

SOUTH GEORGIA ADVOCATE – MARCH 15 EDITION

St. Paul UMC supports, loves, helps Ukrainian orphans

By Kara Witherow, *Editor*

“Tammichka, it’s happening.”

“Tammichka, pray for us.”

Tammy Reynolds – affectionately called Tammichka by her Ukrainian friends – read the texts pouring into her phone from her friends in Ukraine. As explosions rocked Kyiv, Reynolds’ heart broke, knowing homes and lives were being destroyed.

Minutes later, a flood of new texts came in, this time from Columbus friends, neighbors, and fellow members of St. Paul United Methodist Church.

“What’s going on?” “What’s happening?” and “How are the children?” they asked.

For more than 20 years, Reynolds, her husband, Matthew, St. Paul UMC pastors, and dozens of church members have traveled to Krivoy Rog, Ukraine and built lifelong friendships with its residents. Since 2001, the Columbus church has cultivated partnerships with three area orphanages and has built a ministry, Compass Ministries, that serves orphans and their caregivers.

The congregation deeply loves the children, and church members grew increasingly concerned about them and their safety as Russia invaded Ukraine.

“We’ve worked very hard to keep the children and their stories in front of our people over the years,” said Reynolds, who serves as chair of St. Paul UMC’s missions committee. “We’re embedded in Ukraine now. We’re part of these children’s lives.”

Through the years, St. Paul UMC has visited Krivoy Rog twice a year. Each visit, friendships flourished, relationships grew, and bonds deepened. The congregation has joint worship services with the orphanages and they regularly trade phone calls and videos.

Compass Ministries has developed into a year-round ministry with a team on the ground and in the orphanages daily on behalf of St. Paul UMC. They check on the children; run age-appropriate, Christian activities and Bible studies, play games; host groups who meet with young adults who have aged out of the orphanages; and lead weekly small groups. The church continues to stay in contact with young adults and often provide scholarships for further education or training.

Outside of its United Methodist apportionments, Ukraine is St. Paul UMC’s largest mission endeavor.

“We think of Ukraine as another extension of our church,” said senior pastor Dr. Shane Green.

The people of St. Paul, the Ukrainians with whom they serve, and the children have become family, Reynolds said.

“Our people are part of these kids’ lives,” she said. “We’re the keeper of their stories. They don’t have mamas and daddies and families who hold their stories. We keep their stories. We make sure they know that and it makes them feel worthy. St Paul is invested.”

When the St. Paul UMC congregation learned their Ukrainian children were at risk, they did what parents around the world do when children are in harm’s way. They worried. They prayed. They leapt into action.

St. Paul UMC’s social media is filled with updates about the children, the orphanages, and news about how people can help. While it’s hard to be on the other side of the world when those you love are hurting and scared, Reynolds said she’s inspired by the Ukrainians.

“I am so impressed with the young men and amazed with their patriotism and their sense of duty to the people of Ukraine,” she said. “One of the men is staying because there are babushkas – grandmothers and widows – who live in the apartments near him. He said, ‘It is my duty to stay here and do what I can to take care of them. They have no one else.’ That made me cry. I fear for their safety. I love him like he’s my son, but I am so proud to hear those words. He said, ‘That is what a Christian does.’”

Reynolds and her team have been working to get supplies and resources to the orphanages and children. It’s still cold in Ukraine and their power supply is sporadic, so they’ve tried to buy generators along with emergency food rations, medicines, extra mattresses, cots, and sleeping mats. In the midst of the war, one orphanage has taken on at least 65 additional children.

“No one is going to go into there to take care of the kids,” she said. “We’re trying to make sure they have enough food, water, and medicines.”

Everyone at St. Paul UMC cares about and is concerned for the welfare of the children, Dr. Green said, and the congregation has rallied generously to provide resources so the orphanages can maintain their basic daily operations.

“Ukraine is something that draws us all together. They’re ours.”

Borrowing a phrase a former church member said about being involved in missions, Dr. Green said, “Ukraine has grabbed hold of the hearts of the people of St. Paul and will not let go.”

The crisis in Ukraine is ongoing. To join St. Paul UMC in its efforts to help Ukrainian children and orphans, visit their [Facebook page](#) for regular updates, more information, and how to give.



Conference's Confirmation Retreat at Epworth is "the best weekend"

By Kara Witherow, *Editor*

Epworth By The Sea is quiet no more.

The serene, peaceful campus along the Mackay River was once again filled with laughter, activity, and music as the 21st annual [Join the Journey Confirmation Retreat](#) returned after a one-year hiatus.

More than 400 youth and their adult volunteers gathered to worship, learn, and play together during the March 4-6 weekend retreat that teaches confirmands about prevenient grace, justifying grace, and sanctifying grace as well as their United Methodist heritage in a high-energy, exciting atmosphere.

During confirmation, those who have been baptized declare their faith in Christ and are strengthened by the Holy Spirit for continuing discipleship. South Georgia's Confirmation Retreat is meant to complement what local churches are doing to help children respond to the grace of God in their lives and live as people of faith.

