

Come Away
Rev. Sarah Reed Jay
Community Church of Providence
July 5, 2026

Song of Solomon 2:9-13
Matthew 11:28-30

On this weekend, as our nation celebrates the 250th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, and we reflect on the circumstances and ideals that led to the founding of our country, thoughts arise for us about the nature of freedom, independence, and government.

As a Baptist congregation, we often we find ourselves apologizing for what we see in the news that other, very different, Baptists are up to – namely, the exclusion of everyone who isn't a mirror image of themselves. I have an "I'm not that kind of Baptist" speech ready at all times in which I mention Roger Williams and Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King. Our "These Baptists Love You" booth at the Pride Fest gathered a lot of positive appreciation, mainly because of these less welcoming Baptists.

Yet, historically it is a different story – when it comes to the founding of our state and nation, we can look back with great pride on the Baptist contribution to the separation of church and state and freedom of religious expression.

I recently read an excellent article about John Leland, a Baptist minister in the time of our nation's founding, born in the mid-1700s, who was a tireless advocate for religious liberty – traveling on horseback – preaching and teaching – garnering signatures supporting what would become the Bill of Rights – insisting that the government establish not just tolerance for different faiths, but equal legal footing.

Leland was a supporter of Thomas Jefferson and, in celebration of his inauguration as President, commissioned an unbelievably enormous wheel of cheese (yes, a strange present!), stamped with Jefferson's chosen seal, "Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God."

When I explain what it means to me to be Baptist, the word freedom is key: *soul freedom, religious freedom, church freedom and Bible freedom*: the freedom of the individual to relate to God with no church authority in the way, the freedom for every person to choose their religion or non-religion voluntarily without state intervention, the freedom of each congregation to decide its own character and practice, and the freedom of every person to be a biblical interpreter and wrestle with the scripture for themselves. This commitment to freedom is why there are so many types of Baptists – no hierarchical authority sets our practice, and we have no creeds.

As a church, we are, on the one hand, fiercely independent, but, on the other hand, paradoxically, we are all about *dependence*: dependence on God; dependence on one another; cherishing the sacred gift of community and togetherness.

When I read the scripture for this morning, Jesus' call to the weary ones...

Come to me, all you who are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

...when I read this scripture I noticed this tension again, almost a paradox, between freedom and dependence, lightness and burden. Jesus offers us – as rescue – a yoke – a yoke is a device that binds – but Jesus says it is an easy yoke, with a light burden. *If your burden is heavy, if you are*

weary, take my yoke, he says.

Weariness is a universal experience, I think. The people of Jesus' time knew it as well as us. They faced tragic loss and worry and injustice. They sometimes felt as though daily burdens would never lighten and good would never prevail.

There's a line from *The Lord of the Rings* books that often comes to my mind when I'm worn out. The aging Bilbo describes his condition: "I feel thin...like butter scraped over too much bread." Weariness.

Come to me, Jesus said, *all you who are weary*.

But...he does not say simply to lay down every concern, to leave behind caring for others and striving for justice and peace; instead, he asks us to make a trade. Trade the burdens we've been carrying for his burdens – because his are different – somehow they are light and easy and give us life and sustenance – they add butter to our bread, so to speak.

The unnecessary burdens we carry are things like the pressure to succeed, to impress our peers, fulfill the roles and expectations placed upon us; the need to look, dress, or live a certain way. And the yokes we get hooked into are the systems and institutions that encourage all these things; the material gain, the hurry to accomplish, the values that put everything else above people and life and relationship.

Jesus invites us to step out from under those. Wearing Jesus' yoke also means that we are no longer pulling the weight of the world on our own – we are sharing the effort with the pulling tide of Divine Love! And the relief of sharing is exponential.

Some burdens, Jesus seems to say, are freedom! – service, purpose, relationship, concern for others, mission – these are a kind of freedom; while caring for no one but ourselves may be the heaviest burden to bear.

Make a trade with Jesus. *Come to me*, Jesus says, *and I will give you rest for your souls*.

Our text from the Song of Solomon, also called the Song of Songs, is a love ballad that we hear as the Divine One enraptured with us and us enraptured in turn with the One Who Gives Life to All That Is.

The voice of my beloved! Look he comes, leaping upon the mountains...he speaks to me, "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; for now the winter is past, the rain is over and gone. The flowers appear on the earth; the time of singing has come."

Come *away* with me ...be in love with Goodness and Life and receive the lightness and joy that are meant to be part of the human story. Feel the warmth of God's adoration.

Sometimes as progressive Christians, set on righting wrongs and protesting injustice, we forget that we are in a sacred dance; we become duty-oriented, losing the lightness, the freedom and passion of being loved, being cherished, being adored by the Infinite Creative Spirit that calls all things into being. *Arise my love, my fair one, and come away*.

Our scriptures today call us to step out from under the heavy weight and leave behind the winter mindset; enter into a lightness and love that sustains and enlivens us, and flows out into gentle and humble compassion.

This is the mystery of yoking oneself to the love of God. May we seek it and receive it.

Amen.