

*Sacred Space*

Luke 1:39-56

I don't know if you've been reading the Advent devotions we've been sending out by email for the last couple of weeks—if not, it's not too late to get on the email list. You can make a note on your attendance card this morning. Or you can pick up a printed copy of the devotions in the Narthex, at the back of the sanctuary, after this service.

We asked people in the congregation to write something about the theme of our Advent season: what life looks like when we stop to remember that even before Christmas, God has crept in beside us; that the sacred is everywhere; that ordinary life is *infused* with holiness. The writings have come in three categories: sacred people, sacred time, sacred space. I have been moved by how thoughtful and insightful each piece has been, how much you already know yourself about where glimpses of holiness can be found. You probably don't need a preacher at all. :)

The writings on sacred space have a similar theme to them. We think of sacred space most of the time as places of natural beauty—mountains, oceans, sunsets--places mostly untouched by human hands or feet, certainly by human construction projects. Celtic Christians, from the fifth century in Northern England, discovered something they called “thin places”—specific locations where people experienced the boundary between the holy and the ordinary to be very porous, permeable. Places where it seemed like the veil that usually keeps us from seeing God could lift, allowing people to feel themselves part of something sacred, more than we are usually able to sense.

Yesterday's Advent devotion, written by Sherry Finzel, was about one of those “thin places”, a moment of holiness she experienced when she first saw the red rock formations in Sedona, Arizona. I had a similar experience in Sedona. Those rocks—whole mountains built out of truly red sandstone—stand all around, and because they're so straight-sided, you can walk right up to the bottom of where they rise vertically, dramatically, right in front of you.

There is a long tradition in Sedona that started among the first native people who lived there, of finding spiritual power in the shadow of these mountains. People say that there are energy centers—*vortexes*, they call them—in Sedona. Supposedly you can feel the energy in a subtle way all around town. But if you actually go to one of the place of a vortex, which is where the energy is strongest, it's supposed to be a magical experience—like a swirl of energy you can feel in your body. The energy you take in at one of these vortexes can, they say, stay with you and make you feel good for days afterwards.

A few years ago I went to Sedona with my sisters for a week of hiking. And every day as we began our hike, we consulted the vortex map. We made sure that we picked hiking spots that included a vortex. We asked the park rangers as we began: Where exactly is the vortex? And every day the answer was, “You'll know. And if you don't, you'll see a cairn—a stack of rocks—in the place where someone has felt it before. And every day we'd get to a place where there was a stack of rocks or two. So we'd stand there for a while. Pretty soon one of us would

say, “Do you feel anything?” I don’t know, we’d answer; I’m not sure what I’m supposed to feel. Do you feel it? And finally, we’d just start walking again, not sure what we’d missed.

Finally, on the last day we were there, we went on one more hike, to a place where the guidebook assured us there was a very powerful vortex. Again we asked at the front gate: How will we know when we get there? This time the guide was very specific: you walk until you see a river with big flat rocks all around it, and then you go just around the next curve, and you’ll be there.

We set off. After a couple of miles, we came to the river. All around it were big flat rocks, just as the ranger had said. And it really was beautiful. It’s not like there was nothing but vortexes to look for; the whole landscape was amazing. But we really wanted to feel this thing that other people had found so inspiring! When we got to the river, we walked a few more yards, like the ranger had told us to, with the river moving along one side of the trail. We moved away from each other, solemnly, so that each of us would be in our own private place when this thing happened, whatever it was going to be. We sat down on the rocks. We sat quietly. We waited. And it really was beautiful, but honestly—nothing happened. I didn’t feel anything. So after about 20 minutes we all stood up to continue our hike, slightly disappointed again.

We walked a few hundred yards further. And then we came around a corner and this is what we saw. A meadow, with hundreds and hundreds of cairns in it: stacks of rocks, some big, some very small, all made not by God at the creation of the world, but by people who had come to this spot before us. It was stunning. I’m pretty sure I gasped out loud. I felt the power of something bigger than myself, bigger even than my own personal spiritual experience. It was *all those rocks* stacked up, the collected experience of all those people who had come before us to this spot. They had left something behind to say, “Something happened here, something that felt like holiness to me.” And so I felt it too.