It was an answer to prayer and a scene that hadn't been witnessed in nearly two years as the pandemic and a wrecked cargo ship off St. Simons Island's coast had Epworth By The Sea closed to outside visitors.

The South Georgia Conference's Confirmation Retreat – the first large event hosted at Epworth By The Sea since March 2020 – was a welcome return to normalcy, leaders said.

"After one full year without in-person events and another year hosting events at an alternate location while Epworth was closed, it felt good to be 'home,'" said Suzanne Akins, Director of Camping and Retreats. "We enjoyed the improvements Epworth has made during the last two years and mostly, the 33 participating churches enjoyed just being together again - worshipping and learning about our journeys of faith."

For church leaders and youth, it was a much-anticipated and needed time to get away and connect with Christ and one another.

"We had a great time," said Emily Reaves, Valdosta First United Methodist Church's youth director. "This is one of my favorite things to do every year with our kids."

Reaves and her group of 18 youth and four adults were excited to return to a beloved event at one of their favorite locations, she said. Epworth By The Sea is a special place for them and the retreat is well planned and executed.

The sessions reinforced what her students had learned in their confirmation classes at Valdosta First UMC, the worship was deep and rich, and the group strengthened their connections and friendships during the weekend.

“There’s something exciting about getting to learn about your journey with Jesus with hundreds of other people,” she said.

Epworth By The Sea was thrilled to once again be able to host the Conference’s Confirmation Retreat, said Joel Willis, president and CEO of Epworth By The Sea.

“More than 400 confirmands and counselors graced our campus as they learned more about Jesus Christ and becoming a member of their local church. All of our staff are very happy that we are getting ‘back to normal!’”

This was Reaves’ ninth year taking students to the Confirmation Retreat, and she and her students look forward to future events.

“It’s a tradition. It’s what we do and we love it. It’s the best weekend.”

South Georgia UMs raise \$75,000 for tornado relief in Kentucky, Tennessee

By Kara Witherow, *Editor*

South Georgia United Methodists have raised more than \$75,000 to help the Kentucky and Tennessee-Western Kentucky Conferences in their relief and recovery work following a string of deadly December tornadoes.

This is in addition to a \$20,000 donation of disaster response funds given to the Tennessee-Western Kentucky Conference in the immediate aftermath of the storms.

In December, [an appeal](#) was made to South Georgia United Methodists requesting monetary donations for tornado relief efforts in the affected areas. Hundreds of individuals and 46 local churches responded.

“The South Georgia Annual Conference would like to walk alongside your conference as you continue helping churches, communities, and individuals impacted by December’s deadly tornado outbreak,” Bishop David Graves, episcopal leader of the South Georgia Conference, wrote in letters to Bishop Bill McAlilly of the Tennessee-Western Kentucky Conference and Bishop Leonard Fairley of the Kentucky Annual Conference.

“We are grateful for the connectional system through which we are all able to serve through God’s faithfulness to us. The beauty of The United Methodist Church is in our connection, and we come together to support one another.”

The storm system struck Dec. 10 and Dec. 11, 2021, [is blamed for nearly 90 deaths](#) and billions of dollars in damages in five Southern and Midwestern states.

Camp Connect is hiring college summer staff

Applications are now being accepted for the 2022 Camp Connect Summer Leadership Team at Epworth By The Sea. Applications are open to college students who have completed at least one year of college. The Leadership Team will commit to 9 weeks of camping ministry which will include serving hundreds of youth and children while making Christian friendships with other staff members that last a lifetime. For more information, visit www.campconnectumc.org/applytobeonstaff.

Free to Celebrate

Spring Quarter: God Frees and Redeems

Unit 1: Liberating Passover

Sunday school lesson for the week of March 20, 2022

By Dr. D. Craig Rikard

Background Scripture: Ezra 6:13-22; Leviticus 23:4-8

Key Text: “The people of Israel – the priests, the Levites, and the rest of the exiles – celebrated the dedication of the house of God with joy.” Ezra 6:16

Lesson Aims

1. To realize God’s providential care in the life of His people.
2. To recognize the importance of both the outer expressions of our faith and the inner spiritual life.
3. To recognize the need to walk in God’s renewing love as we seek the Lord in all of life.

Introduction

In order to best grasp the message in our text we will examine the historical and theological background that inspired Ezra. Understanding who the characters are in our text helps us grasp the manner in which God used others to care for the community of faith. The historical/theological background is helpful in understanding why it was important for the Jewish people to rebuild Jerusalem and their temple and why it was especially important for them to renew their faith through obedience to the Law. We will then explore Israel’s need to give shape and order to the rebuilding and reestablishment of temple worship. Finally, we will explore the

grand purpose behind the return of the exiles and their rebuilding of both the outer structures of their faith and their inner spiritual/moral life.

