

SOUTH GEORGIA ADVOCATE – DECEMBER 20 EDITION

Merry Christmas from the South Georgia Conference!

Quilters make more than 150 stockings for children at The Methodist Home

By Kara Witherow, *Advocate contributor*

This Christmas, 172 children will smile a little brighter because of a group of South Georgia quilters.

For 15 years, the Stars and Stripes Quilting Guild has made stockings for children and youth at The Methodist Home. Since 2007, the group of about 25 women has made and given away more than 2,000.

While all the women love to quilt and sew, the stockings are more than just a craft project or hobby. The colorful socks, crafted from festive fabric, are meant to bring joy to children who may not otherwise have much this holiday season.

“We want to make a child happy at Christmas,” said Cindy Waldrop, a member of Hinesville First United Methodist Church. “If we can make a child ... a little bit happier at Christmas, that’s something I want to do.”

Each year, members of the Stars and Stripes Quilting Guild make between 150 and 175 stockings. They begin sewing in July to be done by mid-November.

The women, who are from Hinesville, Midway, Ludowici, and the surrounding area, meet once a month to show off their recent projects, discuss new ideas, and work on stocking components.

During the past couple of years when they weren’t able to gather because of the pandemic, Waldrop would meet guild members in parking lots to pass fabric and fully sewn stockings back and forth.

“It was kind of crazy, meeting in parking lots, passing back and forth bundles of fabric, but it was what we had to do.”

Waldrop, whose grandmother quilted, taught herself the art in 1996 when she wanted to make her daughter a quilt to take to college. She’s now been quilting for nearly three decades. Stockings are a simple way to learn the craft, she said.

“Most quilting is straight sewing,” she said. “A big quilt can be intimidating; it can make a new quilter a little apprehensive, but sewing a stocking is a pretty easy way to build your confidence.”

Professional quilter Marsha Cross joined the Stars and Stripes Quilting Guild in the early 1990s to meet other sewers and quilters. At 8 years old she made her first quilt and gave it to her fifth-grade teacher. She now makes them for sick children, children in the foster care system, adults

who have lost spouses, and those whose homes and belongings have been damaged or destroyed by fires or hurricanes.

She finds it fulfilling to use her talent to give back to others.

“It gives me joy to know that I’m doing community service,” she said. “It is very satisfying to be able to help people.”

Thanksgiving week, the 172 stockings were placed on Hinesville First United Methodist Church’s pews and prayed over by the church’s 60 preschoolers. Afterwards, Rev. Tony Caldwell and his wife drove to Macon and delivered them to The Methodist Home where other groups and ministries will fill them with gifts.

Alison Evans, The Methodist Home’s president and CEO, said the handmade stockings help show Christ’s love.

“These special treasures remind our boys and girls that people think about them, pray for them, provide for them in some of the most heartfelt ways,” she said. “We are humbled and grateful for these gifts of love.”

Waldrop, Cross, and the rest of the Stars and Stripes Quilting Guild just want the children to know they’re cared for, by God and a few strangers in South Georgia.

“We want them to have something that reminds them that there are people who love them,” Waldrop said.

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Suzanne Jones named new Conference Director of Administration

The South Georgia Conference Council on Finance & Administration is pleased to announce the new Director of Administration and Treasurer for the South Georgia Annual Conference. Mrs. Suzanne Jones will begin her service to the conference on January 1, 2023.

Jones is currently the Director of Administration and Treasurer for the Alabama-West Florida Conference. She will continue working for Alabama-West Florida while also giving financial leadership to the South Georgia Conference as part of a contractual agreement.

The Rev. Dr. Shane Green, chair of South Georgia’s Conference Council on Finance & Administration, is excited about the possibilities of contracting with Alabama-West Florida.

“Suzanne is very competent and already familiar with the finances of an annual conference and what operational measures are needed,” said Dr. Green. “She is well respected by those in Alabama-West Florida because of her work effectiveness and non-anxious spirit, which will be welcomed by South Georgia.”

With the retirement of Dr. Derek McAleer, current Director of Administrative Services, for South Georgia, on Dec. 31, 2022, this new direction in financial leadership allows South Georgia to be proactive about its future in cost controls and budget reductions.

“We are all thankful for Derek’s service to South Georgia, and I know that the great working relationship he and Suzanne already have established will be critical during this time of transition,” said Dr. Green.

Bishop David Graves, episcopal leader of both the South Georgia Conference and the Alabama-West Florida Conference, has worked with Jones since she was hired in Alabama West-Florida in 2018.

“I am thrilled Suzanne will be joining our team here in South Georgia,” said Bishop David Graves. “I have worked closely with Suzanne since 2018. I immediately recognized her gifts and graces, and she will continue to use those gifts and graces to serve us well in South Georgia. I highly value her expertise and am thankful she will provide much needed stability in this time.”

Jones will have offices in both Montgomery, AL and Macon, GA.

Jones received her undergraduate degree from Auburn University and her MBA from Rollins College in Winter Park, FL. Prior to her work for The United Methodist Church, Jones worked in various corporate leadership positions where she managed finance, human resources, and other administrative staff located across multiple locations in the US and Mexico. She brings with her experience in mergers and acquisitions and corporate restructuring. Jones is married to Bubba. She has two adult daughters from a former marriage, a stepson who is a freshman at Auburn University, and three wonderful and nearly perfect grandchildren. In her downtime, Jones enjoys camping, playing the piano, and spending time with family. She is a member of Wetumpka First United Methodist Church.

The South Georgia Conference’s Director of Administration is responsible for all financial responsibilities in accordance with the appropriate sections of the *Book of Discipline* of The UMC. In addition to overseeing the financial and benefit functions of the Conference, the Director also supports the overall administrative office functions of the Conference and manages the administrative office staff. The Director relates to the Council on Finance and Administration, Board of Pension and Health Benefits, Board of Trustees, Personnel Committee, and Equitable Compensation Commission. The Director serves on the Extended Cabinet, as the Conference Statistician, and on other conference teams and committees when appointed or requested to do so.



Derek McAleer receives 2022 Denman Evangelism Award

The Rev. Dr. Derek McAleer has been awarded the United Methodist Church’s highest evangelism honor, the Harry Denman Evangelism Award.

