

Sermon

Joy in the Presence of the Angels

Pastor Lisa Giacomazza

Bacon Memorial Presbyterian Church

September 14, 2025

This morning's reading from Exodus draws us into a powerful and intimate moment with YHWH, the sovereign God who forged a covenant with Israel. We find ourselves witnessing a tense exchange between God and Moses—a dialogue charged with divine anger and prophetic intercession. The people have turned away from God, plunging into sin so grievous that even Moses has distanced himself. God declares to Moses, "I have seen how stiff-necked this people are. Now leave me alone, so that my anger may burn against them and I may destroy them. Then I will make you into a great nation."

In the face of God's righteous anger, Moses does something extraordinary—he doesn't shrink back in fear or accept the offer to become the father of a new nation. Instead, he steps into the breach on behalf of the people. He pleads with God, not based on the people's merit, but on God's own character and promises.

Moses appeals to God's own reputation. Moses says, "Why should the Egyptians say, 'It was with evil intent that he brought them out...?'" He reminds God that His actions are being watched by the nations. Moses is concerned not just for Israel, but for the glory of God's name. Moses doesn't bargain with God but instead reminds God of the covenant already established between God and God's people.

And, Moses doesn't distance himself from the people in this moment. He pleads with God on behalf of the people and identifies with them. He doesn't bargain with God but instead has an honest conversation and then we are told, "The Lord changed his mind about the disaster that he planned..." What a powerful moment isn't it?

If we, like Moses, were given the chance to stand before God and speak on behalf of our people, what would that conversation sound like today? What would we say about the world we're living in?

We are a nation wrestling with deep-rooted violence. The headlines echo with daily shootings. Our words—online and in person—have grown harsh, aggressive, and divisive. We shout past one another, and true peace feels increasingly rare.

How would we begin that prayer?

"Lord, why are we destroying one another? Why does blood spill so easily in our streets, and hatred spread so freely in our speech? Why does it feel like no one is truly listening?"

And then we might ask: How would God respond? Is He hearing our cries? Is He moved by our grief, our confusion, our longing for healing?

Even in the midst of brokenness, Moses believed that God could be moved—not manipulated, but engaged. He knew that divine wrath was not the final word. And we, too, must hold fast to that hope.

- **God is still listening:** Scripture assures us that God hears the cries of the oppressed, the prayers of the weary, and the groans too deep for words. Even when peace feels distant, God is near.

- **We are not powerless:** Like Moses, we are invited to intercede—not just with words, but with lives that reflect God’s justice and mercy. Our prayers can be bold. Our actions can be healing. Our presence can be prophetic.
- **God’s mercy is greater than our failures:** The people had built a golden calf, yet God relented. That same mercy is available to us today. Grace is not a relic of the past—it’s the heartbeat of God’s covenant love.

So we pray, not in despair, but in defiant hope. We speak truth, not to condemn, but to call forth transformation. And we trust that even now, God is shaping something new—through us, among us, and beyond us.

Just as Moses stood in the gap for a rebellious people, pleading for mercy, we now turn to the Gospel of Luke, where Jesus reveals the very heart of that same merciful God.

In Luke 15, Jesus tells a parable that begins with a question: *“Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?”*

This is not just a story about sheep—it’s a window into the character of God. The same God who listened to Moses’ intercession is the God who actively seeks the lost. He doesn’t wait for them to return. He goes out, into the wilderness, into the mess, into the danger—until the one is found.

There is a wideness in God’s mercy. God wants us on our knees pleading for our lives but God also seeks us when we turn away or are lost. God makes a way when there seems to be no way.

Our world is building Golden Calves – and it seems more than one have wandered away. So who might I ask are the shepherds of this world? Who will return the lost to a righteous pathway? Should it even be my concern?

Yes, our world is building Golden Calves—idols of power, wealth, fame, and self-interest. They're not made of gold, but they gleam just the same. And it's not just one who has wandered. It's many. It's us. The wilderness is crowded.

So who are the shepherds?

- **The shepherds are not just pastors or prophets**—they are parents, teachers, neighbors, artists, activists, and quiet souls who choose compassion over convenience.
- **The shepherds are those who see the lost and don't look away.** They don't wait for someone else to act. They go. They search. They carry.
- **The shepherds are those who reflect the heart of Christ**—who leave the comfort of the ninety-nine to find the one who's hurting, doubting, or drifting.

And yes—it *should* be our concern.

Because if we've received grace, we're called to extend it. If we've been found, we're called to seek. If we've known the mercy of God, we cannot remain indifferent to those still wandering.

This isn't about guilt—it's about calling. It's about stepping into the story of redemption, not as spectators, but as participants. The world doesn't need more critics. It needs more shepherds.

“There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” Not quiet approval. Not polite applause. *Joy*. Explosive, radiant, heavenly joy.

This is the kind of celebration that echoes through eternity. When one heart turns back to God—just one—the heavens erupt. The angels, who have seen the grandeur of creation and the glory of God’s throne, rejoice over something even more precious: a soul restored.

- **This is the heartbeat of grace:** God is not waiting to condemn. He is waiting to celebrate. Repentance isn’t met with shame—it’s met with a party.
- **This is the scandal of mercy:** The world may scoff at the broken, the wandering, the prodigal. But heaven throws a feast. The angels don’t rejoice over perfection—they rejoice over return.
- **This is our invitation:** If heaven celebrates the one, shouldn’t we? Shouldn’t our churches, our homes, our hearts be places where repentance is welcomed with joy, not judgment?

So yes, the world may be building Golden Calves. Many may be wandering. But every time one turns back—every time grace breaks through—heaven dances. And we are invited to join that dance.

Friends, we live in a world of wandering hearts and golden calves. But we also live in a world where heaven rejoices—*rejoices!*—over one soul that turns back. That joy is not reserved for the perfect, but for the repentant. Not for the powerful, but for the humble.

We are souls in a body and that soul is connected to the divine at all times, whether we are aware of it or not. And our soul aches when we ourselves are attacked by hate or when we see how it has manifested itself in this world. Today, video is available and we see it as if we are there, front and center and that is not a small thing. Our merciful, compassionate hearts are injured deeply. Moses left the people – he could no longer bare to witness what was happening. And yet, he pleaded with God to help. His hope never waivered and ours shouldn't either.

So let us be the shepherds who go. Let us be the voices that pray. Let us be the people who believe that grace is still breaking through.

We are not merely bodies—we are souls wrapped in flesh, and those souls remain tethered to the divine, whether we recognize it or not. When hatred strikes us directly, or when we witness its grip on the world around us, our souls ache.

In this age of instant media, we don't just hear about violence—we see it unfold before our eyes, as if we are standing in its midst. That is no small thing. It wounds us. Our merciful, compassionate hearts are pierced deeply.

Moses, too, was overwhelmed. He withdrew from the people, unable to bear the sight of their descent. And yet, he did not give up. He turned to God—not in despair, but in hope. He pleaded for mercy. He believed in restoration.

His hope never wavered. And ours must not either.

Let us pray...

God of mercy and pursuit, We thank You for the example of Moses, who stood in the gap, and for the words of Jesus, who showed us Your heart for the

lost. Teach us to intercede with boldness, to seek with compassion, and to rejoice with heaven when even one soul turns toward You. In a world of noise and violence, make us instruments of peace. In a time of wandering, make us faithful shepherds. And in all things, remind us that Your joy is our strength, and Your grace is our calling. Amen.