The Characters

The Author: Ezra

Ezra was born around 504 BC. The final remnant of Israel, Judah, had fallen 82 years earlier to Babylon. The city walls of Jerusalem were destroyed along with the temple. Thus, Ezra was born in exile in Babylon. It is difficult for us to grasp the depth of despair felt by the exiled Jewish people. The one reality that united them was their common faith in one God, and nothing represented and embodied that faith like the temple in Jerusalem. Thus, when the temple fell and the people were scattered, their entire sense of identity was almost demolished. However, God had promised he would always save his people and that a remnant would remain that one day would restore Israel. Ezra was born in a time of despair, but lived in a time of renewed hope.

Ezra was a scribe. A scribe copied the sacred text from one scroll to another, going through a painstaking process to ensure not one letter was altered. The repetition of copying the scrolls, especially the Mosaic Law, made them scholars of the Law. The scribes were highly respected and were among the religious leaders of the Jewish people, along with the priests and Levites.

Ezra would later gain permission from Artaxerxes, king of Persia (which later overtook Babylon), to return to his homeland. Former Persian kings Cyrus and Darius allowed remnants to return to reconstruct the walls of Jerusalem and the temple. Ezra was allowed to return for the purpose of reestablishing the covenant-life of Israel as it pertained to obedience to the Mosaic Law. Naturally, with the people scattered and no formal place of worship existing, the people of Israel had grown lax in keeping the Law of Moses. Remaining true to the Law was synonymous with being true to the Covenant. Ezra was to bring renewal and order as the temple was rebuilt and dedicated. This was no easy task. Many of those left during the exile had intermarried, which violated the Mosaic Law. Ezra would ask them to dissolve these marriages. The purpose of the prohibition against intermarriage was more concerned with idolatry than the mixing of bloodlines. Jewish men had married women of other lands for years. However, those women were to follow the God of their Israelite husbands. In Ezra's time, the Jewish men had allowed the introduction of foreign gods into their homes and lives. Ezra was not so much concerned with the purity of their bloodline as he was the purity of their faith. Granted, this distinction was not as clear in Ezra's day as it is to those of us looking backward upon Jewish history. Intermarriage was only one issue of many that Ezra would confront in reestablishing the covenant life of Israel.

Kings of Persia

Cyrus: Cyrus conquered Babylon and liberated the Jews from the harsher life Babylon had inflicted upon them. Cyrus was a God-fearer. That is, a Gentile person who recognized or revered the God of Israel. Cyrus allowed Israel to return home and rebuild

their temple. He even released many of the treasures that were stolen from the temple by Babylon into the hands of the returning Israelites. Some even perceived Cyrus as a messianic type of person. Though certainly not the Messiah, Cyrus was highly respected by the Jewish people. Cyrus' decree was a liberating document for Israel. Jewish history lets it be known that God moved Cyrus to liberate and empower the Jewish people.

Darius: Darius I followed Cyrus as king of Persia. The book of Ezra can become confusing for historians. Ezra did not always write in chronological order. However, for purposes of our text, it is important to note that the rebuilding of the temple was halted for almost 20 years after Cyrus allowed its rebuilding. The building project begins again under Darius.

Not all wanted the temple rebuilt. Many had lived without the temple and without the guidance of the Mosaic Law. They had constructed lifestyles more independent of the life Ezra envisioned. They were resistant to becoming obedient to the Law of Moses. Some who remembered the former temple did not perceive the reconstruction as coming close to the grandeur of the original, and thus, complained. Morale dropped and some abandoned the task of rebuilding. There were also groups determined to physically thwart the rebuilding. However, under Darius, the reconstruction continued after the 18-20-year lapse.

Artaxerxes: It was Artaxerxes who commissioned Ezra to reestablish civil order among the Israelites. Again, the Israelites consisted of those who had remained in Judah after the fall to Babylon and those who returned under Cyrus and Darius. Ordering the religious life of the Jewish people was a vital facet of establishing a new social order.

Prophets

Haggai and Zacharia: As new life sprouted from the return of the exiles and the rebuilding of Jerusalem's walls and the temple, the role of the prophets emerged with their challenging messages. Remember, prophets were not future-tellers (though often they did gain a glimpse into God's redemptive future); they were those who called Israel to account for their relationship with God and the Mosaic Law. The Mosaic Law was the plumb line the prophet used to measure the obedience or disobedience of God's people. The presence of these two prophets reminded the people that structures alone were not sufficient for a vital faith and obedient life. They once more needed to hear the prophetic word of God calling them to a higher obedient life of blessing. The prophets challenged and also encouraged the people as they were once again becoming the people of God in the world.

The Historical/Theological Context

Again, Ezra did not always write in chronological order. However, the historical context of the book is not difficult to grasp. The temple was destroyed in 586/87 B.C. by Babylon. Judah was

the last vestige of the nation of Israel. The northern Kingdom of Samaria had fallen to the Assyrian Empire. Later the powerful empire of Babylon arose and conquered the Assyrians and overtook the small nation of Judah. Some of the Jewish people remained in Judah under Babylonian control, whereas others were taken into exile. The concept of separating a nation was understood as an effective means of assuring they never again would rise to power. Those left behind in Judah began to remarry and neglect the Mosaic Law. Those in exile also intermarried and began adopting the culture of their captors.