The Harry Denman Evangelism Award program honors United Methodists in each annual conference whose exceptional ministry of evangelism – expressed in Word (what), Sign (why), and Deed (how) – brings people into a life transforming relationship with Jesus Christ.

Each year Annual Conferences and the Foundation for Evangelism recognize persons in each conference. In South Georgia, nominations for this award are submitted to the Conference Witness Team, who then chooses a recipient for the award.

Evangelism happens in many contexts and many settings; impacts and engages all generations; and requires relationship among a variety of persons. What distinguishes a Harry Denman Evangelism Award recipient is the commitment to consistently introduce others to the Good News of Jesus Christ in all ministry settings. Their ministry is exceptional for the number of new Christ followers who credit encounters with this person as critical in helping to start or reignite their faith journey.

Dr. McAleer began his ministry in 1977 as the Director of Youth at Grace UMC in Savannah, his home church and the place where he received his call into ministry. Ordained as an elder in 1984, Dr. McAleer served the congregations of Davisboro, Dudley Charge (Allentown, Danville, Dudley, & Montrose), Ebenezer (Macon), Rincon, St. Marys, and Forest Hills (Macon) prior to becoming the Vice President for Church Relations at The Methodist Home for Children and Youth in Macon. Dr. McAleer served at The Methodist Home for 8 years before being appointed to the Director of Administrative Services and Treasurer for the South Georgia Conference in 2014. He will retire on Dec. 31, 2022.

“Derek's ministry has always had an emphasis on fruitfulness,” said the Rev. Dr. Rick Lanford in the nomination. “It has driven the effective way he preaches, whether it's in the churches he has served, the churches he has preached in all over South Georgia, and in revivals and camp meetings.

“He is faithful to the Word, faithful to bring home the point in every sermon, and faithful to issue an invitation to discipleship. Derek's powerful administrative skills have also been focused on fruitful ministry and fruitful discipleship in multiple settings of influence,” said Lanford.

The award was presented to Dr. McAleer by Bishop David Graves, episcopal leader of the South Georgia Conference, during a recent retirement celebration celebrating Dr. McAleer's 42 years of ministry in South Georgia.

“In all the churches you served, at the Children's Home, and also in the role of treasurer and director of administrative services, it was all about sharing Christ and making disciples,” said Bishop Graves in his presentation. “On behalf of The United Methodist Church, the Foundation for Evangelism, and the South Georgia Conference it is my privilege to present to Derek the Harry Denman Evangelism Award. We give thanks for Derek's leadership in making disciples.”

The Foundation of Evangelism promotes, encourages and provides resources to grow Wesleyan evangelism bringing all people into a life transforming relationship with Jesus Christ. To

nominate clergy, laity or youth for the 2023 Harry Denman Evangelism award, contact Rev. Danita Knowles, chair of the conference Witness Team, at danitaknowles52@gmail.com.



South Georgia Conference begins January with prayer emphasis

When people pray, God listens.

In a focused effort, the South Georgia Conference is centering itself around prayer in the coming year.

“While it seems so obvious that prayer is the center of our work, sometimes we need to make intentional efforts,” said Bishop David Graves, episcopal leader of the South Georgia Conference. “It is easy to get sidetracked by the business and agenda items of our meetings. We add more to our plates, we find ourselves in a cycle of busy-ness, and we stay in problem-solving mode. All of this distracts us from listening for God’s voice and seeking His will for our churches and lives. This collective effort will allow space for the Holy Spirit to guide us in all we do.”

Each month a prayer guide will be available that will contain a specific focus, including a weekly scripture, a breath prayer, and a prayer prompt. Clergy and laity throughout the conference will help guide these collective prayers each month.

January’s prayer guide, written by Connectional Ministries staff, is now available at www.sgaumc.org/year-of-prayer. Bulletin inserts will be available for local churches to use.

The 2023 Annual Conference Session will be centered on prayer with the theme “When They Prayed” based on Acts 4:31. Each day of the conference session will offer a specific prayer focus where all work will be centered around praying as certain Biblical figures prayed.

Throughout the year, four book studies centered on prayer and hosted by Connectional Ministries, will expand our minds, challenge our hearts and encourage our prayer walks. See below for a synopsis and links to register for these fruit-filled conversations.

“While we might have a lot going on around us, this intentional focus on prayer gives us the opportunity to lean into the leading of the Holy Spirit as the Spirit guides our way forward in the coming year,” said Kelly Roberson, Director of Conference Ministries/Communications. “God is calling us to share the love of Jesus Christ and make disciples that transform the world. What better way to sharpen our focus than coming together in prayer.”

John and Charles Wesley believed “that God does nothing apart from believing prayer.” As the South Georgia Conference we believe that, too. May the laity and clergy of South Georgia be bold in our prayers in 2023!

More information will be available and updates will be posted on the conference website at www.sgaumc.org/year-of-prayer.

Book One

“Prayer Changes Us” by Ted Goshorn, pastor of Mulberry Street UMC
Hosted by the author, Ted Goshorn
Read the month of February; book talk on Monday, Feb 27, noon-1pm
<https://sgaumc-reg.brtapp.com/BookTalkFEB>

Book Two

“Praying with Our Feet” by Lindsey Krinks
Hosted by Abra Lattany-Reed
Read the month of May; book talk on Monday, May 22, noon-1pm
<https://sgaumc-reg.brtapp.com/BookTalkMAY>

Book Three

“From Burned Out to Beloved” by Bethany Dearborn Hiser
Hosted by Grace Guyton
Read the month of August; book talk on Monday, Aug. 21, noon-1pm
<https://sgaumc-reg.brtapp.com/BookTalkAUG>

Book Four

“Dynamite Prayer” by Rosario Picardo and Sue Nilson Kibbey
Hosted by the author, Rosario Picardo
Read the month of November; book talk on Monday, Nov. 27, noon-1pm
<https://sgaumc-reg.brtapp.com/BookTalkNOV>

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Celebration service and reception for Bishop David Graves set for Jan. 8

On Sunday, January 8, 2023, the South Georgia Conference will host a celebration service and reception for South Georgia’s returning episcopal leader Bishop David Graves. It will be held at 4 p.m. at Mulberry Street United Methodist Church in Macon.

