

STEWARDSHIP SERMON OCTOBER 22, 2023
[Exodus 33:12-23; Psalm 99: 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; Matthew 22:15-22]
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Good morning! **Sharing the Joy! Sharing the Joy! Sharing the Joy!** This is the theme of our Stewardship Campaign this year, as you know. And, the emphasis is both on **sharing** and on **Joy**. Those are the twin emphases I want to talk about this morning.

First, something about Joy. It is a *holy coincidence* that joy was also the focus when we installed Rev. Jenny at our Celebration of New and Mutual Ministry last February. The final hymn chosen for that celebration was "Joyful, joyful, we adore thee!" So, pull the blue hymnal in the rack in front of you and turn to #376. Look at verse two: "*All thy works **with joy** surround thee, earth and heaven reflect thy rays, stars and angels sing around thee, center of unbroken praise, field and forest, vale and mountain, blooming meadow, flashing sea, chanting bird and flowing fountain, call us to **rejoice** in thee.*" And verse three: "Thou art giving and forgiving, ever blessing, ever blest, **well-spring of the joy of living**, ocean-depth of happy rest! Thou our Father, Christ our Brother: all who live in love are thine; teach us how to love each other, *lift us to the **joy divine**.*"

This poem, which we sing to Beethoven's magnificent "Ode to Joy," was written by Henry Van Dyke [1852-1933], who was a Presbyterian minister and a professor of English literature at Princeton University between 1899 and 1923. Van Dyke wrote this poem in 1907 while he was serving as a guest preacher at Williams College in Massachusetts. He says he was inspired to write it by the beauty of the local Berkshire Mountains he saw while staying there.

We can understand that, can't we?! We know the same joy that Van Dyke experienced, because we, too, *joy* to be surrounded by the marvelous works of God: fields and forests, lakes and oceans, and two snow-capped mountain ranges. And we find ourselves wanting to *share the joy* of these beautiful surroundings with others in the wider community; so we invite them to visit St. Augustine's in-the-Woods.

Now, besides the joy of creation all around us, there are many other reasons *to be joyful now* at St. Augustine's. In her stewardship sermon two weeks ago, Rev. Jenny lifted up "the joy of community" because, she said, "we are *made for joy*!" I like that very much! But what struck

me most was this statement by Rev. Jenny: “We are made for joy, with joy, by the **Joy of all creation!**” Did you get that? “The **Joy** of all creation”—**capital “J”, Joy**: not only the joy we *experience*, but *Joy personified*, Joy as the *source* of all the joy we know. Joy is God the Creator; God the Creator is Joy. Are you with me? Hold that thought, as I want to come back to it in a moment.

We need, now, to look at our Old Testament lesson from Exodus. In the last few weeks, we have been following the children of Israel traveling through the wilderness after their escape from Egypt. Last week, we heard the astonishing story of Aaron fashioning a golden calf idol for the people to worship, instead of God, because Moses delayed coming down from Mt. Sinai and his meeting with God. When Moses did come down and saw the golden idol, he was furious with the people and, in his anger, he destroyed the stone tablets bearing the Ten Commandments.

In today’s lesson, Moses seems to be questioning God and you may wonder, why? The reason is found in the passage that immediately precedes our lesson. Then God tells Moses to leave Mt. Sinai and to “Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey” [the Promised Land]. God promises to send an angel—literally, God’s “messenger”—before the people, *but*, God says, “I will not go up among you, or I would consume you on the way, for you are a stiff-necked people.” [Ex. 33:3] “When the people heard these harsh words they mourned.” [Ex. 33:4] God’s apparent refusal to go with Israel is a harsh saying for us, too. Can we accept that God ever removes God’s presence from God’s people? I confess I am not certain how to handle this difficult passage. Behind it stands the covenant—the agreement—God made with Israel at Mt. Sinai [Ex. 20:22-23]. By worshiping the golden calf, the people have broken the covenant and are in danger of losing God’s presence. Some commentators have seen the withdrawal of God as a means of grace for Israel, because it means that God will not be provoked to destroy them. At the very least, it means that God will be present with God’s people in a different way.

