

We All Need Sanctuary

Homily by Reverend Rebecca M. Bryan

September 8, 2024

*Open my heart to be a sanctuary,
All made holy, loved, and true.*

*With thanksgiving, I'll be a living sanctuary for
you.*

The first time I heard this song was at the end of my first semester in seminary. My classmates and I were gathered in our seats in an old classroom on a historic hill in Newton, Massachusetts. We were preparing to take our final exam for our Hebrew Bible class, which included 100 random questions covering anything related to the major and minor prophets, the lands and happenings depicted in the Hebrew Bible, and the stories and messages contained within. To say I was nervous is an understatement.

Our professor could sense the anxiety in the room. He paused at the top of the aisle, his Kentucky stature and demeanor ever-present and said: "Let us sing."

"Oh, prepare me to be a sanctuary..."

I had never heard this song and yet immediately my mind began to relax, my body settled, and I knew it was going to be okay.

The people sitting around me were my friends—my fellow classmates—all of us seeking to do what we could in this hurting, broken, beautiful, and magnificent world. *We wanted each other to succeed*, even if we couldn't tell each other the answers.

We were taking this exam together. We were Home.

In that moment, I knew what a sanctuary was.

Years later, we sang this in Boston on the streets and in the church working for the safety and rights of immigrants who were at risk of deportation and whose lives were in danger.

Oh, prepare me to be a sanctuary.

Churches have been sanctuaries of refuge and safety, with varying degrees of legal status, for thousands of years. During my first year with you the Tree of Life Congregation synagogue, in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania, was the site of an

antisemitic terrorist attack and shooting that left eleven people dead and six more wounded, including several Holocaust survivors. A few days later, we gathered on the steps outside of this sanctuary and we walked together, along with many others from the wider community, and stood, inside and outside, at the Congregation Ahavas Achim in solidarity.

We all need, and deserve, sanctuary.

Sanctuary: a place where we can be safe, where our soul and heart and mind can rest, and where we can connect with the larger Mystery of Life.

Look around you; this is *your* sanctuary. Whether this is your first time here or you have been coming for many years, whether you are here in person or online, this is your sanctuary.

Now look at the people around you. These people are your sanctuary, committed to the same values as you: values of interdependence, religious pluralism, justice, transformation, generosity, and equity—all guided by Love.

This physical and virtual sanctuary, this sanctuary of people, is where we value freedom of belief and the inherent worth and dignity of every person and where we engage in healing the Earth and caring for all her creatures. Here we work to end oppression of black people, members of the LGBTQ+ community, and the elderly.

This is your sanctuary. A place where your mind and body can rest and be restored. A place where you are challenged, but are also loved, deeply. Our collective commitments create a container large enough for everyone to connect with the sanctuary inside of yourself as well.

Before sanctuary became associated with religious buildings, the earth and her sacred spaces were understood to be sanctuaries. Pine groves, mountains and hills, secret babbling brooks are all sanctuaries where the divine or sacred is felt. Many of us go to the ocean, woods, or mountains when we need comfort, inspiration, and messages of hope.

At a time when division is high in our country and

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strife continues to boil beneath the surface we need sanctuary. When our minds are continually bombarded with news designed to make us fearful, uncertain, and angry we need sanctuary. When our hearts are heavy, or our minds are confused, we need sanctuary.

And we are part of something much larger. Our families and friends, the community and the world around us, need sanctuary too. Every person and all creatures need sanctuary, and they need those of us who have access and privilege to sanctuary to help ensure they have sanctuary too.

The flower arch that we will create this morning is an outward symbol of sanctuary: this sanctuary (sweeps arms to walls), this sanctuary (sweeps arms to the people,) and this sanctuary (brings hands to heart).

Let us take a moment and bless this sanctuary and all who are here online and in person, who are with us or will be with us.

Join me please as we bless our students, those who are lost and searching and hurting, and those who are celebrating, imagining, and creating.

We remember those who have died, and yet will always be a part of the sanctuary here and in our hearts.

We bless the flowers, blue sky around us, and the dogs and other animals who will be blessed here later this fall, reminders of all God's creatures and their right for sanctuary.

Bless us all and bless this space.

Amen and blessed be.