The special service is a time for our Annual Conference to gather for worship and to welcome back Bishop Graves and Mrs. Nancy Graves and to give thanks for his assignment to the South Georgia Conference.

Bishop Graves will preach, the Mulberry Street UMC choir will perform, and the service will feature laity and clergy from different areas of service and ministry. The service will be followed by a reception.

All are invited and encouraged to attend. Childcare will be available.

For those not able to travel to Macon, the service will be streamed live at www.sgaumc.org/welcomeservice.

Bishop Graves was elected bishop by the 2016 Southeastern Jurisdictional Conference and was assigned to the Alabama-West Florida Conference. In addition, he has been serving South Georgia since September 2021 following the retirement of Bishop Lawson Bryan. At the Southeastern Jurisdictional Conference held Nov. 2-4 at Lake Junaluska, NC it was announced that Bishop David Graves has been reassigned to the South Georgia Annual Conference and will serve as the Episcopal leader for the next two years. He will also continue giving oversight to the Alabama-West Florida Annual Conference.



Church court: No new elections needed for GC2024

By Heather Hahn, *United Methodist News Service Assistant Editor*

(UM News) The United Methodist Church’s highest court ruled that new delegate elections “are not required” for the long-delayed and potentially pivotal General Conference, now set for 2024.

“The delegates duly elected to the 2020 General Conference for the 2020-2024 Quadrennium stand as submitted and certified by the annual conference secretaries,” the Judicial Council said in [Decision 1451](#).

In practice, this means that the same delegates elected in 2018 or 2019 to a General Conference facing multiple proposals for [a denominational split or reorganization](#) can continue to serve when the session finally convenes. The United Methodist Church’s top lawmaking assembly is the only body that can speak for the denomination and formalize such changes.

The church court also said the duly elected delegates can vote at the jurisdictional and central conferences that follow the next General Conference. Jurisdictional conferences in the U.S. and central conferences in Africa, Europe and the Philippines elect the denomination’s bishops. Recently, the same cohort of delegates [elected bishops in the U.S., Philippines and Central and Southern Europe](#).

The Judicial Council’s decision responds to questions raised by three annual conferences after the Commission on the General Conference [postponed the legislative assembly a third time](#).

United Methodist annual conferences — 133 church regional bodies around the globe — are responsible for electing the lay and clergy delegates who vote at General Conference.

The coming legislative session — usually held every four years — was planned initially for May 2020, but [then the event’s venue closed down in the early days of the COVID pandemic](#). Since then, the virus and resulting travel restrictions [have continued to play havoc with planning](#) a global gathering that draws delegates, bishops, interpreters and others from four continents and

multiple time zones.

Citing COVID-caused long waits for visas, the General Conference commission earlier this year postponed the big meeting again — to the year the next General Conference after 2020 was supposed to take place. The commission has since specified that the next General Conference [is scheduled for April 23-May 3, 2024, in Charlotte, North Carolina.](#)

That left the Alaska, Kenya-Ethiopia and Western Pennsylvania conferences each asking the church court whether the General Conference in 2024 should be seen as the next regular session, rather than the postponed 2020 gathering. Both the Western Pennsylvania and Kenya-Ethiopia also asked about the implications for delegate elections. Because the conferences' questions were so similar, the church court decided to address them all in one ruling for the sake of consistency and clarity.

The church court concluded that “no provision” of the Book of Discipline, the denomination’s law book, “authorizes the cancellation of a regular session of General Conference or the annulment of elections properly conducted by an annual conference.”

Hence, the Judicial Council said, the “next meeting scheduled for 2024 is designated as the postponed 2020 General Conference.”

The church court ruling affirms the position of the General Conference commission, [which has consistently argued that the coming session was postponed not canceled.](#) The Judicial Council itself also has referred to the coming General Conference as postponed in earlier decisions.

General Conference is usually identified by the year it takes place simply to distinguish one session from another. Designating the coming General Conference as postponed likely won’t stop people from referring to the coming gatherings by their year, be it 2024, or the regular session expected in 2028.

For the church court, the designation of the coming General Conference as postponed is not so much about the calendar year when it takes place but the fact that delegates to the 2020 General Conference are already elected but have not yet had the chance to serve.

The Judicial Council noted that the denomination’s constitution enshrines the reserved right of annual conferences to elect clergy and lay delegates to the General Conference and the jurisdictional or central conferences.

“Cancelling or skipping the 2020 General Conference and requiring new elections to be held would be tantamount to overturning the results of the 2019 elections and disenfranchising the clergy and lay members of an annual conference who voted in good faith,” the church court said.

The ruling means that the number and allocation of delegates among annual conferences remains unchanged from what the General Conference commission determined for the 2020 General Conference.

The General Conference commission sets [the rough estimate of the delegate count](#). The General Conference secretary then determines how many delegates each annual conference can elect based on a membership formula in the Book of Discipline with the goal of getting as close as possible to that target number.

The membership statistics used in those calculations come from the most recent annual conference journals submitted to the General Council on Finance and Administration, the denomination's finance and data agency.

The coming General Conference is to have 862 voting delegates — 55.9% from the U.S., 32% from Africa, 6% from the Philippines, 4.6% from Europe and the remainder from concordat churches that have close ties to The United Methodist Church. By Discipline, half of the voting delegates must be lay and half clergy.

A number of delegates elected to the coming General Conference can no longer serve because of death, disaffiliation from the denomination or some other reason. Many of the newly elected bishops were previously delegates who also can no longer serve. As leaders of the denomination's executive branch, bishops preside but do not have a vote at General Conference.

Annual conferences elect reserve delegates to replace primary delegates who have withdrawn for whatever reason.

However, the Judicial Council decision doesn't address what happens when an annual conference does not have enough reserves to fill its allotment of delegates. That question was not before the church court.

The Judicial Council's decision does mean the legislation already properly submitted to the coming General Conference will not need to be resent.

New legislation also could still be submitted.

The church court earlier this year ruled that [each General Conference postponement resets the deadlines for legislative petitions to be submitted to the body](#). The church court's [Decision 1429](#) essentially opens the door for more legislation to be considered than what was already before delegates elected to the 2020 General Conference.