In any case, God says to the people, “Take off your ornaments [those reminders of the gold used to make the golden calf idol] and I will decide what to do to you.” [Ex. 33:6] The people *did* what God commanded; so then God says to Moses, “My presence *will* go with you, and I will give you rest.” [Ex. 33:14] According to the Old Testament scholar, Samuel Terrien, the

Hebrew word translated “rest” here is not a noun, as if the cessation of movement, the end of the journey, is meant; instead it literally means, “I will cause you to be *transformed* from a fretful to a secure people.” [*The Elusive Presence*, p. 141] God promises even more than God’s presence; God promises *transformation of God’s people*. Think what the presence of God among us may mean for our transformation at St. Augustine’s!

Now, it was God’s apparent refusal to go with God’s people that prompts Moses to plead with God: “If your presence will not go [with us], do not carry us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in your sight, I and your people, *unless you go with us?*” [Ex. 33:15-16] There is no identity as God’s people, no security, no joy, if God is not present with God’s people!

I stand with Moses on this one, my friends! If God is not present among us at St. Augustine’s, if the Holy Spirit is not with us, if the Spirit is not leading us into an abundant future together, if God is not transforming us into the beloved community, then I want no part of what is going on in this place!

GOOD NEWS! God *is* with us; the Spirit *is* working among us; the spirit *has been* and *is now* leading us to become an outpost for the Kingdom of God and to be transformed into a secure and beloved community. How do I know this?

Well, I could spend an hour or so telling you about the search process that brought Rev. Jenny and Henry, our Missioner for Music, to St. A—a process full of unplanned “co-incidences” that we could not have manipulated. We were *given* Rev. Jenny’s name by Bishop Rickel and by chance—*no, because of the Spirit’s prompt*, I believe—Henry found out we had an open position in our music program and asked to be considered for it. That is one of the ways I know.

But the most profound evidence, in my view, is this: Joy—capital “J”—is incarnate in both Rev. Jenny and Henry! Yes, you heard me correctly! Henry and Rev. Jenny are the *incarnation* of Joy in our midst; they *embody* Joy; they are the new and energizing presence of God in our midst—“God with us”. No pillar of cloud by day, no pillar of fire by night to signify God’s presence among us, but rather, the incarnation, the embodiment of Joy—capital “J”—in the

very persons of Rev. Jenny and Henry. By the way, the Stewardship Committee gave us who are preaching this month some of their thoughts on the theme of “Sharing the Joy.” One of their thoughts was this: “Rev. Jenny and Henry *project joy*.” Well, yes, they do, because both of them *incarnate Joy* and so we experience Joy in their presence!

But, wait, there’s more! Think of others you know here at St. Augustine’s who embody Joy. Think of the little “bundles of Joy”{ we see running around now in our church. There are too many of you for me to name now and I don’t know them all! Better yet, think of **yourself**.

You, too, embody Joy!

So, now, you may be asking yourself, “What do all these incarnations of Joy among us have to do with our stewardship?” Here is *my* answer. I want to be where I know God is present; I want to be present where the Spirit is moving; I want to be *transformed* by the incarnation of Joy among us; I want to be here, in this place, where we share with each other and with the wider community the Joy of something new and wonderful coming into being!

Now, If I choose to be here at St. Augustine’s, if I choose to share the Joy we know together and to share that Joy with the wider community, then I also choose to serve Joy and to support St. Augustine’s with my *volunteer work* and with my *money*.

So, Meade, since you have urged all of us to get our pledges in *just as soon as possible*, and since you have challenged all of us to increase our pledges by 15% for 2024, Teresa and I accept your challenge!

Glory to God for God’s presence among us! Glory to God for the Joy that we share! **Amen.**