

Seeking Sanctuary
Luke 1:39-55
A Sermon by Rev. J. Michael Cobb
The Fourth Sunday of Advent (Love)
Woodbury UMC
December 19, 2021

Every year, there are certain things that seem to get passed around or posted on social media, some funny, some heartwarming. For some reason, this is the year I have seen much criticism and accusations of mansplaining in the song “Mary Did You Know.” It is a beautiful song, but I am seeing lots of comments on it, two in particular I want to share with you. One I came across is called Mary Freaking Knew. I won’t share the whole thing with you, but it ends: “Yes, she knew! Read Luke 1, you fool, she sang about it then. It helps, if when you’re reading, you listen to women!” (*Someone in the congregation shouts Amen!*)

Another one I enjoyed takes a different approach, saying

Mary did you know that your Magnificat makes you sound like a raving Marxist
Mary did you know that powerful men consider your words alarmist
Mary did you know that governments will censor the song you sang
And although I am a Protestant, I really want to join your gang.

Goodness, so much snark! Snark everywhere!

It’s still a beautiful song, one you will hear in this sanctuary before the season is over.

“Mary, Did You Know?” has lyrics written by Mark Lowry in 1984, and music written by Buddy Greene in 1991, and was first released by Christian artist Michael English in 1991. I think if you are a songwriter, you can consider yourself very successful if your work attracts the kind of attention this song has attracted. I first got to know it from Cee Lo Green’s 2012 version, and two years later when Pentatonix released their version, it suddenly seemed to become ubiquitous.

The point of Mary Did You Know, as far as I can tell, is the exact same point being made in the very words she speaks in the scripture we just heard read today—that she is going to have a baby, and she is wondering what kind of life he will have—and what kind of impact his life will have on the world.

This brief scripture packs in a lot, far too much for one message, so I will focus on just one piece of this: What kind of world do Mary and Elizabeth envision coming into being as a result of their babies?

This is our fourth week in our Close to Home series—you might say we are getting close to being done with it. We started off with thoughts on being homesick for the place you will always belong, will always be welcomed. We then reflected on the foundations needed for a reliable home, and then last week on what it meant to have a home for all, where all people are able to bring their entire, true selves to a place of safety and belonging. Today, the theme is Seeking Sanctuary.

Sanctuary more or less means a place of safety, and safe space is so crucial for everyone, especially the mother of Christ while she prepares to become a home for God. Sanctuary is found anywhere God's love dwells freely and abundantly. In recent years it has become more common to talk about the idea of safe space, or “a place or environment in which a person or category of people can feel confident that they will not be exposed to discrimination, criticism, harassment, or any other emotional or physical harm.” When I was in seminary, for example, all three of my schools and most of my instructors, made a big point of saying that these were safe spaces. I went to very good, reputable schools—one pretty progressive, one pretty conservative, and one that did not really fit into that sort of binary—and not one of them was a place where I can say that no one was exposed to discrimination, criticism, harassment. That's just not how things work. But most of them tried hard.

I dearly wish that our churches, or at least the United Methodist ones, were places that fit this definition. In my experience, that just hasn't been the case. But it is our job as Christians to make the effort. I think we can do our best to create safe environments, and I think that in Elizabeth, Mary felt that she had found the kind of safety that is so important, and that is all the more precious because it doesn't happen all that much.

Mary retreats to Elizabeth and Zechariah's home to digest the angel's extraordinary news. She seeks refuge—physical safety and emotional protection. This was not a safe time for unwed pregnant teenagers. She receives a safe haven, a home for her heart to soon sing praise. (Go back and read the story of when the angel gives her the news. She says almost nothing, until she is in front of Elizabeth. Only when she has found sanctuary does she give voice to the song in her heart.)

But for all the love and respect we, as Christians, claim to have for Mary, the systems that support women like her are dangerously insufficient. Writer and social commentator Lauren W. Reliford notes in *Sojourners Magazine* that in our nation's capital, women in this country are dying and becoming disabled due to pregnancy, labor, and birth at a rate worse than in Syria, a nation embroiled in an ongoing civil war. Women in the United States tend to be primary caregivers for their families and have a greater risk of short- and long-term health impacts as a result. Can we really claim to love the Marys in our lives if we also don't seek to improve our maternal health crisis?

If we want to truly celebrate motherhood in this country — and not just venerate the concept of childbirth — we would ensure access to comprehensive care at community health centers that include birthing. Parents and children would receive care and support throughout the first years of life, and mothers would feel secure in knowing that their community has adequate resources to support healthy child development; they would know their children could thrive. Shouldn't we want to create the kind of society that would have supported and protected and honored Mary if she was living today, a society where birthing and motherhood are safe?

