

Based on Psalm 84. An ancient choir member longs to sing back in the Temple.

Our Lesson Learned from Lockdown this week is simple: Space Matters.

Yes, we know we can worship God anywhere. Yes we know “the Church has left the building.” But we miss this building. And we miss who we are in this building.

Archaeology attests the importance of sacred spaces throughout human history, and of course even pre-history. Indigenous cultures the world over point to particular places where divine energy dwells most powerfully. Even our own Shepherdstown, West Virginia, I have been told, resides on a paranormal vortex with healing, calming, attracting energy to soothe our wounded souls.

And then there is our sanctuary. The “Meeting House” it is alternatively called, because at the time of our founding as a congregation the colony of Virginia declared it illegal to name anything other than The Church of England a sanctuary.

But sanctuary it has surely been, as a literal hospice for the dying during Antietam. As a “house of peace and healing for all people” ever since, we say on our website.

Do we ever miss it!

We *long* for this sanctuary, in the language of the psalmist. Aching in our souls, gasping for breath as if we are fish out of water beyond it, desperate for the depth of divine and human connection that seems impossible to replicate so far from it.

If there is anything we have learned through these eighteen months of lockdown let it be that sacred space *matters*! Yes, we are thrilled to be online, to dash across that digital divide, even to imagine the potential for growth as we shift toward hybrid worship come September.

But let’s be real: if all we did was worship online, this Pastor would have to find another calling. There is just too much meaningful ministry that is missing from disembodied community.

The *singing*, for example! As the psalmist describes, as our own choir has been moaning, as even those of us who are lucky enough just to make a joyful noise are groaning. There is nothing like joining our voice with the voices of our siblings in faith to make melodies and harmonies we never could on our own. We are longing for the sanctuary, where we can sing together as a congregation again.

The real-time feedback, for example. Watching on our faces if we are grooving with the message and the music and the movement of the liturgy. Or puzzled by it. Or flaring up in righteously angry response to it. We are longing for the sanctuary, where we can engage in real-time feedback about the message again.

The concrete acts of caring, for example. The simple, “how are you, really?” uttered across the pew as a family that has been through hell this past year settles in for the introit. The quick check-in at the postlude that turns into lunch that turns into a lifelong friendship. We are longing for the sanctuary, where we can talk and touch with concrete acts of caring again.

The ministry of our children and youth, for example. As they plod down the aisle to the First Pew and stumble through pronunciations of nations and challenge our wisdom and just generally keep us on our toes and back to basics about what this thing called life is really all about. We are longing for the sanctuary, where we can receive the ministry of our children and youth in person again.

Friends, if there is anything we have learned through these eighteen months of lockdown let it be that sacred space *matters*!

And yet ...

The Presbyterian tradition teaches as strongly as possible that *all* space is “sacred space.” That the church is not a building, the church is a people. That we do not “go” to church; we *are* the church.

Lord, prepare me to *be* a sanctuary, we sing. A Living Sanctuary. Not Lord, prepare me to *come* to the sanctuary.

The Psalmist gets there, too, in the end, but not without describing the same longing we feel today. In a remarkably relevant lectionary text, the ancient member of the sacred choir composing this poem finds himself exiled from the Temple – for reasons we can only surmise – and has to figure out what to do about that.

My natural place is in your Temple, the psalmist sings. Really, it’s the only place that matters, she declares. Better to be a doormat there than a diva anywhere else.

But the pilgrimage is dangerous, the psalmist admits. Too dangerous in fact. It is not safe, O God, the psalmist laments, for me to worship in your sanctuary. So, lo and behold, I must figure out how praise you in exile, the psalmist concludes. How to trust you beyond the vortex. How to serve you from the sanctuary in my soul, he wonders.

And we have been figuring out how to do that, too. Our own Chris Madeo reflects upon this journey so beautifully in our Reading today. “Prior to COVID I could run, drive, fly here there and everywhere,” she ruminates, “including driving to services, meetings at church. But with COVID I have had to settle down and just be here in my home where I am.”

“And I have discovered it’s not so bad a place!” she concludes. “I have made friends with my memories, keepsakes in my home, the trees around my house, the snow, the heat, the dust, the ants. ... ho-humming with spider solitaire and pretending I am in the Queen’s Gambit ... and just being alive amidst all of this.”

With “no place else to go but here,” Chris has received a different kind of sanctuary through the grief of losing her husband. She has discovered the place of the outlier and even finds herself rejoicing in it.

In the meantime, though, there is still this longing. A holy longing, as the psalmist describes. And that holy longing is honored, so long as it moves us to compassion. Because the sanctuary of which the psalmist sings is not for herself alone. The sparrow and the swallow find refuge there, as well. Literally, to be sure, but also as biblical symbols for all who are vulnerable to forced exile from their homes.

If there really has been anything we have learned from lockdown, let it be the deepest compassion for those who need *that* kind of sanctuary.

Sanctuary, after all, about protection and refuge in the face of hostility and danger. Sanctuary is about asylum and peace in the face of violence. Sanctuary is about justice and mercy in the face of hatred. Sanctuary is, theologically, about “the provisional demonstration of the reign of God” on earth as it is in heaven. Sanctuary has always really been more about a state of being than it has ever been about a building.

And we can be sanctuary anywhere.

We can be sanctuary, for example, when we plant pollinators and file legal briefs on behalf of indigenous communities. We can be sanctuary when we teach students with disabilities and when we stand up for mandatory masks with the county schoolboard. We can be sanctuary when we teach our children how to pray at the dinner table and when we advocate for voting rights with our state’s swing vote Senators. We can be sanctuary when we support immigrant families acclimating to a new land and when we pick up the phone to call someone who is just plain having a rough time.

Yes, it is okay to long for our own sanctuary. Yes, it is okay to be grateful for a date and a time of return. But let us bring back with us this lesson learned from lockdown:

That “there are many ways to hold sanctuary,” as the Muslim poet Sherif Jannehamed writes. “May I be one of

That there are many ways to hold sanctuary, as the Muslim poet Saeed Anwar writes. May I be one of them.”

Let the church say, Amen!