However, there always remained a faithful remnant of Israel believing that God would one day restore their nation. The Jewish people in exile, over the years, created homes and later businesses and trades. Consequently, not all returned when Cyrus decreed they could return to their homeland. The Jewish people were separated and scattered with little to unite them and give them identity. Ezekiel's (who prophesied just prior to the fall of the temple and the days following) vision of the dry bones in the valley serves as a great picture of Israel during this time. The bones were scattered, bleached and lifeless until God's Spirit moved upon them.

Eventually, the Persian Empire conquered Babylon. Their kings were far kinder to the Israelites. Some of their kings even respected, or perhaps revered the God of Israel. Cyrus was perhaps the most respected and received the greater affection of the Jewish people. It is important to note that the Persian kings were not concerned with giving Israel autonomy. Israel was to remain a part of the Persian Empire. However, kings like Cyrus believed in granting them a sense of identity and happiness within the realm. They did so for other conquered peoples as well.

As the people began to reconstruct the walls of Jerusalem and the temple (read Nehemiah), the people once again began to sense a unity and purpose. The reconstruction was not always easy and was not without conflict. However, under the preaching of Zechariah and Haggai and the administration of Governor Nehemiah, the reconstruction continued to completion. Nehemiah was an Israelite appointed as governor over the area formerly known as Judah.

The ministry of Ezra and the prophetic ministries of the prophets complimented each other. Both reminded the people that rebuilding the "structures of faith" was not enough to become the vibrant people of God in the world. They needed an inner spiritual life! Ezra in particular would call the people to renew their faith in God, in God's covenant, and to the Mosaic Law. Ezra was a strict disciplinarian in relation to the Mosaic Law. However, he must be understood in his time and culture. Israel had grown very lax in their obedience. Many of the young were altogether unfamiliar with their history as a covenant people. Ezra would call them to return to the holy life God intended. In many cases this would involve drastic, and even painful change.

The historical context reminds us that faith is a vital and serious facet of life. As a matter of fact, it isn't just a part of our life, it is our life! We are often tempted to equate our spiritual life with the outer structures of faith. We can recite our ritual without thought. We can sing without considering the message of the hymns and songs. We can recite our prayers rote. Faith has

everything to do with the heart and will. We may not always possess an emotional feeling related to our faith. Often, our faith involves a choice of the heart, an act of the will. Ezra isn't calling Israel to stand back and admire their new temple. He is calling them to choose to follow God in their heart and allowing that choice to become evident in their lives.

Ezra also must ensure that renewing the faith of God's people must not become one, stationary experience. Faith is a journey, a walk with God. Maintaining faith is vital and necessary. Consequently, Ezra will work to reestablish the structures, order, rites and rituals necessary for faith to flourish in the future.

What do you think represents our shared identity as Christians in the world? Is it our churches and buildings? Is it our ministries? Do you believe we need a call to renewal? How would you articulate that renewal? What needs to occur? Are there facets of our faith you believe we've neglected? Can you identify areas of laxity? How can we engage the heart and will more in our journey of faith? What disciplines help ensure that our faith never becomes shallow or lifeless? Like Christians in any age, there are always pressures to divide and weaken us. How do you believe we can remain strong? What are some things we can do to strengthen our unity? Have you ever had to undergo a drastic or painful change for renewal to occur in your life? Can you share the nature of this struggle and the blessing that emerged? Can you share the importance of grace and compassion as we seek renewal and change?

Establishing the Continuation and Flourishing of our Renewal

Consecration

In verse 18 of Ezra 6, a consecrated order was installed to govern, protect, and strengthen the faith of the Jewish people. This consecrated order was not new to Israel's life of faith. As a matter of fact, it was a return to their former liturgical life. Liturgy was and is important! Remember, the Old Testament people did not have Old Testament scrolls in their homes. They depended upon the public readings of the ancient writings by the priests and scribes. Consequently, these roles were of extreme importance to the community of faith.

Not only were the people dependent upon these holy offices for the hearing of Scripture, the priests performed vicarious rites regarding the spiritual life of God's people. They offered the sacrifices in the temple, offered the public prayers, and led the community in participatory prayers, singing, etc. These consecrated offices were required to undergo ritual cleansings and rites of purification in order to perform their sacred tasks. The outer rites reminded them and the people that we worship a holy God, and thus, we should handle these holy tasks with holy hands and hearts. The rituals in the law were given to "separate" these holy acts from the routine tasks of daily life, and especially from the pagan practices of their neighbors. The faith of the Israelites called them to "come out and be separate" from the polytheistic, idolatrous world about them. Thus, their rituals and rites must stand apart. Verse 21 states, "So the Israelites who had returned

from the exile ate it (the Passover lamb), together with all who had separated themselves from the unclean practices of their Gentile neighbors in order to seek the Lord.”

Even today, the Church has established holy requirements for those who handle the sacramental life of the Church. The ordained clergy are set apart, through the laying on of hands. They undergo a very stringent process of education and spiritual examination. Again, these requirements serve the purpose of ensuring these sacraments and rituals point the people to the holiness of God. The sacramental life and the liturgical life of the Church call us to come out from the world and empower us by grace to live in the world.

