

**“Surprised by Joy in the Ordinary”**  
**October 29, 2023**  
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Deuteronomy 34:1-12; Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17; 1 Thessalonians 1:4-7; 2:1-8

Have you ever been to a surprise party? We probably have all either participated in surprising someone or even being the recipient of a surprise party. Surprise parties follow a common sequence; someone has an important event in their life (often a birthday or anniversary) and friends and family secretly plan a party with all the bells and whistles and lots of attendees that interrupts someone’s ordinary path through the day. The recipient is supposed to be caught unaware that anything is going on.

Like them, or not, surprise parties are intended to share a moment of love and appreciation with someone when they least expect it. You thought we were just going to Payless pick up a few things, and instead you end up at Freeland Park with balloons and dozens of friends there to celebrate you! Simple, or elaborate, they share the common element that things are just moving along in routine ordinary ways and then... Whoosh! Out of the blue!

As we continue in this time of stewardship and the theme of “sharing the joy,” I invite us to take a few minutes this morning to explore another element of sharing the joy and consider the idea of being surprised by joy amid the ordinary of our daily lives. Even the ordinary act of filling out our pledge card (which, by the way, the Stewardship Committee hopes we will complete and return as soon as possible). Could that be an invitation to joy as well as an expression of joy?

What do we know about surprise? Well, from the party example it can be about being startled. Yes, it can be an experience of encountering the unexpected. But, maybe one of the things that is the most interesting part of surprise is that surprise can also open our eyes to something we hadn’t seen before or even shine a light on a treasure that had been there all the time (like the love of our family and friends who organized that surprise party).

**Surprise isn’t always about startling your heart into panic, surprise might just be the moment that the ordinary is transformed by an encounter with joy—an encounter with love and deep meaning.**

Let’s take, for example, this morning’s Epistle and the Thessalonian Christians we’ve been reading about these last two weeks. What do we know about the emerging church at Thessalonica? Thessalonica was one very busy Greek city. It was located on a major road that went all the way from Rome to India and China—it was the Interstate 90 of the first century. It’s a busy place and I can imagine a lot of different ideas and cultures passing through. However, change didn’t seem to be something relished by the established religious order there.

Earlier, Paul and Silas had a rough time preaching the gospel there and had, in fact, been driven to a hasty retreat for their own safety. Nevertheless, the new church and its converts continued to grow in what must have been a hostile environment. Is that what we would expect?

This letter back to them from Paul, Timothy, and Silas showed they were doing well. Their affection for this community in Thessalonica is apparent in today’s reading. In fact, Paul states that “in spite of the

persecution you received you received the word with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit.” They received the word with joy. Perhaps, one of the reasons that the Thessalonian Christians had become “very dear” to Paul and his companions.

Perhaps Paul and his companions, as much as those early Christians, were surprised that despite what you might expect from an environment of persecution, the gospel—the Word—caused the Thessalonian Christians to see their ordinary circumstances in a new light. **The hope of the Gospel served as an anchor of joy to ground them in what it was like to live and grow in their faith along a sometimes-hostile superhighway.**

Moving forward a couple thousand years. In the early 90s I had moved to England for graduate school, and I had the privilege to live a couple miles down the road from the home where C. S. Lewis had lived for many years. I’m sure many of us have enjoyed the books Lewis wrote over his lifetime. Considered by some to be one of the last century’s greatest Christian apologists, Lewis’s “Mere Christianity” has been translated into at least 64 languages and reprinted more times than we can count. His allegorical works like the *Screwtape Letters*, the *Great Divorce*, and, of course, the beloved *Chronicles of Narnia*, opened windows to understand ideas of our faith journey in surprising ways.

But there’s a surprise here too. C. S. Lewis was late to the faith. His life up to the time he established his career as an Oxford academic was one that was far from the faith he espoused later in life. His early schooling in Ireland in then in England was a step-by-step journey where he said, “I became an apostate, dropping my faith with no sense of loss but with the greatest relief.”

Lewis’s time experiencing the brutality of the trench warfare of the first world war and his undergraduate years at Oxford only bound him closer to the predicted tracks of being a crusty realist with no time for Christian nonsense. However, some key friends (like Tolkien and his engagement with certain other authors) began to crack that crust.

Now set up for a career as respected Oxford academic, Lewis began to encounter joy in the ordinary—like a gradual awakening. I think his book, *Surprised by Joy* is one of my favorites. Lewis talks about how he began to let the joy of the ordinary reframe his sense of self. **As he wrote at one point, “I saw common things drawn into the bright shadow.”**

For C. S. Lewis his personal turning point happened in one of the most ordinary of places—riding on the top of double decker bus going up the Headington Hill leading away from the center of Oxford. He wrote at that point, “I chose to open myself to a different way of being.”

**So, on that bus in 1929 he entered the surprise party and allowed joy—the idea that he was deeply loved by the God of the universe—to transform the ordinary and even predictable path of his life into a hope-filled new life.**

So, what might this mean for us today at the time of stewardship? Rev. Jenny launched the theme of sharing the joy earlier this month by taking on a challenging parable (the parable of the landowner and his vineyard). Rev. Jenny suggested that this rather fearsome parable was like an alarm clock waking us up to pray that surely there is a better way to understand the life of the joyous community of heaven.

Two weeks ago, Meade reminded us of the growth of joyous energy in our parish over the last year and how that serves as a springboard for our joyous giving. Joy building on joy.

And last week, Frank reminded us that God is with us, his spirit is working among us and as a result, we see joy incarnate in each of us.

Let me suggest, joy is not primarily an emotion. Maybe joy is more a sense of being grounded when we find we are in the right place doing the right things (just like those dogged Thessalonians). **When we are drawn into the bright shadow of joy, we are suddenly open to discovering the light of God's presence in the ordinary of our daily lives—from the Mukilteo ferry line to the expected routines of our days, and even to this annual pledge card—each ordinary moment invites us to be surprised by joy.**

This is the joy of our walk with the living God. The ordinary, the predictable, perhaps even the expected become a surprise—a profound sense of being loved and in the right place.

So, in this ordinary time of stewardship month—and as we consider our pledge—I invite us to pause and be drawn into the bright shadow of joy as we lay before God our time, our talents, and the resources we have been given.

Amen.