

“Sanctuary”

Psalm 15; Micah 6:1-8; Matthew 5:1-12

February 1, 2026

Woodbury United Methodist Church, Woodbury, Connecticut

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Are we prepared to meet God?

It's usually a question we consider as earthly life ends. Sometimes it's asked by folks whose theology is designed to frighten us into whatever concept of God they have.

But what if it's a question about this morning? Right here. Right now. Are we prepared to meet God?

Because God is with us. Right here. Right now. It's what we sang in our opening hymn: *“God Is Here.”* Unnerved? Don't be. This is what the spiritual life is about. It's what we mean when we say *“God is always with us.”*

Public, corporate worship is one way we meet God and allow ourselves to be met by God. That is part of what it is to experience sanctuary. To be *in* the sanctuary is one thing. To experience sanctuary is something else.

Our Psalm today sets the table for us. Scholars believe this Psalm is an *“entrance liturgy,”* a psalm offered in preparation for worshippers to enter the Temple.

Consider that ancient context. There was not a church on every corner. There was ONE temple. In Jerusalem. That was where God lived. The temple did not have a sign saying *“Join us for worship.”* In fact, some people—with deformities or handicaps, skin ailments or improper parentage—were barred from entering. There were also circumstances—Deuteronomy 23:1-8 provides a list—that prohibited admission to the temple. I don't advocate reviving these restrictions but understanding them helps us understand the reverence with which the ancients viewed worship.

So imagine, you've come from some distance and at some sacrifice to enter the temple. You wait outside in anticipation. Finally the gates are opened and the worship begins. With those

assembled you ask *“O Lord, who shall abide in your tent? Who shall dwell in your holy hill?”* You ask this question of God, and of yourself. Who, indeed, is worthy?

And here’s the thing: God answers! That’s right! God responds with ten qualities of a true worshipper. Whoever:

- Lives blamelessly
- Acts uprightly
- Speaks truth from the heart
- Keeps the tongue under control
- Does not wrong a friend
- Casts no discredit on a neighbor
- Honors those who fear God
- Stands by an oath at any cost
- Asks no interest on loans
- Takes no bribe.

And quickly we realize that few, if any, of us pass this test!

Yet that realization is not so bad. It allows us to ask ourselves, *“Have I prepared myself to enter into **this** sanctuary and **this** time of worship?” “Am I opening my heart and mind to God and others? “Am I willing to be in this community even when there are difficulties and misunderstandings?” “Did I just ‘show up’ and expect God to do all the heavy lifting?” “Do I expect to meet God here, today?”*

When I came here 22 months ago I promised to bring my “A” game every Sunday. But I don’t remember that I told you why. It is because God is here, and God is worthy to be praised and to be honored and glorified with all that we have and our very best. If I haven’t brought my “A” game every week, it is not for not trying. God will decide.

To have the experience of sanctuary is to realize we are in the presence of God and in the presence of the holy.

So do our behaviors reflect this belief? Or are we engaged in behavior, even in worship, that suggest that God is not here; that we are spectators and not participants; and that Christ is somehow not

present in the Sacrament that we are about to receive? Being attentive to our inner spiritual life, and the attitude we bring to God, is a lifelong journey.

And, truth be told, we don't always get it right. I don't, try as I might. That is why the prophetic tradition is so critical of public worship. Micah tells us that God is not persuaded by hypocritical worship, that offers sacrifices outwardly but not inwardly. Micah echoes the prophetic stream of Amos (5:24), Hosea (2:19-20) and Isaiah (7:9, 30:15) in a single sentence: *"God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"*

Let's not be distracted by being called hypocrites. It's the old critique from those who don't want to bother with public worship, so they accuse those of us who do of being hypocrites. My response is, *"There's always room for one more."*

The concept of sanctuary is now under daily assault. This space used to be off-limits to law enforcement. No more, according to the guidance our Trustees have received from the Annual Conference. It is considered "public" versus "private" space, the latter being my office and possibly the Assembly Room. This assault, led by an Administration that interprets immigration enforcement as the killing of American citizens by masked agents of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, is why I will be attending the Public Witness for Immigrant Justice on February 25th in Washington, D.C. The details are provided in today's bulletin and last week's *"Living Through Grace."* I am happy to discuss my discernment around attending this event, but essentially it is this call from the prophet Micah, and the reminder from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., that *"It is always the right time to do the right thing."*

Still, Jesus, too, imparted the experience of sanctuary, and invited people into God's presence, apart from being in a sanctuary. The Beatitudes, today's Gospel, were offered on a high hill overlooking the Sea of Galilee. I have been to the traditional site outside the ancient city of Capernaum, and it is indeed beautiful. It

supports the argument posed by others for not being in church when they say *"I can worship God in nature."* Yes, one can. But does one?

Jesus offers these Beatitudes – the word means “extreme blessedness” – because internalizing sanctuary, becoming a sanctuary, is a product of experiencing God’s presence in our lives and living as God desires. Those of us who love God, and who are faithful in our presence in the sanctuary, still sometimes need the eyes of someone “outside” to remind us.

I was a young and less-spiritually-mature pastor 40 years ago in a neighborhood church in Queens, New York. It, like Woodbury, has a beautiful, if different, sanctuary: warm exterior beige brick, dark interior woods, high ceiling all designed to lift eyes and hearts heavenward.

One afternoon a knock came on my office door. I was alone, and even the brazenness of a young clergyman was not always at match for the challenge of the city when alone. I opened the door and a man stood there; a man a bit rough around the edges; who had seen the harder side of life; and who I presumed was there to ask for food and drink I supposed he didn’t have. *"May I help you?" "Yes. I've been by your church many times and I'd like to see it and pray for a while."*

Oh. God have mercy, to my shame I wondered what his real motives were. Still, the LaRosas were next door, the Kirchsteins across the street, the Herzogs across the intersection. If there was trouble I could outrun him. So I let him in.

He marveled at the sanctuary’s beauty and then wordlessly knelt at the Communion rail. I told him I’d be in the office, a few steps away, if he needed me; and to let me know when he was ready to leave. About a half-hour later, he did. If my life depended on it I couldn’t tell you what his parting words were. But I remember his tears; and the lightness of his gratitude; and I knew that he had encountered a Presence in that sanctuary that I had come to take for granted.

When we believe that God is here and that all we prepare is for God, not only do we encounter God in the sanctuary but we, ourselves, are made a sanctuary. Mark Richardson, a United Methodist pastor, tells of the time he gave permission for a traveling youth choir to sleep in his church. They showed up road-weary and ready for sleep. Rev. Richardson showed them where to bunk down.

But before they unloaded their vans, the director said they wanted to thank the church for providing a “sanctuary” in which they could rest body and soul. She whispered some words to the 30 or so young people, gave them a starting pitch, and in the dimly lit narthex they sang:

*“Lord, prepare me to be a sanctuary, pure and holy, tried and true
With thanksgiving, I’ll be a living sanctuary for you.”*