

The Rev. John Sampson, Pastor
Glen Ridge Congregational Church

Welcome Back!



Celebration by John August Swanson

Sunday, September 13, 2026 – Celebration Sunday
Psalm 122:1 – 4

Will you join me in prayer?

God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer.

Amen.

Welcome back! Welcome back everyone. How was your summer? I see some nodding heads like it was okay. Great. Well, it's so wonderful to see all of you here this morning again. You are a people who have come through the deluge of this morning's rain. You belong here.

So, I'm struck because for many of us there are different moments in the year which we consider the beginning of the year. There's January 1st, which is one kind of the beginning of the year. We hosted a Jewish congregation at the church this week that was celebrating Rosh Hoshana. And for them it is the beginning of their year. For Christians, the beginning of the liturgical year is the beginning of Advent. But for many of us, driven by the seasons of school, perhaps of the natural world, the beginning of September is its own kind of start to the year. And here in this church, it is no different. We begin Church School today. We welcome back the choir. We are together again from the different places that the summer has taken us.

But why do we come back? Why is today a day of celebration?

It is certainly because there are more of us together. We celebrate each other as our community of faith. We come back together to realign our focus in our lives, remembering and putting God more centrally than perhaps we have done over these summer months. We walk the path of Jesus perhaps more intentionally now that we are back from the beach or the mountains or from times with our family.

I was struck by something that someone said recently. They asked, "Why don't we ever say the covenant of our congregation?" Now, since I've been here, it's true, we have not said it, even though it was a tradition in the past that at some point during the year, we would say it together. It is in our hymnal; it is actually on the opening cover of the hymnal. And so, as we come back together after hopefully wonderful summers, wherever we have gone to, whoever we have seen and been with, as we come back together to be with each other, to be inspired by the beautiful music of our music program, to have a wonderful robust coffee hour after worship today, let us remember the central reason we are coming back together this morning.

I will share with you the covenant of Glen Ridge Congregational Church. If you would like to follow along, you may. But I'm going to read it slowly, so we have a moment after each of the different points that is shared to reflect upon its meaning for us as not just individuals but as a community.

The covenant of Glen Ridge Congregational Church:

We covenant with God and one another to be the church of Jesus Christ, loving God and our neighbors.

With God's help, we shall come together to glorify and worship God, proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ, and celebrate God's presence among us.

We shall teach ourselves and our children the faith of the church and shall together follow in the ways of Christ.

We shall share our beliefs by word and example and be a welcoming and caring home community where all persons may find their faith.

We shall grow spiritually, nurture and strengthen each other, share our joys and concerns, and treat each other and all people with respect, compassion, and dignity.

We shall go where God calls us to offer faith and encouragement, extending a helping hand to all God's people.

We shall participate in the ministries and the mission of the United Church of Christ.

Relying on the power of God's Holy Spirit, we go forth to live and serve as Christians.

I think on this celebration Sunday, as we come back together and start another church year, it is important to remember this covenant. This covenant, which has been crafted by our spiritual grandparents, and is now in the DNA of our congregation, is here to show us where we are going, who's we are, who we serve both in heaven and on earth, and how we shall be guided in all of the decisions we will make together over this upcoming year.

So, it is great to see all of you here today. It is a day to celebrate all of us, this church, the gifts and the needs of each other, and to do it in the radiance of these words of our covenant, which recenter us in our worship and service to God along Christ's pathway.

Amen.