Hahn is assistant news editor for UM News. Contact her at (615) 742-5470 or newsdesk@umcom.org.



It's a CLM Celebration!

Certified Lay Ministry (CLM) continues to be a source of celebration and energy in the South Georgia Annual Conference. Through the Office of Connectional Ministries, 8 individuals recently completed the CLM class held at Vineville UMC in Macon under the instruction of Rev. Dorsia Atkinson and a variety of other experienced teachers. These eight individuals will go on

to complete their assignments and move forward to be officially approved by their District Committee on Ministry (DCOM) for continued service in their local churches.

We are also celebrating the following individuals who have taken the CLM course in previous sessions and have now been approved by their DCOMs this Fall as official Certified Lay Ministers!

Coastal District

Joeli Chance, Encounter Church
Debbie Pinkney, New Haven Sheffield
Michelle Reaves, Asbury UMC, Savannah

South Central District

Robert Hutto, Jamestown
Willie Wettenstein, Jamestown

Northeast District

Brenda Johnson, St. Andrews

Northwest District

Donna Pounds, Pierce Chapel
Roger Presnell, Buena Vista
Whitney Weyeneth, St. Marks Columbus
Henry Lee Young, Smithville

If you or someone you know would like to take your leadership to the next level and join our next Certified Lay Ministry class, you can find all the information you need at www.sgaumc.org/certifiedlayministrytraining.

Questions? Contact Anne Bosarge at the Office of Connectional Ministries at abosarge@sgaumc.com.



Camps & Retreats Happenings

Confirmation Retreat: Registration for the 22nd annual South Georgia Conference Confirmation Retreat opened December 1st for South Georgia churches and January 1st for all other churches. The 2023 retreat will take place March 3-5 at Epworth By The Sea. Designed for students in the fifth grade and above, the “Join the Journey” Confirmation Retreat will provide churches of ALL sizes an opportunity to connect with others through worship, study, and fellowship. Bishop Graves will be joining us to kick off the event! For more information, [click here](#).

Summer Camp: Registration opens up January 1st for Camp Connect - the South Georgia Conference Camping Ministry at Epworth By The Sea. These week long residential camps are

offered for elementary, middle and high school students in June and July. For more information, [click here](#).

Camp Connect Leadership Team: Now hiring college students for summer staff at Camp Connect! Do you know of a college student who loves Jesus and desires a summer of ministry in a beautiful location? As a camp counselor, college students will be able to minister to hundreds of youth and children throughout the summer, while making Christian friendships with other staff that last a lifetime. As a paid position, the Leadership Team will commit to nine weeks of service which will include serving at high school, middle school, and elementary camps, as well as closing the summer serving at a camp for foster children. For more information, [click here](#).



Mary Rejoices

Winter Quarter 2022-2023: From Darkness to Light
Unit 1: God's Preparation

Sunday School Lesson for the week of December 25, 2022
By Jay Harris

Lesson Scripture: Luke 1:46-55

Key Verse: *And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. (Luke 1:46-47)*

Lessons Aims

- To set Mary's words in the context of her visit with her cousin Elizabeth
- To examine the literary form of Mary's words and appreciate the tradition that influenced it
- To make comparisons to Hannah's prayer to see what we learn
- To learn about the "Great Reversal" and its place in Luke's gospel
- To ponder where we locate ourselves in the scripture
- To allow the scripture to orient us, disorient us, and reorient us
- To connect Mary's words with what we know (or think we know) about Jesus

The Song and Its Setting

The date for today's lesson is December 25, which is obviously Christmas Day. Although the scripture passage we're studying is not the Bethlehem nativity story itself, it is a great passage to explore because it anticipates both the birth of Jesus and his impact on the world. If your class, because of its Christmas Day schedule, is not meeting on this day, you will want to find some

time or way to experience this lesson together. You soon discover that what makes this scripture unique is its literary form and structure and choice of words.

**⁴⁶ And Mary said,
“My soul magnifies the Lord,
⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,**

The scripture that we are studying is a song. There is emotion in it. This begs the question, “What has led up to this outbreak of song?” We know that up until this point, Luke’s gospel has unfolded in a series of dramatic, interrelated events.

First, the birth of the one who will be known as John the Baptist was announced by the angel Gabriel to the one who will become John’s father, Zechariah. Zechariah was told that John will be the forerunner of the Messiah. Then, Zechariah’s wife, Elizabeth, who was thought to be barren and past her child-bearing years, conceived John by Zechariah.

Meanwhile, the angel Gabriel announced to a young virgin named Mary that she would conceive in her womb and bear a son whom she was to name Jesus. She was told that she would conceive her child by the Holy Spirit so that Jesus will have a holy origin like none other. He will be called the Son of God. She was also told by Gabriel that her older relative, Elizabeth, in a miraculous turn of events, was six months pregnant.

So, Mary set out to visit Zechariah and Elizabeth. They were already related by blood, but now they would be related by so much more. They would share a bond by virtue of the joy they were both experiencing. They also shared the world’s greatest secret. When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, Elizabeth felt something in her womb, and she was filled with the Holy Spirit. What Elizabeth felt was her yet-to-be-born son, John, stirring in her womb. Elizabeth said, excitedly:

“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me” For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

We should not be so surprised that what flowed from Mary was a song of praise from the depths of her soul. The setting and its occasion prompted this song. The audience for the song was the Lord and Elizabeth. Mary’s all-consuming desire at that moment was to rejoice and magnify the Lord. At that moment for Mary, we find that God was, more than anything else, her Savior.

Our Bibles tip us off that what Mary uttered was a song because of the versification. Notice that the indentions are that of a poem. We see this kind of versification throughout the Old Testament in the Hebrew poetry that is found in Job, Lamentations, the Psalms, the Old Testament prophets, and sprinkled throughout scripture (for instance, the songs of Moses, Miriam, Deborah, Barak, and Asaph). This form of writing is known for its passion and emotive power. Whatever emotional tone is needed is amplified by the literary power of metaphors, rhythm, repetition, and dramatic language.

