

“This Is US: Holy Spaces, Our Sanctuary and Stained Glass Windows”

Psalm 84: 1-12

This week, we are transitioning in our Lenten Series from telling about certain holy moments which happened within this community of faith to telling about the holy spaces which fill our lives. When I first asked the question about some of the holy spaces in our lives, so many of us mentioned our sanctuary with its stained glass windows. There was talk about the beauty and wonder which fills this place. There were stories shared about a sense of peace which overtakes us as we enter its doors. There was even a mention of knowing that in this place, we are not alone. And it is not just church members who shared these sentiments. Visitors always walk into this very room and express a feeling of awe, going on to talk about how the light streams through the stained glass windows just so, sharing how they have this sense of connection with those who have gone on before us. I can't tell you how many times I have heard the words...This church has a beautiful sanctuary.

Which is why I hesitated to include our sanctuary in the conversation about telling our stories as the people of God. Not because I disagree with all the previous shared statement. Quite the opposite in fact. As one who has walked the

aisles of Westminster Abbey, stood under its arches and breathed in its history, as one who has sat within the hallowed halls of Iona Abbey, experiencing the mystical moments of Celtic spirituality, I deeply appreciate the beauty and wonder which greets me in a place such as this.

The simple reason I hesitated to include our sanctuary within the conversation as we tell stories as the people of God is this....Too often as people of faith, the conversations surrounding our sanctuaries become just that... conversations about our sanctuaries. We discuss the wall paint. Or we argue about which color carpet should fill the aisles of the sacred space. And don't even get me started on the pew wars which too often take over when we talk about our sanctuaries. That debate usually goes one of two ways. It either revolves around whether we should have pews or chairs in the sanctuary and which one is better. Or the extreme of this particular debate is...starting a fight about who is sitting in our pew during worship that day.

Sadly I am not making this stuff up. These are actual conversations we as people of faith are having about our sanctuaries these days. And I am just naming a few of the top of my head. I could go on and on but I won't do that to you. The sad thing we need to realize as the people of God is that what all these conversations about sanctuaries really have done is to distract us. They have pulled us away from

the very purpose of this holy space which is to point to the reality of God in our midst.

So I thought since we are working on reclaiming our place within the larger faith narrative as the people of God, it might help if we went back and took a look at beginning of the word “sanctuary”, to see how this beginning continues to shape our mission and mission today as a community of faith. The first mention of sanctuary within our sacred text appears in Exodus 25 verse 8. God tells Moses to have the people build a sanctuary so that God may dwell among the people. This verse falls within a larger section where Moses is on the mountain top with God.

On this mountaintop, God and Moses are having a conversation surrounding the Ten Commandments. They are figuring out how the people of God will live in community with one another and with God. This idea of building God a sanctuary comes immediately after the people have entered into the covenantal agreement with God. They agree to live out all that God will ask them to do. In return, God will be their God and they will be God’s chosen people.

So in the midst of all this talk about community and covenant, God asks the people to build God a sanctuary. This is so God can dwell among them. For God and the people, the sanctuary becomes a symbol of God’s constant presence in and among the people of God. It helps them foster an understanding of the source of

their lives. The sanctuary empowers the people to experience a new reality in their midst, a reality where dry valleys yield springs, a reality where love and grace reign. For the people of God, the sanctuary becomes a space for them to draw to their God.

Which brings me to our text today...Psalm 84. This psalm is an account of the experience one pilgrim has as he makes his way to the Temple in Jerusalem. Notice what he describes. He does not talk about the architecture and the pews. He talks about singing for joy when he gets there. He talks about those who abide in God's presence and how they go from strength to strength. He talks about knowing how being in God's presence is better than a thousand days elsewhere.

Within these verses, the psalmist anticipates what he will find in God's dwelling place. He anticipates experiencing a real, living, breathing, God. He anticipates experiencing the presence of God to its fullest. Within these verses, the psalmist anticipates coming into God's sanctuary and experiencing a God who is still moving, a God who is still working among the very people God created. The psalmist knows that this sanctuary, God's dwelling place, is a testimony to a God who is still active in and among the people of God, just like our sanctuaries need to be for us and our communities today.

You see, the word “sanctuary” was never supposed to be about the building. It was always meant to reflect the character of God...a God who offers comfort to those who are hurting, a God who uplifts and empowers God’s people, a God who draws us nearer so that we will know the beauty and wonder of the Kingdom of God which is in our midst already.