The liturgical life of the Old Testament people also served to preserve and protect the integrity of the holy acts and duties. The rituals and sacraments that point us toward God are never to be taken lightly. Over the years I have heard people complain regarding the ritual we use in Holy Communion. What many fail to understand is that the ritual ensures every facet necessary to experience the Lord through the sacrament is preserved in the ritual. When people begin to omit or replace the ritual with their own personal statements, we are in danger of lessening important facets of the sacrament such as the invitation, the Scriptures of promise, the prayers of confession, and the blessing of the sacrament itself. Ritual and order are important in the worship of the Lord. They do not have to be lifeless or read in a rote manner. When people understand the beauty and wonder of the sacraments and the importance of preserving their integrity, it enlivens their participation.

Why do you believe God wanted Ezra to ensure the holy offices of the priests and Levites were reestablished after the Exile? What purpose was served in establishing these offices in regard to the spiritual life of Israel? How knowledgeable are you of the importance of the Church's consecrated and ordained offices? Can you identify the value in reading and participating in the rituals of the Church? Can you imagine what might happen should all order and ritual be removed and replaced only by spontaneous expressions of faith? What do you believe is the value in having individuals set apart for administering the sacramental and liturgical life of the Church? What do you think can be done to increase our understanding of our worship, sacraments, and liturgy regarding their holiness? What do you think can be done to enliven our participation? What can you do to better familiarize yourself with the process the ordained and consecrated servants of the Church must experience?

Uniting God's People

As stated above, the liturgical life of Israel proclaimed the holiness of God, and God's desire that they be a holy people. It also preserved the spiritual life of the community as the world about them was in constant transition. It preserved the integrity of the rituals and rites that they might always serve their appointed purpose.

Now, we need to remember the liturgical life of Israel *united* them. The rituals and rites performed in the tabernacle, and later the temple, united God's people in a holy faith. They

worshipped the one true God, the Creator and Sustainer of all things. Our faith was never intended to be a “private faith.” It is true that each of us has our personal experiences with Jesus, and our individual journey in faith is of extreme importance. However, our personal faith exists within a community established by God from the beginning. Our personal faith is experienced, explored, enriched, and tested through our participation in the faith community. In Colossians 1:9 Paul prays that the church might be filled “with the knowledge of God’s will.” In the early years of my faith I diligently desired to know God’s will for my life, as most all of us. We pray, “God, show me your will.” This is an acceptable desire and prayer. However, when we study Paul’s letter more thoroughly we discover a valuable lesson. The Church must understand God’s will for the Church! Then, we are more able to discover God’s will for our life as members and participant’s in the Church. It is the will of God, and our desire to know that will, that unites us. The liturgical life of God’s people is a means of hearing, experiencing, and participating in God’s will for the redeemed community. Thus, we are united in our desire, in our seeking through the expression of God’s will in the liturgy and sacramental life of the Church.

The temple, its liturgy and worship, its festivals and holy days united God’s people. After the destruction of the temple and the absence of worship, God’s people were quickly becoming uprooted in their faith. They were separated from each other through the exile, and they were beginning to experience what it meant to be separated from all of their expressions of God in their life.

When the more benevolent kings of Persia allowed Israel to return in order to rebuild the temple and the walls of Jerusalem, it was the beginning of their spiritual renewal. Ezra had now arrived to breathe the inner, spiritual life of God into their renewed structures. Not only would God’s people be united around the temple and its worship services, they would be united in their obedience to God’s holy covenant.

Why do you think God called for the rebuilding of the temple? Why do you believe God called Ezra to return? What unique role did Ezra fulfill after the temple was rebuilt? Do you believe our corporate worship unites us? In what manner? Do you believe the sacramental life of the church unites us? How does Holy Communion and Holy Baptism unite God’s people? Why do you believe it is important to live out your faith in the Christian community? Is it possible to value the “structures” in our worship (like creeds, prayers, hymns, etc.) without possessing the inner spiritual life God intends? How can we increase our sense of unity in worship? How can God help our church to enliven our worship through the elements of prayers, hymns, creeds, rituals, etc.?

The Grand Purpose of Renewal and Faith

To seek the Lord

Verse 20 of our text reveals God’s driving purpose behind the rebuilding and the renewal. The walls of Jerusalem, the temple, and the spiritual/moral renewal of Israel are to awaken Israel to

their need to continually seek the Lord. Isaiah 55:6 reads, “Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near.” From our beginning in Eden until the full coming of God’s Kingdom, God desires that we seek him. Seeking the Lord involves more than prayer alone. We are called to seek God in our day, in our experiences, and especially in our interpersonal relationships. Worship is an appointed time to separate ourselves from secular life. In worship, seeking the Lord is done more easily because every facet of worship calls upon us to acknowledge God and the Lordship of Jesus. However, acknowledging God’s presence doesn’t end as worship concludes. One of the beautiful aspects of Old Testament Jewish life is their ability to understand their life as it relates to God. From the dropping of the rain to the harvests to triumphs and even in defeat, they sought to understand where God was in their life and what God was doing. We cannot fully grasp the life of Paul in the New Testament without an awareness that he truly sought God’s presence in every facet of his life. Thus, he could write in II Cor. 4:9: “We are persecuted but not abandoned, struck down, but not destroyed.” Paul sought God even in the worst adversity. Few statements express Paul’s belief that God worked in all of our life as Romans 8:28: “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