We have already studied Zechariah's song in a previous lesson. We discovered then that the first two chapters of Luke's gospel contain four such songs, or canticles. These songs were identified by the Early Church and have been used in Christian worship from the beginning until the present day. These four canticles have been given names by the Church.

- The *Magnificat* (Luke 1:46-55) sung by Mary
- The *Benedictus* (Luke 1:67-79) sung by Zechariah
- The *Gloria in Excelsis* (Luke 2:14) sung to the shepherds on the night Jesus was born
- The *Nunc Dimittis* (Luke 2:29-32) sung by Simeon, an old man who could depart in peace because he witnessed the arrival of the long-awaited Messiah

These songs punctuate the nativity story in Luke in ways that elevate the story while adding movement and emotion. The content of these songs also bridges the Old and New Testaments in ways that celebrate the arc of salvation history from Abraham and Sarah to where it finds fulfillment in the incarnation (the Word made flesh).

How can Elizabeth's words and Mary's spontaneous response in song inform the way we receive the message of the incarnation, the Word made flesh to dwell among us? How do we make sure that we receive the message with both head and heart? Does it make a difference for you that these are two women sharing this news and experiencing this world-changing event? While it is true that every day is an occasion to celebrate the birth of Christ, how could you be using the season of Advent to deepen your appreciation of the incarnation.

Comparisons with Hannah and Her Prayer

In our lesson two weeks ago, we took a moment to compare the situation of Elizabeth with the situation of an Old Testament character named Hannah. Just as Elizabeth had been unable to conceive and bear children, so had Hannah, a thousand years earlier. In biblical times, the inability to conceive and bear children carried with it a stigma. One need only to read about Hannah in the first two chapters of 1 Samuel. In that story, Hannah's heartache of being unable to have children was compounded by the torment she had to endure from her husband's other wife, her rival:

“Her rival used to provoke her severely, to irritate her, because the Lord had closed her womb. So it went on year by year; as often as she went up to the house of the Lord, she used to provoke her.” (1 Samuel 1:6-7)

We're told that Hannah “was deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord, and wept bitterly.” (1 Samuel 1:10) When Hannah was praying in the temple for a child, she made a vow to the Lord that if she was given a son she would dedicate him to the Lord. She would raise him to live out the nazirite vows listed in the sixth chapter of the Book of Numbers. These vows included abstinence from drinking wine or other intoxicants.

Notice the parallel with what the angel Gabriel told Zechariah about John. Gabriel said that the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth must never drink wine or strong drink—"even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit." (Luke 1:15) God had big plans for their son that required a life of self-denial and spiritual preparation. When the time came for Elizabeth to give birth to her son John, her community of women was gathered around her, and they noted that the Lord had shown great mercy to Elizabeth.

Going back to Hannah, imagine the great weight that was lifted from her when Hannah was able to conceive and bear her son, Samuel. The cause for the oppression she had suffered at the hands of her fierce rival was eliminated. Hannah would have identified with the feelings associated with being shown divine mercy. The word "mercy" also conveys the idea of favor. When God grants God's favor, there is often a bigger picture that accompanies the divine action.

In the case of Hannah, God had big plans for her son Samuel. Samuel would be thought of as the last judge to rule before God allowed and anointed kings to lead God's people. Then, Samuel would become a prophet and the chief advisor to Israel's first two kings, including King David. In the case of Zechariah and Elizabeth, a thousand years later, Gabriel's announcement informed these parents that their son was to fulfill a grand purpose in God's plan. Their son John would be the forerunner to the Messiah.

Think of this connection in the similarities between Elizabeth and Hannah. Hannah's son, Samuel, granted to a formerly barren woman, would grow to be a judge, priest, and prophet, and anoint King David. Elizabeth's son, John, also granted to a formerly barren woman, would grow to be a prophet and forerunner to the Messiah. John would baptize Jesus, as the Holy Spirit descended upon Jesus in the form of a dove, and the voice of God would proclaim Jesus to be God's Son. This was the anointing of Jesus as the promised Son of David, coming roughly a thousand years after David's anointing. Think of these astounding connections:

- **The Elizabeth—Hannah Connection:** two formerly barren mothers who would give birth to special sons
- **The John—Samuel Connection:** two sons who played a leading role in the anointing of two central figures in salvation history: Jesus and David
- **The David—Jesus Connection:** two kings, one who was King of Israel, recipient of a divine promise a thousand years before Christ, AND the One who was and is the Christ, the fulfillment of the promise to David and Israel, the promised Son of David, the return of the King.

We discover that the parallels between the story of Hannah and the Nativity story do not end here. Not only does Elizabeth share a connection with Hannah, but also Mary. The connection between Hannah and Mary begins with the fact that the prayer of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2:1-10 bears a strong resemblance to the song of Mary. Notice that they begin the same.

Hannah's Prayer
My heart exults in the Lord...
because I rejoice in my victory.

Mary's Song

My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior

When we compare the two songs, we hear in both of them the theme of God lifting up the humble. Hannah surely felt it when God lifted her up after all those years of being humbled by her circumstances. As Mary's song unfolds, it seems as if Mary was "channeling" Hannah in her song—either consciously or subconsciously.

⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowly state of his servant.

Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed,

⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me,

and holy is his name;

⁵⁰ indeed, his mercy is for those who fear him

from generation to generation.

It was not lost on Mary that God's favor was falling upon the most unlikely sort of person, at least from the face of it. In this divine moment, Mary felt her lowly social status. It was remarkable to her that God would choose her. She knew however not to think God had made a mistake. She saw and felt the stark contrast between her lowly state and the fact that all generations will call her blessed—not because she felt she was deserving of God's selection of her and favor toward her. It was because of the great things the Mighty One was doing *for* her. By bringing attention to God's favor toward her, she was not boasting at all, because she was very aware that this was God's doing, not hers. Holy is *God's* name in all of this!

The lowly, servant state of Mary's position in Jewish society was something God intended to use. Her son Jesus would not be afforded the privileges and status of the upper class. This was all part and parcel to Jesus' identity as the Savior of the world. He would be a different kind of Savior than perhaps what was expected by some of the Jews of the day. For Mary, when the angel Gabriel first told her what was about to happen to her, she said, "Behold, I am a handmaid of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word." (Luke 1:38) In other words, she felt herself to be God's humble and obedient servant in this unfolding story. She was just the sort of person to shoulder this huge responsibility.