What the Exodus story, what the psalm reminds us is that it would have been so easy for God to remain up there on that mountain, to remain distant in some heaven light years away. But our God did not do that. Our God came and dwelled among God’s people, leading them through the wilderness as a pillar of smoke during the day, and as a pillar of fire through the night. Our God came and dwelled among God’s people, never leaving their side as they made their journey into the promise land.

But God didn’t stop there. We are told in the Gospel of John that God came to dwell among God’s people as the Word made Flesh, breaking bread with us, inviting us to experience God’s grace, bringing healing and wholeness for all of God’s children.

But God didn’t stop there. We are told in 1 Corinthians that we are God’s Temple, that we are God’s sanctuary, that God’s spirit dwells within each of us, bringing us into a new reality, a reality where the Kingdom of God is made real

and present for each and every one of us. We are told God's spirit dwells within each of us, inviting us to lodge together, to be in partnership with God as together we work to create a reality here on Earth, not just for a select few, but for all of God's children. Our God came and still dwells in and among God's people, bringing about a new reality for all of God's children, a reality where dry springs can yield springs, where love and grace prevail, a new reality where all are embraced as Beloved Children of God. By becoming God's dwelling place as the people of God, we claim that this life giving reality is not in some distant future, happening years from now. Now, as God's dwelling place, the people of God, we make a statement that this life giving reality is present here, that this reality is available here and now for all of God's people.

And we have to look no farther than our very own sanctuary to know that this is true. Within these walls, as the people of God, our faith becomes active. We say our liturgy during Sunday morning worship, words that name the beauty and wonder, the hopes and hurts that this world has to offer and then....Then we do the work of the people. In this space, where God dwells in and among the people of God, we cast a vision of God's Kingdom here on earth for the people of God. We tell a story which shapes us into living signs of God's reconciling grace and love in this world. We gain strength and courage to be the heart and hands of God in this world, bringing healing and wholeness to all of God's people. In this holy space, our

words and our actions become one...all because we have experienced, and continue to do so, all because we experience the very real presence of God within this sanctuary, this place where God dwells in and among the people still today.

Within this space, the very story told to us as a community of faith is about God's comfort and peace. Our sanctuary with its stained glassed windows tells us that hope is the anchor of our souls. It tells us that after the cross comes the crown. It tells us that no matter what grief and pain may come our way, an angel is watching over us. The very story our sanctuary tells us as a community of faith is that it was never supposed to be about the building, as a monument to ourselves. Our sanctuary was always meant to be a testimony to our God who is still active in and among the people of God, just like God has always been and forever will be.

Now please don't hear this sermon as a plea to make drastic changes to this space. But I will say, it is my hope that this Lent, as we take the time to listen to the stories of our faith, as we listen to our narrative as Midway Christian Church, we embrace our call to tell a different faith story, a faith story which celebrates God's life changing, life giving actions, a faith story which reminds us that God dwells in among God's people, a story that calls us to be a sanctuary for others in our world as well.

I'm not sure what that will look like just yet. But it seems that with each passing day, there is more and more hurt and brokenness in this world, that there is more and more need for us to let this world know that God is still here, that God is still working to bring healing and wholeness to all of God's people, to bring hope to the refugee and stranger alike, to bring safety and comfort to the undocumented and immigrant alike, It seems that there is more and more need for us as living sanctuaries to let this world know God is still here, active in and among the very world God created, bring about the Kingdom of God here on earth as it is in heaven.

Again, please hear me say, I'm not sure what our response to this call to be living sanctuaries in this world will look like just yet but it is my hope that by listening and sharing our story as Midway Christian Church, by telling the stories of our holy moment, the stories of our holy spaces, we will begin the journey of becoming the community of faith God created and calls us to be.

So today and all days, may we remember that what we do here in worship, in mission, in fellowship, in study as Midway Christian Church is not just some story. It is not just history. Our narrative as Midway Christian Church, as people of faith, more importantly as disciples of Christ, is about how love and hope came into being through Jesus Christ and transformed the world. It is the story of how our everyday lives are intertwined with the holy and sacred. It is a story about how we

are transforming into the people of hope, the people of love, the people of
WELCOME God calls us to be so that the Kingdom of God comes to life more and
more here on this Earth. So Midway Christian Church....This is Us, telling our
story as the people of God. Amen.