

The Risen Community: Sanctuary

1 Kgs 19:1-15a; Pss 42-43

Brent Newberry

June 19, 2016

5th Sunday After Pentecost

A lot of pastors this day are stepping into the pulpit feeling more sheepish than shepherd-like. What do you speak in the wake of such tragedy? Who am I to offer any kind of response?

And yet, that's how many of us, probably most of us feel this day. What do we have to offer the world? We're just as lost as everyone else.

That may be the case, and that's to be expected, but today is day in which we remember. Those lives lost, to be sure, but also to remember the source of our hope; the ground of our faith. As the psalmist says in our reading today, we will ever hope in our God.

Let us remember together.

Remember.

"Do you think this is how they'll remember us from now on? As one of the shooting cities?"¹ That was the question the son of a journalist asked his father in the aftermath of the tragic murders of 49 LGBTQ people last Sunday. Not as the home of Disney or the tourism capital of

¹<http://www.orlandosentinel.com/opinion/os-orlando-mass-nightclub-shooting-scott-maxwell-20160612-column.html>

the world, but like those other cities in a growing list of cities defined not by their best attractions, but by their most terrifying moments. New York City, Newtown, Columbine, Aurora, Ft. Hood, Charleston, Boston, Orlando.

Do you think this is how they'll remember us from now on?

Charleston. Do you remember what I remember, when I say *Charleston*? This week marked the year anniversary of the tragic shooting in the sanctuary of Emanuel AME Church. Nine African Americans were murdered in their safest of places simply because they were black, simply because they were who God made them to be.

Their sanctuary was razed; their lives were taken from them.

Sadly, next year, we will mark two anniversaries in the same week, when we look back and remember the black lives that didn't matter to Dylan Roof; when we look back and remember the LGBTQ and latinx lives that didn't matter to Omar Mateen.

They were killed simply because they were gay, simply because they were who God made them to be. Their sanctuary was razed; their

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lives were taken from them.

Many of those who were interviewed in the past week, particularly LGBTQ persons, referred to gay clubs and bars as a sanctuary. And a lot of people had a hard time understanding how a dance club or bar could be a sanctuary for people. Even those of us who are welcoming and affirming allies—we didn't have a context to fully comprehend the communal safe haven that gay bars are and have been for the queer community. (Never mind that many of us watched 11 seasons of a TV series that was filmed and set almost exclusively in a Boston Bar.)

A twitter user named Jeramey Kraatz put this into context for me, personally, in a way that has been nothing short of transformative. He tweeted, "If you can't wrap your head around a bar or club as a sanctuary, you've probably never been afraid to hold someone's hand in public."

That was a simultaneous gut punch and light bulb moment for me.

He's oh, so, right.

I've never been afraid to hold someone's hand in public.

Few of us have been.

I'm used to perceiving sanctuaries as places of worship, not places of refuge. As places where we celebrate love, not as a place we go in order to be able to love.

I hadn't considered the functional purpose of a sanctuary for people to fully be who they were made to be. We haven't had to hide parts of ourselves from the world in order to survive.

So I went back and looked up the word *sanctuary*. It comes from the Latin *sanctuarium* which means *a container for holy things*. Or holy people.

Indeed a sanctuary is a place where people can fully be who they were made to be. Holy things. Holy people.

In our text from this morning, Elijah has fled to the wilderness, where he longs to die just like the many other prophets of God who've been murdered. You can almost hear Elijah praying words similar to our Psalm reading this morning. *Like a deer, I'm thirsty. Like this parched wilderness, I'm in need of water. My tears have been my food and drink. Where are you, God?*

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And while he is out there seemingly alone, wishing to die and be done with it, the fear and hopelessness and grief too much to bear, angels begin tending to Elijah's needs. With food and drink, they direct him to a cave for shelter. God provides for Elijah; God protects Elijah.

He laments before God the death of his people for no just reason.

I imagine Elijah understood how many of our friends and maybe you feel this morning, and this past week. Maybe it has nothing to do with the public events of this past week, or maybe it significantly does.

But you feel fragile, afraid, alone.

And what Elijah discovered in the wilderness and in that cave, is that God isn't found in the winds and earthquakes and fires and wars and assault rifles and 30 round magazine clips. God was found in the thin, quiet place. That space after the violence ceased. When our tears are our food and drink. When the silence grows louder than the gun shots. When hope seems lost, and life unfair, when our enemies and injustice seem to flourish.

What Elijah discovered, is that in the most vulnerable of moments, in

the most horrific moments, God is there, closer than ever.

