

## **Sanctuary – Not just a place**

### **Psalm 63; Wednesday in Lent**

When you hear the word sanctuary, what image comes to your mind? This place of worship where you are sitting or watching online? A safe place? A place in nature where you feel relaxed and free? What is sanctuary?

If you had asked me two years ago what sanctuary was, the conversation would have been different. Facebook Live was a cool new thing we were just trying to add to what we were already doing. But then, a lockdown occurred. Suddenly, I had my phone hooked up to a tripod and we gave it a go. I didn't even know how to stream live to the St. John's page. I accidentally went live on my own personal Facebook page for that very first Lent service on March 20<sup>th</sup>, 2020. As it so happens, this week, Facebook's memories algorithm magically reminded me of that first Pandemic Lenten worship service. Facebook does that reminding you of all the things that happened the year before, two or three years before, five years before, etc.

And in this the last year, I had been ignoring all that as a lot of these memories that came up brought back some really hard times. It was a bit of PTSD remembering all that difficulty of trying to navigate that new reality. But, this one, just for curiosity, I clicked on. I then watched the entire Lenten service. Eric Nielsen and I sang the hymns. I preached a sermon about isolation and loneliness. Pastor Julie led the liturgy and Roxanne, who was never seen because the phone couldn't pivot at that time, could be heard on the piano. Lastly, Stacy Kelly's beautiful art, pieced together by the middle school youth was lovingly displayed in the chancel. I vaguely remember the theme of that Lent. It's kind of a blur.

For those who don't do Facebook, forgive me as I remember all this which may be foreign to you. But, for me, what were truly tangible were the comments on that first Facebook Live worship service. There were 42 comments from you, members of this body, who watched and participated with your presence. A few comments were from other friends all over the

United States who also watched our service. It was shared 10 times. But, more importantly, here's what just a few of the comments were:

"Thank you for bringing this sacred space to my home."

"What a beautiful church we have."

"I love our beautiful church and the people there."

"Just seeing the lit cross gives me hope."

"God, bring us back to our sanctuary soon."

"It's comforting to see our beautiful sanctuary."

"This is church, being together even if not together physically."

Sanctuary. What is it? Is it this place? Is it a feeling? Is it an internal presence? For me, I would have answered this differently two years ago than today. But, maybe the meaning of the word has not changed. According to the dictionary, sanctuary means a place of refuge. Now, I would really like to make certain we are not always thinking of sanctuary as only a building. While as this physical space is indeed a building, this sanctuary has to be much more than that. Who isn't already familiar with churches that put so much effort and importance in their building to the detriment of their ministry and mission? Those churches die a long, slow, painful death. Worshiping or idolizing a church building while forsaking the purpose, the ministries of that building can happen to any beautiful church. Anyone can build a physical space that is beautiful. But, there also is valuable, tangible presence and faith in a comforting space such as this one and it can and often does lead to a deeper attachment to its people as I pray it does here at St. John's. This sanctuary, however, is more than a building. But why? It is more than a building because, when at its heart, it is its people and it represents the actual body of people being the realized Body of Christ in the world. In fact, I would even say that this sanctuary is meant to help build sanctuary within each person who enters here, to be a sanctuary for the sake of the world. Just like the old praise song says: Lord, prepare me to be a sanctuary, pure and holy, tried and true; with thanksgiving, I'll be a living sanctuary for you." As we see this place as sanctuary in all its purpose and beauty, God also longs to make us a sanctuary as the living Body of Christ.

As the psalmist states in today's reading: "I have seen you in the sanctuary and beheld your power and your glory." How do we see God in this sanctuary? Do we see God present as a refuge in bread & wine, word, water, in the symbols present here, in the history of the saints that were baptized here and whose lives were remembered here; and in its ones here who God called to be a people of faith together? How is this place and people to remain a sanctuary as we grow accustomed to a new normal surrounding pandemic and in the numerous concerns of our world and community? We are more than banners, candles, stain glass windows and wood carved altars. The difference is in how we make this refuge not merely a comforting one, but a refuge of presence and purpose in a hurting world.

For your prayer time, you can draw, doodle, write or contemplate the following questions: What is sanctuary? How is God calling you to be a sanctuary presence in the world?