tourists coming to the place that is promoted as the exact spot where Jesus was born, the site where Jesus preached the Sermon on the Mount, the Upper Room where he and his disciples shared their last meal together, and the garden where Jesus prayed and then was betrayed. The Western Wall is filled with people (men in one area, women in another) praying. Some of the places that seemed most sacred to me were those that were less trafficked and where I could more easily imagine Jesus actually being there. I loved being on a boat on the Sea of Galilee, walking through the ruins of Capernaum, and stopping along the steep terrain from Jerusalem to Jericho and seeing the kind of area where a story like the Good Samaritan might have taken place.

In today's Gospel reading we have the account of Mary in the early stage of her shocking pregnancy visiting her older relative Elizabeth who was in the last trimester of her also unexpected pregnancy. Elizabeth's pregnancy was miraculous but in at least in two other places in the scripture an older woman who had been considered unable to bear a child becomes pregnant. Sarah gave birth to Isaac, and Hannah gave birth to Samuel. Both children would grow up to become important people in our faith and leaders of their people.

Elizabeth is also to give birth to a child who we would know as John the Baptizer. John would be like the advance team, the herald, announcing and preparing the way for Jesus.

Since the angel told Mary about Elizabeth's pregnancy, she must have hoped Elizabeth would understand what was happening to her. So Mary went to see Elizabeth. It makes sense to me that Mary would want to see Elizabeth. When the world has gone crazy, when the unexpected has happened, when we don't know how to understand what is going on and we have more questions than answers, many of us reach out to a person who has been through something similar, or someone we are sure will listen to us, hear us out, and help us know that we are not alone. For Mary, that would be Elizabeth.

The journey to visit Elizabeth was not just walking down the street to see her. The distance was somewhere around 90 miles and there was no hopping in a car and driving an hour and a half on the highway to get to Elizabeth's. Traveling was not safe for any woman in that day and she would definitely not have traveled alone. She, or her parents, would have arranged for her to travel with others going in that direction. Depending upon whether she rode on a donkey or walked, this trip would have taken anywhere from 3 to 10 days. It was a long journey with Mary carrying a huge secret inside her; one that she could not share with anyone.

Imagine the many emotions that she must have experienced on this trip. She had plenty of time to think about what had happened, what the angel had said to her, what was happening inside her body, and what might happen when others learned that she was pregnant. What would she find when she met Elizabeth? Would Elizabeth understand?

Mary's doubts and fears were erased immediately when Mary finally arrived. Luke tells us that when Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. "And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me?'" (Luke 1:41-44).

She immediately confirmed what the Angel had told Mary, and then also affirmed Mary's faith; Mary's belief that the Angel spoke the truth and would do what had been said.

I would imagine that for the rest of her life, Mary would think back to that moment when the angel's words became even more real, as they were confirmed by a woman whom she loved and who while honoring her would also be a mentor of sorts to her, an older woman who had also experienced the incredible action of God working in her life

I'm guessing that Elizabeth also needed Mary's presence at that time. Her husband Zechariah was unable to speak because he had not believed the angel who came to him. It must have been very quiet in their home, and now finally Elizabeth and Mary each had someone with whom they could speak openly and safely.

Elizabeth's home must have been a sacred space for both women for the next three months while Mary stayed with her. This visit created space for the gestation of hope – the kind of hope that can move into and change the world. Both Mary and Elizabeth knew that their sons would be men who would transform the world. They knew that their sons would be men who would serve God, who would be welcomed by many and despised by others.

These women chosen by God were well rooted in the hopes that had kept their families and their people alive for millennia. They were being prepared to give birth and training to babies who would be leaders for their people. They lived in a time when the Roman Empire ruled the areas in which they lived. The Pax Romana – or Peace of Rome – was widespread, but it was a peace that was only a lack of war, a peace between nations, a peace that had come through victory and battle. It was a peace that came at the price of religious freedom for those who claimed the lordship of anyone other than the emperor. It was far from a peaceful or safe time for normal people like Mary and Elizabeth who lived under Roman rule.

As soon as Mary and Elizabeth meet, Mary proclaims words of praise to God. Many know this song as the Magnificat because of the opening words, “My soul magnifies the Lord.” Mary goes on to praise God and God’s faithfulness in words that proclaim God’s love for true justice. They proclaim that God is the real power in the world and that God favors the lowly; that is, God wants true equality among people where those who have more help those who have less so that everyone has enough. It is a vision of a world where compassion and justice are the order of life and where mercy abounds because of God’s mercy. Mary expects that Israel will receive God’s mercy, just as she has, because of God’s faithfulness and promises to Abraham and so she sings for joy.