The returning exiles struggled to find God in their struggle and loss. They had lost their holy city, their holy temple, and the Mosaic Law was no longer being read. Ezra’s day marked a day of renewal! It was a day when the structures that pointed to God were resurrected and the Law that governed their life was restored. What were they to do afterward? They were to seek the Lord.

There was one final step in order for the Covenant to reach completion in the life of Israel. It had to move from the external into the internal. It had to move from Law to grace and principle. Jeremiah caught a glimpse of that day writing in chapter 32 that the time would arrive when the Covenant would be written upon the heart. Returning Israelites were to start their journey anew toward that inner transformation. That moment would arrive with the gift of Jesus. Jesus stated that he did not come to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it. Jesus would move faith, hope, love, and morality from being present only in the external, into the human heart.

The call to seek the Lord continues for those of us on “this side of the resurrection.” We are to seek God in life until the Kingdom of God arrives in all of its glory. That Kingdom is present now in life, moving and touching lives. We capture glimpses of it and taste its sweetness. Yet there is still a day of full redemption coming when tears are wiped away and there is a new heaven and new earth.

How important is it for you to seek the Lord in your life? What are the obstacles you encounter in seeking God in worship and life? Do you find yourself solely dependent upon outer expressions of faith, or are you cultivating your inner spiritual life? Do you believe God’s people need renewal? Can you offer a reason for your answer? What do you believe will be the purpose of such renewal?

Prayer

Almighty God, we thank you for the expressions of our faith in worship. We thank you for the beauty in life that calls us to seek you and to be thankful. Help us see you both in the beauty of life and the adversity. Renew our hearts with the joy of our salvation. Fill our hearts with the beauty of our faith and hope. Help us to see not only what is, but what is yet to come. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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No Set Formula

By Dr. Hal Brady

So much has been and continues to be written about leadership. Author Harris W. Lee examined leadership over the past 50 years and learned there are at least 350 definitions of it. From his study of leadership, Lee concluded that “leadership is one of the most observed but least understood phenomena on earth.” To be sure, leadership is difficult to define. There is a certain elusive mysterious quality about it. There is no set formula. But while there is that mysterious quality about it, we do recognize leadership when we see it. In the unprovoked Russian attack and war on Ukraine, we are seeing a leader emerge in Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy. While he could have fled to safety, he has stayed in his country leading and encouraging his people by his courage and example. So, what makes a strong leader? The following are a few biblical characteristics of a leader.

First, leaders are also followers! No question about it, leadership has become a buzz word in our society. We are told in numerous books and magazines that leadership is the way out of every difficulty. And as a matter of fact, it is. Leadership does determine the answers of practically every human endeavor. At this point, however, the late Herb Miller, church consultant, asked a profound question. He said that if leadership is so important why, then, did Jesus emphasize the verb “lead” so lightly? Twenty times he said, “Follow me.” He used the word “lead” zero times. Why? As Miller put it, “Because leadership is not the first step in becoming an effective leader.” Hear me now! A real leader stands amid the world and says, “I am your servant – not your judge, not your star-of-the-show.” Rare, indeed, is the effective leader who didn't learn to be a good follower first. Leaders are also followers.

Second, leaders assume responsibility! It is a truism that everything which has been “done” in the history of the world has been done by “somebody;” some person took up the challenge, assumed responsibility and exercised some leadership to do it. In their study on what followers most want from their leaders, the authors of the book “The Leadership Challenge” found three basic categories: commitment, competence, and consistency. These qualities must not only be

present in the leader, they must also be present within the organization. When leaders assume responsibility, they commit themselves, they work at being competent, and they practice consistency.

Third, leaders serve the larger community and not their own interests! Leadership is always for people and group purposes and not for self-interest. And, of course, I'm talking about God's kind of leadership. Things were not going well with the inept and impoverished Continental Congress. So Colonel Lewis Nicolas sent George Washington a letter in May 1782, urging him to assume the responsibility of king of the United States. General Washington replied with indignation that "No occurrence in the courses of the war has given me more painful sensation than your information of there being such ideas existing in the army." Washington was always more committed to seeing the larger community than his own self-interest.

Lastly, leaders are undaunted by criticism! The boy David was criticized by his brothers and Goliath. But David was committed to what he was doing. Remember his words to Goliath: "You come to me with a sword and a spear and a javelin, but I come to you in the name of the Lord." Authentic leaders do three things with criticism. They listen to it. Is it true? Is it valid? They learn from it, and they leave it.

The search is on for effective leaders – God-like leaders!