It reminds me of the story of Frodo Baggins in J.R.R. Tolkien's, *The Lord of the Rings*, trilogy. It was the lowly Hobbit among the members of the fellowship who was fit to carry the one ring of power. The humble, diminutive Hobbit would best be able to resist the insatiable hunger for power the Ring stirred up in individuals. Since the goal was to destroy the ring, the one to lead had to be the one who could best resist the lure of the Ring and give up possession of the Ring and its power.

The story of Frodo Baggins is fictional, of course. And the story of Jesus does not involve the destruction of an evil ring of power. Still, there was a lot at stake in who the mother would be who raised Jesus. You may be familiar with the phrase, "The hand that rocks the cradle is the hand that rules the world." It comes from a poem written by William Ross Wallace, first published in 1865. The poem praises motherhood as the preeminent force for change in the world. In the Christian story, Jesus is the preeminent force that changes the world, but he became that force by always putting others before himself. It is not hard to think of God using Mary and her humble disposition and character to form Jesus' character.

In Mary's song, we see evidence that Mary understood the far-reaching implications of God choosing someone like her. What God was up to was not just about her—far from it. She said, "indeed, his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation."

The Great Reversal in Luke

What follows in Mary's song lets us know that what God has done for Mary, as an individual, is a sign of God's concern for all the lowly:

- 51 He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.**
**52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones
and lifted up the lowly;**
**53 he has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich away empty.**

Here again we should point to the similarities in the themes between Mary's song and Hannah's prayer. Mary's song is like a condensed version of Hannah's prayer.

Mary's Song Luke 1:51-53	Hannah's Prayer 1 Samuel 2:1-8
God has shown strength with his arm (vs. 51a)	There is no Rock like our God (vs. 2)
He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts (vs. 51b)	Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth (vs. 3)
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones (vs. 52a)	The bows of the mighty are broken (vs. 4)
And lifted up the lowly (vs. 52b)	But the feeble gird on strength (vs. 4) He raises up the poor from the dust; He lifts the needy from the ash heap, To make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor. (vs. 8)
He has filled the hungry with good things (vs. 53a)	Those who were hungry are fat with spoil (vs. 5)
And sent the rich away empty (vs. 53b)	Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread (vs. 5)

It is as if the similar situations of Hannah and Mary have given them both insight into God's saving work. Moreover, Mary's song foreshadows a theme that is a hallmark in Luke's gospel. This theme has been called the Great Reversal. Through Jesus, the coming of the Kingdom of God will turn everything upside down. It will overturn our expectations and our experiences.

Those who are on the bottom or on the margins of society will find themselves at the top and the center. What Mary's song offers is a preview of the Beatitudes of Jesus in Luke's Gospel, which contain not only blessings (Luke 6:20-23), but also woes (Luke 6:24-26).

Blessings

*Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.
Blessed are you who are hungry now,
for you will be filled.
Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.
Blessed are you when people hate you and
when they exclude you, revile you, and
defame you on account of the Son of Man.
Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for
surely your reward is great in heaven, for that
is how their ancestors treated the prophets.*

Woes

*But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation.
Woe to you who are full now,
for you will be hungry.
Woe to you who are laughing now,
for you will mourn and weep.
Woe to you when all speak well of you, for
that is how their ancestors treated the false
prophets.*

For the oppressed of the earth, there is no greater news than to know that your fortunes are reversed in the kingdom of God. In the end, the invitation to the reign of God that Jesus offers separates the willing and the unwilling and changes the pecking order. The poor, the hungry, the broken-hearted, and the outcast end up getting blessed in the reign of God, because they have nothing to lose and are therefore more receptive to Jesus' invitation to live according to the relational demands of God's loving reign. Sadly, those who are at the top of the social order are often too heavily invested in the way things are instead of being open to the new and redemptive nature of God's in-breaking kingdom. When people are too satisfied with the status quo, with the status and temporary pleasures they receive from the world, they leave no room for what is of eternal value.

Recalling the Promise to God's People

God's choosing of Mary reminded her not only of God's concern for the lowly of the world in general, but also for God's people Israel specifically.

**⁵⁴ He has come to the aid of his child Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever."**

I have made references several times to the arc of salvation history. I did not make this concept up, of course. One of the characteristics of the Bible is the numerous places throughout scripture where Israel recalls and recites its own history of God's saving work—beginning with God's promise to bless Abraham and Sarah so they and their descendants could be a blessing to others and draw others to God's blessings through a relationship with God. That covenant was renewed with each generation. During the dark centuries of enslavement in Egypt, when the covenant was wiped from the collective memory of God's people, we learn that God had not forgotten the covenant. God renewed the covenant under Moses and led his people Israel out of their bondage. God renewed the covenant with David and promised that there would always be a king on the throne of David.

Notice in Mary's song, how she says that God "has come to the aid of his child Israel." There is an intimate relationship being recalled. God's "child" was in a most vulnerable state in the year 4 B.C. Israel was not a sovereign nation at all, but a region ruled by the Roman empire along with many other conquered nations.

Even before being under Roman rule, they had been under Greek rule before that, Persian rule before that, Babylonian rule before that, and Assyrian rule before that. At the time in human history that Mary sang her song, God's people Israel was just a people striving to hang onto their spiritual identity. But Mary's song recounts that God was coming to the aid of his child Israel in remembrance of his mercy and his centuries-old promise.

The question should be asked, "Why did God choose this people?" Why did God choose Mary, a daughter of Israel? The Book of Deuteronomy gives us a clue why:

*"For you are a people holy to the LORD your God; the LORD your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on earth to be his people, his treasured possession. **It was not because you were more numerous than any other people that the LORD set his heart on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples.** It was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath that he swore to your ancestors that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt."* (Deuteronomy 7:6-8)

God chooses the lowly who are able and willing to make themselves vulnerable enough to rely completely on God. This is what it comes down to. Just as God had not forgotten God's people during their time in bondage in Egypt, and just as God had not forgotten his people during their time in Babylonian exile, God had not forgotten his people who were being oppressed by Roman occupation.

