

# A PLACE CALLED SANCTUARY

AN EXCERPT OF A SERMON PREACHED AT SAINT JOHN'S PARISH ON SEPTEMBER 11, 2005  
PENTECOST XVII, YEAR A, PROPER 19

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We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live in the Lord, and if we die, we die in the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's possession. ... For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living. Romans 14:5-12

On Friday, a member of my family died. Her name was Betsy. She would have been fifteen next Sunday, which in human years they say would have made her about one hundred and five. That's a long, long life for anyone, even a golden retriever.

My twenty-two year old daughter was only seven when we brought the puppy home from a backyard breeder in Concord. Four years ago, MichalAnna had taken Betsy off to college with her and, with her love of animals, she'd kept the old girl going for a long time. But then Besty got cancer, and her days were numbered.

On Friday morning I got the call and drove to Davis, so we could go through the tender ritual at the animal clinic. There, on the floor with the old blanket, the dog's head rests in Michal's lap, while every breath is ragged and a struggle. Michal weeps freely. I manage to get out a simple prayer of thanks for this wonderful companion to my children for so many years. The vet takes his time, giving us time to say goodbye; as he gives her the merciful injections, and this furry old creature of God slips away, back to the vast created order from which it came.

"I know it's silly," Michal says, sniffing through her tears, "but I want a place to remember Betsy." So, in a few weeks we'll take the dog's ashes and bury them under the cherry tree in the backyard, beside the children's playhouse. "It's silly," Michal says, "but I'll have a place to remember."

It was only a dog. [That is, unless you're a pet owner yourself. We're a peculiar breed who understand what someone else says about these deaths in our families.] But it also got me thinking about people and places. Because there are so many people these days without a place. And it got me thinking how sometimes all that's left are places of refuge, places of sanctuary, the places where we live, and die, and are one day laid to rest. And I kept thinking of that particular phrase we read today from Romans, about how "whether we live or die," the place we die is "in the Lord." For, as Paul puts it, we are "the Lord's possession."

A fellow by the name of Shelvin Cooter is one of 583 people from New Orleans relocated this last week from New Orleans, to a National Guard camp south of Salt Lake City. "We're getting shown a lot of love," he was reported saying in the morning paper, "but we're also getting a lot of stares like we're aliens or something. Am I the only person out here with dreadlocks?"

Well Shelvin, in a place like Salt Lake ... there's probably a good chance ...

But more so, what do you call a disaster that uproots and displaces people so far from the familiar, former kind of a place that – if not gone forever – will nonetheless never be the same again? These days we call such a life-changing event Katrina. Four years ago this morning, we came to call it simply "9-11."

One commentator in the NY Times noted: "On the first three anniversaries of Sept. 11, 2001, the nation had the grim luxury of uncluttered memory. We looked back on that day's events as the most terrible thing that could happen on American soil. Today, we are cursed with an unwanted expansion of that vision."

Where is a place, a place to remember? A place for us, for instance, to remember, we "are the Lord's?"

9-11, among other things, was about a place. It was about two soaring towers. Or a five-sided cluster of buildings housing the headquarters of the largest military machine in human history. Or a field in Pennsylvania. But the swath of destruction from this recent hurricane is so immense in sheer scale that there are millions of people affected over huge, once-populated areas. And they're all saying the same thing: "The place will never be the same again."

According to a recent poll, New York City residents say the time has come to start to make something of their hole in the ground; that hallowed space where there was once something, and for four years has only been emptiness. There's still a place, to make a new place; to replace something representing human will, spirit, determination, or even defiance.

But across the waters of that NY skyline is Ellis Island and the giant statue with Lady Liberty's arm raised and holding its torch; under whose sheltering wing countless homeless, hopeful souls sought the refuge of another place, when there was no place for them anymore elsewhere. Where do you go when you can't remain where you were – when there's no "there" there anymore – and you find yourself in an alien land?

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*Where do you go when you can't remain where you were – when there's no "there" there anymore – and you find yourself in an alien place?*

"We're getting shown a lot of love," Shelvin says, "but we're also getting a lot of stares like we're aliens or something."

The word alien has such an alienating, threatening sound to it. Aliens come sneak across our borders in the dark of night; or worse, come from outer space. But these American aliens bristle at being labeled "refugees;" which, they say, makes them sound as if they don't belong in this country.

Okay, how about referring to those dis-placed as simply "evacuees?" As a reporter recently observed, "Hundreds of thousands of evacuees are scattered around Louisiana and neighboring states in a sudden diaspora, and no one seems to have any idea what to do with them next. But whatever you call them, they won't be able to go back home - won't have a home to go back to - for months or even years."

Finally, there's another word for a place and those who seek refuge here. We call it sanctuary. It's a place we set it aside as holy ground, sacred space. It's a place set aside where we return week after week to share a life. From this place, and from this perspective, we say it is where we "live and die in the Lord."

So last Monday, a longtime, faithful parishioner named Pat ended her long battle with cancer.

On Tuesday, Ilona's son, Peter succumbed at last to his terminal disease.

On Wednesday, Howard notified me that his elderly mother, Ruth, died Monday. We have our own dead among the living. Where is there a place for us all?

Paul says, "We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live in the Lord, and if we die, we die in the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's possession."

We look around and find there are so many displaced people. Whether evacuees, refugees, aliens - we all find ourselves in need of a place. A place we call sanctuary.

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