Dr. Hal Brady is a retired pastor who continues to present the Good News of Jesus Christ and offer encouragement in a fresh and vital way through Hal Brady Ministries (halbradyministries.com).

School Pictures

WHAT'S OLD IS NEW AGAIN ANNE PACKARD

It's 1975 and a young boy in third grade shows up to school in his favorite "Jaws" t-shirt. He was in a hurry and didn't really have time to brush his hair or wash his face, even though he told his mother he had. He may even still have a little grape jelly in the corners of his mouth. You may be wondering how these small details could be remembered 47 years later. Well, I'll tell you, as luck would have it, it was picture day at the elementary school and this photo became a classic. What's Old Is New Again!

Without further delay (we hope), the South Georgia Conference Directory will be created later this summer, but we need your help to make this possible. United Church Directories will be photographing clergy and conference staff at the Annual Conference Meeting being held in June in Columbus. I can almost hear the groans and see the eyes roll as you reread that last sentence.

After two years of virtual meetings, do we really have to take photos at our first in-person meeting? Yes, you do!

If John Wesley were writing this article, he would list the 17 things that one could do that would make their time better spent than having a photo taken. He might state that one could be handing out food to the hungry or praying for those in need. A district superintendent might mention meeting people at one's new appointment or making sure all contact information is up to date. A spouse could mention getting lunch or a good seat in the auditorium. Luckily, it is the Conference Historian who is writing this article and she thinks that no time could be better spent than getting a current photo taken for the Conference Directory.

United Church Directories is offering online registration for photography sessions and it can be accessed here:

Directions to reserve a photography session

1. Go to www.ucdir.com
2. Towards the top and right of the home page, you should see Photography Appointment Scheduling Login. Click on this tab.
3. Church Code: ga154 / Password: photos / Press Enter
4. Click on the day that you'd like and it should reveal the available time slots
5. Click on the time slot and enter your information

Photography session times are listed here:

Dates and times

Sunday, June 5: 1 – 6:30 p.m.

Monday, June 6: 10 a.m. – 5:30 p.m.

Tuesday, June 7: 8 a.m. – Noon

Walk ups will be accepted and will be fit into spaces as fast as possible, but we highly encourage everyone to utilize the online registration to secure a date and time that works best with one's schedule. Photographs with spouses can be easily done but only the clergy photo will go into the Conference Directory. These photos will also be used for any publicity needs that might arise in the near future.

So, don your best bib and tucker and fix your hair just right. It's school picture day again!

Anne Packard serves as Conference Historian and director of the Arthur J. Moore Methodist Museum on St. Simons Island. Contact her at director@mooremuseum.org.



Retired Clergy Birthdays – March 2022

- 3/01 – Ralph Bailey: 9650 Lehigh Ave.; Savannah, GA 31406
- 3/01 – Buddy Whatley: 2153 Bold Springs Rd.; Ochlocknee, GA 31773
- 3/02 – Gene Yates: 705 Curl Rd.; East Dublin, GA 31027
- 3/03 – Ricky Bishop: 292 Timberwind Dr.; Byron, GA 31008
- 3/05 – Tim Paulk: 104 Lee Rd. 2153; Salem, AL 36874
- 3/06 – Ellison Whitt: 443 Lee Smith Rd.; Ellaville, GA 31806
- 3/08 – Jerry Lillard: 253 Paul Lockley Rd.; Lyons GA 30436
- 3/09 – Grover Bell: 333 E. 53rd St.; Savannah, GA 31405
- 3/10 – Joey Cannon: 146 Callaway St.; Leesburg, GA 31763
- 3/15 – Brenda Iglehart: 305 Palm Club Circle.; Brunswick, GA 31525
- 3/16 – Joel Dent: 1819 Pine Forest Circle; Dublin, GA 31021
- 3/16 – Truett Leveritt: PO Box 15893; Savannah, GA 31416
- 3/16 – Vance Mathis: PO Box 222; Bonaire, GA 31005
- 3/17 – George Durham: 844 Woods Hole Circle; Statesboro, GA 30461
- 3/17 – David Seyle: 304 Causton Harbour Dr.; Savannah, GA 31404
- 3/18 – Tom Oliver: 511 Victory Dr.; Waynesboro, GA 30830
- 3/20 – Ronnie Culpepper: 2848 Sue Mack Dr.; Columbus, GA 31906
- 3/20 – Dan MacMinn: PO Box 1325; Ellaville, GA 31806
- 3/21 – Delia Steffen: 128 Cambridge Way; Macon, GA 31220
- 3/22 – Beverly Flowers: 390 Brook Hollow Dr.; McDonough, GA 30252
- 3/22 – Tommy Mason, Jr.: 7321 US Highway 41; Vienna, GA 31092
- 3/23 – Dwight Bishop: 15 Blue Magnolia Dr.; Alapaha, GA 31622
- 3/23 – James McIlrath: 748 Old Jesup Rd.; Brunswick, GA 31520
- 3/23 – Jimmy Pennell: 2257 S. Lakeshore Dr.; Lake Junaluska, NC 28745
- 3/24 – Larry E. Bird: 325 Langston Chapel Rd.; Statesboro, GA 30458-3773
- 3/24 – Rob Grotheer: 4 Druid Court; Savannah, GA 31410
- 3/28 – Hal Brady: 36 Lullwater Estate; Atlanta, GA 30307