What do we make of the Savior that Mary's son became? I love how this question is answered in the hymn, "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing," by Charles Wesley. It says,

"Mild he lays his glory by,
born that we no more may die,
born to raise us from the earth,
born to give us second birth."

Mild he lays his glory by... God's Son, who was with God, and was God, from before the foundation of the world, from eternity past, **set aside his glory**, to be born as a meek and mild infant, in an animal stable and laid in a manger, surrounded by his young, peasant mother, his stand-in father, and some shepherds. Did he grow to become a warrior and overthrow the Roman Empire? No, he was born that we no more may die by giving his life for us on a cross in an unjust act of Roman execution. He was born to raise us from the earth just as his dead body was laid in a tomb and then resurrected on the third day. He was born to give us second birth—in other words, to give us the power to be born again as children of God.

The plan had always been for Israel to be blessed in order to be a blessing to all the families of the earth. It was God's choice from the beginning for God's people Israel to play a central role in God's offer of salvation to the world. We see, in the manner in which the Savior was born, the fulfillment of God's promise.

Where Do We Locate Ourselves in the Scripture?

I was blessed on the second Sunday of Advent to experience music for Advent and Christmas at Mulberry Street United Methodist Church in Macon by the Ainsworth Choir and Orchestra. One of the selections that moved me the most was a treatment of the Magnificat composed by Terre Johnson, the choir director. The musical setting in which the words of Mary's Song were placed was so beautiful. There was so much emotion. Certain phrases were repeated allowing the music beneath the words to soar. I felt transported by the experience. The text of the Magnificat was printed in the program so I could follow along. I absorbed it. It was so timely since I was already beginning to prepare mentally for writing this Sunday School lesson. I came away from this experience with the desire to appreciate more than ever the "music" of what Mary said.

If I locate myself in the scripture in the place of Mary and the place of God's people Israel, I easily hear the music beneath the words. What beautiful words to hear when we place ourselves in the position of Mary who realizes how surprising and lovely it is that God would choose someone in her position to carry in her womb the Savior of the world. The words are also magnificent when we place ourselves in the position of God's people Israel to whom God was lovingly delivering aid in remembrance of his mercy. In light of the oppression that was being experienced by God's people Israel in the time of Mary, we can understand the good news about the proud being scattered in the imaginations of their hearts and the powerful being brought down from their thrones.

It can be somewhat disconcerting however to hear in Mary's song about the rich being sent away empty. Compared to the rest of the world, most of us live in relative affluence. Where should we locate ourselves in relation these words in our scripture? Consider these questions:

How might we personalize this song for us? How might we voluntarily take the position needed to receive the good gifts this song offers? How might we voluntarily take on the lowly state of a servant? How might we prepare to recall great things the Mighty One has done for us and proclaim God's name to be holy? How might we use all the means of grace available to us that we might belong to the present day's generation of those who fear him?

I am looking at a blessing that I have taped up in front of me so I can be reminded of it when I see it. Bishop Bryan emailed it to members of the conference staff on the day he began his retirement. He said that with all the thinking he had been doing about his plans and ideas for the weeks and months ahead, there was a blessing he was claiming. He was claiming this blessing to challenge him and to serve as a breath of fresh air for him. It was a blessing someone had given Henri Nouwen. It reads:

“Lord Christ,
May all of my expectations be frustrated.
May all of my plans be thwarted.
May all of my desires be withered into nothingness,
That I may experience the powerlessness and poverty of a child,
And sing and dance and pray utterly in the love of God
the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. Amen.”

Would you have the courage to claim the challenge in such a blessing? Could you see it possibly, as Bishop Bryan did, to be a breath of fresh air for you?

Applying this same thinking to Mary's Song, I wonder how beneficial it is for me to try to deny my pride, or downplay my power, my position, and my well-fed and full existence. It is easy to give into sentimentality, especially when reflecting upon the Nativity Story. As I try to locate myself in Mary's song, I want to challenge myself by not putting myself in the position of Mary or God's child Israel. Instead, I want to put myself in the position of the powers of this world, and then ask the Lord to speak to me through the scripture a challenging word.

I invite you to do the same and reflect upon it:

**Lord, flex your arm and show your strength in my life to cause me to question myself.
Disorient my proud heart.
Scatter the imagination of my heart.
Take me down a notch or two in terms of the power I think I have.
Take me down from the throne that I keep putting myself on.**

**Deprive me of that which makes me full and satisfied that is not of you.
Make me hungry.
Send me away empty.
Take away my supports,
that I may experience the lowly state of a servant,
and long to be fed and lifted up only by you. Amen.**

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God Promises to Hear and Forgive

**Winter Quarter 2022-2023: From Darkness to Light
Unit 2: God's Promises**

**Sunday School Lesson for the week of January 1, 2023
By Jay Harris**

Lesson Scripture: 2 Chronicles 7:12-22

Key Verse: *"If my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land." (2 Chronicles 7:14)*

Lesson Aims

- To set the lesson in the context of a new year
- To set the scripture in its context: the dedication of the temple
- To explore the difference that is made when God's people pray and repent
- To examine the establishment of the temple as a special place for prayer
- To reflect on the conditional "if-then" promise made to Solomon
- To ponder the value of anticipating the consequences of disobedient actions
- To remember how the negative consequences of our actions do not have the last word

Happy New Year!

The date for this lesson is January 1, 2023. New Year's Day always fills me with excitement. As I transition from one year to the next, I look forward to the newness that can be introduced in my life. The first sermon I ever preached was as a student on Student Day in my home church. Student Day was the Sunday between Christmas and the new year. My sermon had a New Year's theme based on Paul's words of encouragement in Philippians 3:12-14:

"Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal, but I press on to lay hold of that for which Christ has laid hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider that I have laid hold of it, but one thing I have laid hold of: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal, toward the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."

What longings do you bring to a new year? Have you been thinking about using this time as an opportunity for renewal?

We are beginning a new unit, entitled “God’s Promises,” which continues the Winter Quarter’s theme “From Darkness to Light.” Dwelling on God’s promises provides a great way to bring about a move forward in our ongoing journey from darkness to light in the new year.