Unlike the peace of the Roman Empire, God’s peace comes not because of victory or violence, through justice and non-violence. In Luke’s gospel, especially, there is an emphasis that those who are marginalized by society are not marginalized by God. They can find comfort that Jesus’ birth, life, and death took place on the fringe of society.

In Luke's gospel, these are the promises proclaimed as soon as Mary and Elizabeth meet. Both women have been marginalized. Beyond the normal low position, they held simply because they were Jewish women, Elizabeth's status was even lower because in the many years that she and Zechariah had been married, she had not given birth to a child. This was often considered to be some sort of punishment or curse from God. Now Elizabeth becomes the anomaly, the old woman who is pregnant, and Mary enters the state of the marginalized and likely rejected because she is a single woman who is pregnant in a culture where this put her in great danger.

The newly marginalized comes to visit the formerly marginalized. Because Mary and Elizabeth both know that God chose them to bear these children who will transform the world, Mary can proclaim with joy and certainty that God upsets the status quo. She can, from her own experience, testify that God cares for the marginalized, and has a vision of a world where God's love and justice are the rule, where compassion, peace and mercy are the operating principles.

During this Advent season, we have been looking at the possibilities of seeing the sacred in the middle of everything. We have tried to see that all our days, hours and minutes are filled with the possibility of God's presence. We have proclaimed that every person is a sacred child of God. We are trying to see that God can and is working in and through every person even when that person is not yet aware of God's presence in his or her life.

One of the reasons I wanted us to sing "Bethlehem of the Heart" was to help remind us that while we love the places and spaces that we have called sacred, they are not the only places that are sacred in our lives.

Sacred spaces are any places that are feeding and nurturing the freedom and grace so desperately needed in our lives and our world.

Think of the spaces that you inhabit. Think of your homes, your places of work or socializing. Ask yourself whether they are places that feed and nurture love, freedom, grace, and hope. Think of your community, the stores where you shop, the restaurants where you eat, the streets where you walk. Are these places where love is nurtured, where people are treated with respect, where compassion is practiced, where grace is shown?

If you can answer yes to these questions, then that is terrific. If, however, your answer is no, or not usually, or even not always, I invite you, and I invite myself, to think about what we can do to change this. Think and pray about how we can help make the spaces around us sacred spaces. Think about how they can become spaces where hope can be planted and grown so that those who inhabit those spaces can move forward into the world and transform the world in ways that reflect the vision that God has for the world.

The Roman empire represents the longest period of peace in the world, but if it is peace that came through violence and enforced through fear and oppression, then that is not peace. The peace that Jesus came to bring to the world is a peace that comes from justice, non-violence, love, and hope. In this Advent season, we seek God's presence and peace wherever we are.

Let me share with you, as our prayer, a prayer from the Iona Community, an ecumenical Christian community in Scotland.ⁱ

When the world was dark and the city was quiet, you came.

You crept in beside us. And no one knew. Only the few who dared to believe that God might do something different. Will you do the same this Advent, Holy One?

Will you come into the darkness of the world; not the friendly darkness as when sleep rescues us from tiredness, but the fearful darkness, in which people have stopped believing that war will end or that food will come or that a government will change or that the church cares?

Will you come into that darkness and do something different? Will you teach us how to save your people from death and despair? Will you make this world a sacred space in which your love is birthed?

Will you come into the quietness of this town, not the friendly quietness as when lovers hold hands, but the fearful silence when the phone has not rung, the letter has not come, the friendly voice no longer speaks, the doctor's face says it all?

Will you come into that darkness, and do something different? Will you teach us to embrace your people? Will you make this world a sacred space in which your grace is nurtured? And will you come into the dark corners and the quiet places of our lives?

We ask this not because we are guilt-ridden or want to be, but because the fullness our lives long for depends upon us being as open and vulnerable to you as you were to us, when you came, wearing no more than diapers, and trusting human hands to hold their maker.

Will you come into our lives, if we open them to you? Will you do something different and make our lives sacred places?

When the world was dark and the city was quiet you came. You crept in beside us.

Do the same this season, Holy One.

ⁱ Shared through license and subscription to Worship Design Studio, Rev. Dr. Marcia McFee.