And like the safety of a cave, as a refuge containing holy things, God offers God's self as Elijah's sanctuary. So that he can fully live into who he was made to be. And as he leaves that cave, his mourning turned to mission, he is able to remember his full self as a prophet of God.

It wasn't in the wind or the fire or the violence of an earthquake that Elijah remembered who he was, but in the sanctuary of God's protection. In the sanctuary of God's provision. When angels tended to his needs.

I saw this remarkable picture this week. A National Geographic picture, so you know it'll be good. And it was this odd mass of something, like a tower of sorts. And when you looked more closely it was this huge conglomeration of army ants. And they are connected to each other by their appendages, arms, feet, whatever, and their bodies together create this huge wall. And why are they doing it?

They are moving their nest, or colony to a new location, and inside this physical wall of bodies, is something precious, almost holy to them.

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Their queen is inside.

They created a physical sanctuary of themselves to contain and protect the holy things.

That resonated with me, because not too long after I saw that picture, I saw another one. This time of individuals wearing costumes made of white sheets. They had PVC pipes attached to their shoulders so that the white sheets protrude up and out over the PVC pipes, creating an angelic appearance.

It turns out that these “angels” are counter-protesters in many cities around the US where Westboro Baptist Church is protesting--they of the bigoted and mean-spirited protests at funerals of soldiers and politicians and gay people.² You see, when Westboro Baptist announced that they’d be boycotting the funerals of these 49 beautiful gay lives that were lost in Orlando, a theater group in the city stepped up to stop them from harassing the families in their grief. So their costume designers got to work recreating these angel costumes, so that this coming week as the

funerals begin, volunteers will don these costumes and create a wall of protection around the funerals and the families, so that they won’t have to see the hatred on the protesters’ signs. These angels, not unlike the ones in Elijah’s story, are providing for the families, and creating a sanctuary for them, containing holy things, holy people, where they will be safe to fully be themselves.

My friends, that’s us. That’s what we’re supposed to be. Maybe we won’t counter-protest dressed up as angels, but we’re supposed to be the ones providing safe spaces for those who are mistreated.

We have a beautiful sanctuary, and we should be thankful for it, but make no mistake: we aren’t called to sit inside a beautiful sanctuary; we’re called to go and *be* a beautiful sanctuary for those in need.

God sends Elijah out from that cave. God doesn’t keep him there in the safety of those walls. God goes with Elijah as his safe space.

As the body of Christ, as the people of God, the Risen Community, a church empowered by the Spirit of Jesus, we are called to go. To follow this God on the move, to create safe spaces in our cities where others can fully be who they are made to

²<http://m.sfgate.com/news/article/Angels-to-block-Westboro-Baptist-Church-s-8303872.php>

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be.

If we want people to feel safe enough with us, to fully be themselves, then we must be active in being a sanctuary, a people who protect holy things, and holy people, even with our own physical bodies.

That means we go and march in Worcester's Pride Parade. That means when tragedy strikes and the entire community of Worcester is gathering to pray, then we go and join in—and we don't just leave it to the pastor. That means we go to events like Start on the Street or forums on gun violence. If we are truly welcoming and affirming of all people, then our actions must be congruent with our words, so that all people feel safe here, gay people and people of color, people of different ethnic backgrounds and socio-economic statuses and political parties.

It's time for us to get up and go, to get moving, to join this God on the move. To *be* a sanctuary isn't just about being a safe place *here*, welcoming people in. That's important, but that's the easy part. The real challenge, and our deep calling is *to go* and create sanctuary wherever we go, in our cities and nation and world. To love our

neighbors by standing with them and embracing them, by being outraged by the discrimination they experience and the injustice they face.

Too many people hear from the churches who disapprove of their lives. They need to see and hear from the churches who are celebrating their lives and creating spaces for them to fully be who they were made to be. People won't know to come here until they see us come to them, and stand with them, and mourn and rage and celebrate with them.

Many of those who were killed last Sunday, didn't feel like they had a safe space in churches; it's why they found sanctuary in gay bars and clubs. And as more comes out about the shooter, that he may have actually struggled with same sex attraction in a space of his own that wasn't safe enough for him to do so, we can see all the more, how important it is for the people of God to offer something more, something else. To *be* something else.

A sanctuary.

Do you think this is how they'll remember us?

Amen.

Benediction:

The Psalm ends saying that our hope is in God, and we shall always praise him, our savior and our God.

Our saving place.

Our sanctuary.

May we as the body of Christ, embody salvation and refuge, may we be a sanctuary.

Amen.