There are programs being debated at this time that would go a long way to accomplish this, but that gets into public policy in a way that goes beyond my focus in this sermon. My point is that what I have described is our reality, and Mary and Elizabeth are singing a song of a different reality, one of justice for those at the very bottom of the social order, even unwed teenage mothers.

When we try to understand God, our most frequent shorthand is that God is Love, and so sharing God must mean sharing love, freely and abundantly.

Sanctuary is anywhere God's love dwells freely and abundantly. I think that is what we should strive for as a United Methodist congregation. Today is the fourth week of Lent, and the candle lit stands for Love. Bringing God's abundant love to all, as well as we can, Love in action—we crave these things, and we cherish these things when we encounter them. Today we light the candle of love—and then we read a scripture where Mary envisions a world where God has scattered those with arrogant thoughts and proud inclinations, pulled the powerful down from their thrones, and sent the rich away empty-handed.

I ask again—What kind of world do Mary and Elizabeth envision coming into being as a result of their babies? Is this message good news? Well, if you are powerful and rich, you might not be so sure.

Here is my point. What Mary says here is not about putting those at the bottom into the positions of power—it is about ending those distinctions between being at the top and being at the bottom, and getting rid of those structures that lead to abuse. What's so interesting about that? What has been the pattern of political power for all of human history? You have someone in charge, there are abuses, so one way or another, that person is removed from power, and we put someone else in charge of that same system, same structures of power, but with someone else in charge we expect a different result. How often have we seen good people given massive power, and then seen how that power changes them? Mary's song is highly subversive and dangerous because it calls for an end to that cycle of corruption. She doesn't suggest putting herself in charge, she doesn't suggest putting those she likes in charge. Nothing of the kind, just an end to hunger and a lifting up of the lowly.

When the church has changed from the Reformation onward, all manner of abuses in a corrupted church, and the result was a breakaway that created the same kind of structure, but with different people in charge. We do well to beware of perceiving justice as simply swapping one for another! Instead, Mary dares to suggest we want to create something radically different, without winners and losers.

Of course, winners and losers is exactly what the disciples wanted, right? Kick out the Romans, re-establish Israel, only now with Jesus as king, and themselves in

positions of power and influence. With our guy in charge, we eliminate the abuses that the other side committed.

What is being proposed here is radically different from anything seen in human history. A place where you stop the cycle of winners and losers, where abuses stop, everyone gets what they need, and none can take it from them. In seeking sanctuary, what is being said here is a place where all have safety, all have sanctuary, all have enough, and I can bring my full self, without leaving any parts of my identity behind. Sanctuary here is envisioned as the people who say, “Here I am,” striving to create and to become a safe place for others.

How does that have any application to us, here, today?

Will we be a refuge, someone’s haven in the storm, sanctuary? THAT is the world that Mary envisions — not where her baby is king, but where her baby ushers into being a world where the experience of safety and belonging in God incorporates all people, with Jesus the one that invites us in. So what? The mission of the United Methodist church is to make disciples for the transformation of the world. If you claim Christ as Lord, then you are a disciple, and your work is our work—nothing less than the transformation of the world.

When we are received safely into refuge, we have the capacity to provide sanctuary for others. It is one of the great things about this week where we anticipate Christmas — because we can provide that safe refuge to a world that sure needs it. How many people feel really good about being in this sanctuary, hearing ancient words in the scriptures and the hymns and the prayers? That is a feeling of sanctuary and a feeling of home that is about more than a physical location. We can bring that love light from the front of the sanctuary, into the community—whether you see community as this nation, this world, this community, or the people you encounter as you live your life. All of it counts to God, so all of it counts for us, too.

In the spirit of these two holy women, Mary and Elizabeth, may we offer ourselves as sanctuary for anyone in need of one—glorifying, with our actions, the One whose love, freely given, is our sanctuary, our home.

I want to end by reflecting on the tremendous power in the invitation into sanctuary, into the type of home we find in the embrace of Jesus, the type we do our best to replicate in our own homes, for our own loved ones. This is a poem from the Close to Home devotional we shared for this Advent season, something to consider alongside this week's scripture. I invite you to close your eyes, and perhaps think back to a time when you weren't entirely sure what counted as your home—and then finally being invited into that place where you are not merely tolerated, you are celebrated, and you are embraced.

Come on Home | Luke 1:39-55

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.