

Worship for July 30, 2023

Prelude

Welcome and Announcements

*Call to Worship

God of grace, you have given us minds to know you, and voices to sing your praise.

**Fill us with your Spirit,
that we may celebrate your glory
and worship you in Spirit and in truth;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

*Hymn 611 Joyful, Joyful We Adore Thee

Prayer of Confession

**Holy and merciful God,
in your presence we confess our sinfulness, our shortcomings,
and our offenses against you.
You alone know how often we have sinned
in wandering from your ways,
in wasting your gifts,
in forgetting your love.
Have mercy on us, O Lord,
for we are sorry for all we have done to displease you.
Forgive our sins,
and help us live in your light,
and walk in your ways,
for the love of Jesus Christ our Savior.**

Hymn 698 Take, O Take Me As I Am

Assurance of Forgiveness

Hear the good news!

The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance,
that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners.

He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross,
that we might be dead to sin and alive to all that is good.

I declare to you in the name of Jesus Christ, you are forgiven. Be at peace.

First Scripture Reading

Psalms of Solomon (selected verses)

Time With Our Young Disciples

Gospel Reading Psalm of Solomon (selected verses)

Morning Message

Ed and I went to a worship service Wednesday evening. Together. That is a rare event and we don't take it for granted. I count it as joy.

A crowd was gathering, greeting one another. The atmosphere was charged with anticipation. We were there to hear a young seminarian, a hometown girl, and cheer her on as she begins a life of ministry.

In the chapel there were lots of handshakes and hugs going on, lots of smiles and goodwill. I noticed that a long-time friend seemed especially happy. In fact she was beaming. People were hugging her especially tightly. She was a living example of her name: Joye.

Soon she turned and hugged me like we had been separated at birth. "What's going on, Joye? You seem exceedingly happy."

"I had an accident...and I survived!"

Then I heard the rest of the story, at least the parts she remembered, for she did have a head injury. Indeed, she had reason to rejoice in her survival.

The service was good, lighthearted in some ways and profound in others. There is a story that accompanies this event. Complicated. Controversial. But Wednesday night, it echoed with a note of joy. We'll come back to that.

In our text, Jesus is still telling stories in the form of parables. In the one we read today, there is a search for something most valuable. And there is genuine joy in its discovery, as the gospel reads, "Like a treasure buried in a field, which a person finds and hides again, and out of joy goes and sells all that he has and buys that field."

Matthew wrote to a mixed Judeo-Greek Christian community. He identified a "new" way of Christ emerging from the inheritance of Israel. This new faith was based on both a book and a person, as Christ's disciples were asked to trust equally in the Scriptures and in the living presence of Christ.

Each of the characters in Jesus' story has a history, family, a community, a trade or occupation. But we aren't privy to those details. All we know is that they devote themselves to a search for something most valuable, and when it is finally found, their lives are immersed in deep joy.

I recently discovered the work of Margaret Feinberg. She is a spiritual director and contemporary author and I would call her a theologian. I'm reading her book, *Fight Back With Joy*. She writes about the start of a new year, when some of her closest friends took up the discipline of choosing a word on which to meditate, and in so doing, learn something of God. One friend chose "peace," and another chose "hope."

"I dreamed about which word embodied the work I wanted God to do in my life. I had spent years listening for the sacred echoes. I'd set out to scout for the divine, searching to better understand God through lesser known biblical texts. I had worked to shake myself from spiritual slumber and encounter the wonder of God all around. During these God journeys, a word kept bubbling inside me and fluttering about everywhere I turned. Only three letters and one tiny syllable: 'joy.'"

C.S. Lewis described joy as serious business. Her wrote a book about it, *Surprised by Joy*. Margaret says she thought she could take joy lightly, capturing it like fireflies in a mason jar. But, she discovered, you need more than that. You need chutz-pah, backbone, intentionality-and sometimes you need a crisis.

