**Springfield Presbyterian Church**

**December 19th, 2021**

**Seeking Sanctuary**

1. Mary’s Song

 I can envision this reunion, Mary, and her sister Elizabeth, and

their joy and awe in that moment, when Elizabeth’s belly leapt and Mary sang a beautiful song of praise. Yet, I wonder what brought Mary to her sister, what happened before this scene.

Because even amidst this sense of awe, Mary was facing some

hard realities. Mary was a pregnant teenager, poor and unwed, and these implications could cause both physical and societal dangers. I can’t imagine that this is what Mary wanted from the beginning – I imagine she wanted a life with her husband, not overly complicated, maybe a mother of one or many, and a wife of a local carpenter. This news, despite its very goodness, throws a wrench in her plans, in what she envisioned for her life.

 So, she goes to her sister’s house, she goes with haste. She

goes to the person who she knows and loves and she seeks reassurance and the comfort of a hug or warmth at the hearth of a fire. Elizabeth’s words and belly offer Mary the reassurance she needs – the assurance that what is happening is a marvelous and extraordinary thing, meant to be celebrated, even if it’s complicated. Mary hears her sister, and perhaps moreso, she believes her sister, she sees the wonder because she’s now in this safe space and she rejoices with song. In her song, she sees the prophecy of her ancestors playing out right before her and she feels the joy and honor of being the unexpected servant to carry the greatest gift of the world.

1. Thank God for Elizabeth

When I think about this exchange between sisters, I am so glad

that Elizabeth can be there for her sister Mary. Mary was able to go to her house, to seek sanctuary, to seek safety, to be understood completely.

 It makes me think, particularly this season, about what it means to seek sanctuary. Yes, we are in a sanctuary, but what we see in this story is a deeper reality – sanctuary is not only a place, it is the people in your life who say ‘here I am…’. These are the people that say ‘here I am’ even when they are busy, even when things are hectic – the door is open, the kettle is on, arms are open, and you can finally let your guard down, because you are safe here to say whatever is on your heart.

 Those places, those places where you really feel that safety can be rare, but when you find it, what an incredible gift of love it is to find sanctuary. For some of you, sanctuary might be in the arms of your blood family – maybe the arms of your parents, of your brother or sister, of an aunt or an uncle. For others, it is our chosen family – the friend we’ve known for years who ‘gets us’, the person we haven’t spoken to in years but when we pick up the phone – it’s like we’ve never parted, or the neighbor across the street who has seen us grow up and welcomes us with joy.

 For me, there’s a few of those people who are sanctuary folk. One in particular just celebrated her birthday yesterday, her name is Greta and when I initially met her, I felt so safe and so loved and so heard that I looked to Bryan and said, “Do you think she will adopt me as her granddaughter?” I know there’s a place for me at her house, I know I can laugh or cry, and I know I can bring the heavy stuff of life to her and she won’t shy away – she’ll welcome me in and hear me. What a joy to have a sanctuary like that, what a gift of love to be known.

 Mary ran with haste to Elizabeth, so I ask you – in a time of need, in a time of joy, in a time where you need a safe space, where do you go to find that shelter? I pray earnestly that you each have a place like that – a sanctuary where you feel a deep sense of love, of safety, of shelter.

1. The Other Side of the Coin

If I flip the other side of the coin though, if I move myself from

Mary’s perspective to Elizabeth’s, I wonder if I am someone’s sanctuary, if I am someone’s safe space. I pray that I am, I pray that I can grow into that each year. I feel like every year I grow and I learn and priorities shift and change and I continue to learn what it means to welcome people in, to be able to say ‘here I am’ without getting caught up in my own list of things to do or distracted by our busy world.

 It’s hard though, isn’t it? It isn’t that it’s hard to be an encourager or offer assurance, but it can be difficult, especially in a time of global trauma and pandemic, to be who we want to be – to creatively find new ways and safe ways to be a sanctuary space for someone. I believe though, as we sit among the pews, as we listen to stories at fellowship, as we hear the good news of the Gospel, we continue to grow and embody the call of the Spirit – the call that welcomes all in and welcomes all home.

1. The Candle of Love

But I’d like to now to turn our attention to the candle we lit

together today – the candle of love. This particular candle holds a special place in my heart. I remember the words of one of my mentors 10 years ago as I sat in her office and she said, “You can preach about many things, but when it comes down to it, there’s one theme that will be yours.” For some, it’s stewardship, for others it’s discipleship, but for me, it continues to be the theme of love. For me, all of these stories we hear at their very heart are about love. Today, we celebrate the love of sisterhood, the love of finding those sanctuary people, and the love that we can offer when we are able to bear a safe refuge for those who need a hug, an ear, a place to be authentic and find hope and renewal.

 As it is the candle of love that is lit today and as I think about Mary’s song, I’d like to share with you a beloved song that I fell in love with when it first came out in 1999 by the band, Point of Grace. I remember, as my parents drove around to find all the houses with Christmas lights, me, delightfully insisting that we listen to this song. It echoes the theme that resonates with me always – the sense that love came down to be with us, to teach us, to show us a new way of life through compassion, gentleness, and radiating the very love of God into the hearts of all.

 I invite you now to look at the lyrics that have been passed out, to sing along if you like, and to really listen to the story unfold. If you aren’t yet in the Christmas spirit, I hope that this message helps you to find your way there. May love come down and may love live and dwell among us. Amen.