OBITUARIES

Dr. Grover Bell

Dr. Grover Bell, 90, of Savannah, passed away on Thursday, March 3, 2022. Grover was born in Sardis, Ga. on March 9, 1928. While at Georgia Teacher’s College, he met his beloved “Deanie.” Together they raised five children and served almost 30 churches of the South Georgia United Methodist Conference. A graduate of Emory School of Divinity, beginning in 1953 until his retirement in June 2020, “Brother Grover” served and shepherded as a much-loved minister. His other passions were gardening and cooking. He particularly loved his day lilies and roses. Grover was a great Southern-style cook, known for his fried chicken, biscuits, pound cake, and carrot cake.

He is survived by his “Sweetheart” Lourdine Bell, children Burt Bell, Carol Melton, Crystal Davidian (John), and Doug Bell, eight grandchildren, and six great grandchildren. He is predeceased by his son, Dean Bell.

Visitation was held Tuesday, March 8 at Wesley Monumental United Methodist Church, followed by a service and celebration of life.

In lieu of flowers, donations may be made to the Wesley Gardens Fund at Wesley Monumental United Methodist Church.

Scripture Readings – March 15 edition

March 20

Third Sunday in Lent

Isaiah 55:1-9

Psalms 63:1-8 (UMH 788)

1 Corinthians 10:1-13

Luke 13:1-9

March 27

Fourth Sunday in Lent

UMCOR Sunday

Joshua 5:9-12

Psalms 32 (UMH 766)

2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

April 3

Fifth Sunday in Lent

Isaiah 43:16-21

Psalms 126 (UMH 847)

Philippians 3:4b-14

John 12:1-8

Events in the South Georgia Conference – 3/15/2022 edition

2022 Clergy Spouses Retreat – March 18-20

The 2022 Clergy Spouses Retreat will meet March 18-20 at Epworth By The Sea on St. Simons

Island. The retreat theme is “God’s Peace, God’s Calm” and the featured speaker is Joyce Ashley. [Download the brochure](#) / [More information](#)

Basic ERT Training and Chainsaw Safety Course, Midland – March 19

A Basic ERT Training and Chainsaw Safety Course will be held Saturday March 19 at Pierce Chapel UMC in Midland. The basic class starts 8 a.m. with the chainsaw safety class to follow after lunch. Lunch is included. For questions, contact Luis Morales at morhill@gmail.com or Mac Wooldridge at macdaddy1977@gmail.com. [Register](#)

Unto the Least of His Leadership Conference – March 22-23

Unto the Least of His will host a Leadership Conference March 22-23 at Wesley UMC in Macon. The conference has been designed for leaders to meet with other dreamers to explore possibilities as a leader within the church. To register for the conference, visit to totheleast.com. This conference has been approved for one CEU credit for in-person or online attendance. Contact Rev. Bobby Gale at 478-233-0345 or bobby@totheleast.com for more information.

UMW Spiritual Growth Retreat – March 25-27

The 2022 UMW Spiritual Growth Retreat will be held March 25-27 at Epworth By The Sea on St. Simons Island. The retreat theme is “Becoming a Romans 12 Church” and the retreat leader is deaconess Clara Ester. [Download the brochure](#)

UMCOR Sunday – March 27

UMCOR Sunday (fourth Sunday in Lent) enables the United Methodist Committee on Relief to reach out through worldwide ministries of food, shelter, health and peace. A special offering is taken on this day to support humanitarian aid through the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR). You can be assured that when catastrophes cause suffering, your church, impelled by Jesus' love and compassion, will be in the lead to ease the pain. Gifts to the UMCOR Sunday offering underwrite UMCOR's "costs of doing business." That helps them keep their promise that 100 percent of every other gift you make to a specific UMCOR project can be spent on that project - not on home office costs. To learn more about UMCOR or to order resources to promote the offering, visit www.umcor.org or call 888-346-3862. [UMCOR Sunday Pastor and Leader’s Kit](#)

Online Basic Lay Servant Training – April 12, April 14, April 19, April 21

Lay Servant training is designed to educate those persons interested in stretching their faith to participate more fully in the ministries of the church. They have three main areas of focus: Leading, Caring, and Communicating. Basic LSM Training includes a basic foundation of the faith and an introduction to leadership. This training will be offered via Zoom. Registration fee for the class is \$25. For more information contact Anne Bosarge at anne@thechapelministries.com.

United Methodist Men Spiritual Life Retreat – April 22-23

The South Georgia Conference's United Methodist Men will gather for their annual retreat April

22-23 at Epworth By The Sea on St. Simons Island. Bishop James Swanson, episcopal leader of the Mississippi Conference and president of the General Commission of United Methodist Men, will be the featured speaker. The Goshen Travelers Praise Band will provide musical leadership. [Download brochure](#)