Margaret's crisis came in the form of breast cancer. She says, "During the last year and a half, I felt my way through the darkness of despair and stared death in the face. Somewhere along the way God unveiled a spectrum of joy that I had never experienced-from the joy expressed as lighthearted laughter in an impossible situation, to the joy from hearing the deep voice of God during times of great pain. Through it all, I learned something startling: More than whimsy, joy is a weapon we use to fight life's battles."

Margaret's story reveals the discovery of her disease, something she found that did not bring her joy, but terror. She describes the first days of treatment. She takes us on an adventure she had planned before the diagnosis-a spiritual retreat in Maine, a hiking trip in Acadia National Park, and several days in an old Victorian house on the coast where twenty people had gathered to experience the wonders of God.

On the third day of the retreat they were set to climb to the summit of Cadillac Mountain. I've been to Acadia. I've been to the top of Cadillac Mountain. In a truck, not on my feet. And it was scary enough.

The hike started off well, with plenty of water, energy bars, and sunscreen. But soon the hike went awry. They misinterpreted the trail markers, the heat rose, the sun scorched, the fierce wind became unbearable. Six mountains stood between them and Cadillac. They were quickly running out of supplies. Margaret says she only had three sips of water left in her canteen. She asked another hiker, a stranger, for a drink of water. He offered her the whole bottle.

It was soon apparent that it was too much, especially for Margaret, who had her first round of chemo.

When they all returned to the old Victorian house, with their scrapes and bruises and sunburns, something inexplicable and magical happened. Although they had felt abandoned, “God had been working, his fierce love revealed for us in our conversations.”

They spoke of being refreshed from overloaded work schedules. They spoke of the encouragement they gave and received from fellow hikers. One woman was fixated on accomplishing something important and hiking this mountain was part of that goal. But, along the way she sensed God whisper, “You have nothing to prove.”

“Through the harrowing experience, a curtain was drawn back as we listened to each other share how God had used the trek to challenge us, teach us, speak to us, and free us. A hike gone awry became the place where God met us. Joy stoked a flickering flame that warmed the room.

The biggest myth about joy is that it only flourishes in good times, or that it is only the byproduct of positive experiences. But the botched hike had led them to a bigger truth: Life’s thorniest paths can lead to great joy.

Back to the Wednesday night worship service. I referred to it last week, but when I returned home I realized I hadn’t fully explained the reason why it was controversial and the session of the church where the young minister-to-be was raised was concerned that it would not go over well.

It’s both simple and complicated. We have much yet to learn. You see, when this soon-to-be minister was growing up, he was a boy. Now, in her twenties, she is a woman. Yes. Difficult to take in, but not so difficult as it is for her and her family. Even so, more than 75 people turned out in support, and that evening personified love and trust, hope and courage, and above all, it exuded joy.

I’ve spent the rest of the week noting the appearance of joy, the reports of good news, the opportunities to encourage and pray for others, the unexpected moments of delight. I speak of my grandchildren so often I know you’re sick of it. But you’re polite and let me go on about how

I miss them seeing them in person. Yesterday I received a video of five year old Tad breaking his first board in karate. His joy made my day.

I know some, but certainly, not all of your struggles, frustrations, needs, hopes. I do know that the sun comes up each day on all of us. And in its rising are the day's new gifts of God's mercy.

And in them, I pray you are surprised by joy.

*Affirmation of Faith The Apostles' Creed *p. 35*

*Hymn 581 Gloria Patri

Sharing Our Joys and Concerns

Pastoral Prayer and the Lord's Prayer

Presenting Our Tithes and Offerings

Offertory

*Hymn 607 Doxology

*Prayer of Dedication

**Loving God, having received your grace in the redemption of Christ Jesus,
we live strengthened in the faith, with lives overflowing with gratitude.**

**From the depths of our hearts, we offer to you the very best we have-time, talent, and
treasure.**

May our offerings be a sign of our true devotion and thanksgiving. Amen.

*Hymn 623 I've Got Peace Like a River

*Blessing

May the God of peace

make you holy in every way,

and keep your whole being- body, mind and spirit,

free from every fault at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

*Postlude