I don’t actually know what any of those people who stacked up a pile of rocks experienced. I don’t know if they felt the presence of the same God I worship. I have no idea whether that’s what a vortex is supposed to feel like. But it didn’t really matter. What mattered was that in *that place*, I could see that most human experience of longing and connection had been shared—by people who didn’t even know each other, at many times, probably over many years. Our common experience was what created sacred space; what people had made in that space marked it as sacred.

That’s church, I thought; this is what church is: a place where each of us comes because this is a place where people have come before to find what we are looking for. They have found it here; this place is full of collected memories, shared grief, connection with God, cracked-open hearts. All things we might call sacraments. And if we are doing church right, we are leaving visible marks of holiness, marks that beckon other people to come in and find what they are looking for too.

God has made sacred places all around us. A sunset with brilliant colors will knock us to our knees every time. But people too make sacred space. We too can create the space for holiness to enter.

I think that's what we hear in the story of Elizabeth and Mary, that we read this morning. Elizabeth is the mother of John the Baptist, the wife of Zechariah, who we talked about last week. Elizabeth is pregnant, and her husband is mute; he has not been able speak for months. So she must be lonely, and maybe a little bit confused by all of this. She is old, remember; long past the age when she thought she might have a child, old enough, probably, to be a grandmother. And one day her much younger cousin shows up at her door. Mary is decades younger; probably they had not been friends before.

This young girl who has traveled some distance to get to Elizabeth's house is not in good shape. She's pregnant. She's not married. Maybe she had been kicked out of her parents' home; that's what nice families did with girls who could not follow the rules. She came to Elizabeth because here was a relative, in a town far away from home, where no one would know her, where she wouldn't have to explain something she didn't fully understand herself. What would Elizabeth do when Mary got there? Would she open the door a crack to see who this was and then close it again? Would she look around quickly to see if the neighbors were watching? Would she ask a lot of questions first, so she could judge for herself if it was safe to let Mary in? Make sure she wasn't a terrorist? Try to get some clear picture of how long Mary intended to stay and what kind of hospitality she expected, exactly?

Elizabeth doesn't do any of those things. She just listens to Mary's story. She doesn't ask questions that might shame Mary or point out how complicated her life had just gotten. Instead, she welcomes and blesses her...immediately, without reservation. She treats her guest as if she is more honorable than Elizabeth herself, as if there is a miracle that is taking shape inside of Mary. Elizabeth does this even though she too is a woman who had just been visited by a miracle. She seems to feel no need to make comparisons between their surprising pregnancies. No competition for the most amazing supernatural event. She puts herself—her fears, her discomfort, her reservations—aside, to focus on someone else. Elizabeth breaks into song, the Bible says. "You are so blessed!" the words of the song go. "And your baby too. Everything inside of me is leaping for joy to have you here."

Suddenly this pregnancy that had seemed to Mary murky and mixed up and even shameful now looks different. In Elizabeth's welcome she sees something about herself that she had not dared to believe before. Even the angel's pronouncement had not convinced her she was OK the way Elizabeth now did. Mary is so full of grace, so grateful, she too sings. "My soul magnifies the Lord." Think about that: the holy comes into me inside of me it gets bigger—magnified, multiplied.

Elizabeth had created for Mary sacred space. Safe space. Space where she could be her best self, not ashamed, not afraid. Elizabeth saw beyond the shameful of Mary's situation to the reality hidden to most people. God's love at work—even in someone her society was ready to reject, exclude, condemn. And as she did that, she too was blessed. God was magnified. Holiness multiplied.

There are people all around us who are excluded, full of shame or fear. Sometimes they look like refugees, or Muslims. Sometimes they look like our children or grandchildren. Maybe these

are the ones who, like that young pregnant girl long ago, hold God' new reality inside of them when they show up on our doorstep. Who are you being called to create sacred space for?