The key verse for today’s lesson is one that you often see decorating homes and public places. Take a moment to read aloud through the key verse several times. Emphasize a different set of words each time. What thoughts, feelings, and reflections are being prompted by this kind of reading. There is a reason for the appeal of this verse, and we want to tap into this. In the verse, there is a promise of being heard by God, being forgiven, receiving healing, and beginning again.

When one verse gets singled out and separated from its context, we want to make sure it is being used properly and understood properly. More than that, we want to explore what is to be gained by looking at the verse’s larger context. What wider or deeper meaning is to be found by looking at the larger context? Prepare to look for these wider and deeper meanings in today’s study.

The Larger Scriptural Context

Our scripture lesson begins this way:

¹² Then the LORD appeared to Solomon in the night and said to him, “I have heard your prayer and have chosen this place for myself as a house of sacrifice.”

We learn from this opening verse that Solomon is a central character in the story that follows. The First Book of Chronicles ended with the obituary of King David, and 2 Chronicles begins with the startup of the reign of Solomon, David’s son and successor. We witness Solomon in the first chapter asking God for wisdom and God granting him that wisdom. We witness Solomon establishing his reign.

What night does the scripture refer to that the Lord appeared to Solomon? It was the night after a days-long festival to dedicate the newly completed temple.

What prayer had God heard? The prayer that the Lord heard Solomon lead was a prayer of dedication for the newly completed temple. The festival of dedication had gone on for days. It was a huge event.

What place was God referring to? It was a place God himself had chosen to be the location for the house of sacrifice. It was here where the people were to offer their hearts to God. To understand the significance of this, you need to go back centuries earlier to the time of Moses when God first mentioned this place in the Book of Deuteronomy.

God referred to this place as the special location God would choose for his name to dwell there. Notice the association God makes between this location and God’s name. What is in a name? God’s name is associated with God’s divine reputation. It is also the name by which we call upon God. How we call upon God matters greatly!

This is why one of the Ten Commandments, the third commandment, is devoted to the use of God’s name. The commandment prohibits us from misusing the name of the Lord—or using the name of the Lord in vain, or in an empty or profane way. Stated positively, we are to handle the name of God with great care. **Do you handle the name of God with great care? Is God’s name handled with care in your home?**

When God referred to this place, we know now that God was speaking of Jerusalem although he had not revealed the name or location of the place until David acquired it from the Jebusites. Choosing a special place was a part of an effort to centralize worship. All the other worship centers, or “high places,” were to be closed down so that the worship of God could be consolidated into this one place.

The centralization of worship was desired by God for the purification of worship—to keep the worship of the Lord from being corrupted with the worship of false gods. The high places tended to be hijacked by the worship of local Canaanite deities and idols. By centralizing worship, God was declaring one place to be so associated with God’s name that God’s name could be said to dwell there.

Before we look at the words that God spoke in his appearance to Solomon on the fateful night mentioned in our opening verse, let’s look briefly at the prayer of dedication that precedes it in the 6th chapter of 2 Chronicles, since this is the prayer that God said he heard Solomon pray.

Solomon first pondered how you dedicate something as magnificent and important as the temple. One thing Solomon did was put the temple in perspective. In the prayer, Solomon posed the question: “But will God indeed reside with mortals on earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, how much less this house that I have built.” (2 Chronicles 6:18) As great as the temple was, God is much greater. We do not build temples or houses of worship to contain God.

Solomon prayed, “May your eyes be open day and night toward this house, the place where you promised to set your name, and may you heed the prayer that your servant prays toward this place. And hear the plea of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place; may you hear from heaven your dwelling place; hear and forgive.” (2 Chronicles 6:20-21) The temple is a house of prayer. Notice that Solomon’s request extends beyond the prayers prayed inside the temple. It extends toward the prayers that are prayed *toward* Jerusalem. Solomon has in mind people from all over Israel praying in the direction of the temple.

Solomon envisioned people who would take oaths in God’s name before the altar to say that they were telling the truth when they brought a dispute against a neighbor. Solomon asked that God would make sure that the guilty and the righteous were repaid accordingly.

Solomon envisioned God’s people coming to God when they were defeated in battle. They would come to pray to be made right with God again so they could be forgiven and go out again and be victorious.

Solomon envisioned God’s people praying for God to alleviate all manner of suffering:

“If there is famine in the land, if there is plague, blight, mildew, locust, or caterpillar; if their enemies besiege them in any of the settlements of the lands; whatever suffering, whatever sickness there is; whatever prayer, whatever plea there is from any individual or from all your people Israel, all knowing their own suffering and their own sorrows so that they stretch out their hands toward this house; then hear from heaven, your dwelling place, forgive, and render to all whose hearts you know, according to all their ways, for only you know the human heart. Thus may they fear you and walk in your ways all the days that they live in the land that you gave to our ancestors.” (2 Chronicles 6:28-31)

Solomon prayed that God would hear and answer the prayers of foreigners, “so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel, and so they may know that your name has been invoked on this house that I have built.” (2 Chronicles 6:33)

Solomon prayed that if God’s people were taken into captivity as judgment for their sins, and they prayed toward this place, and repented, God would hear their pleas, maintain their cause, and forgive their sins.

After the prayer of dedication was concluded, fire came down from heaven and consumed the offering and the sacrifices, and the glory of the Lord filled the temple. The festival lasted for days. Then, the scripture says, “Thus Solomon finished the house of the Lord and the king’s house; all that Solomon had planned to do in the house of the Lord and in his own house he successfully accomplished.” (2 Chronicles 7:11) In these first chapters of 2 Chronicles, we see all the details being put together successfully by Solomon, showing off the wisdom and organizational ability for which Solomon was famous.

What happened next is where we find the Lord appearing to Solomon in the night. The Lord said that he had heard Solomon’s prayer of dedication, and reminded Solomon that he, the Lord, had chosen this place for himself as a house of sacrifice. The very fact that God chose the place for his name to dwell is instructive. God comes to us in the context of worship on God’s terms, not ours. This is something to keep in mind as we continue to study this scripture.

When God’s People Pray

¹³ When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain or command the locust to devour the land or send pestilence among my people, ¹⁴ if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and heal their land.

Notice that what God says he will do is in response to Solomon’s prayer in the temple that is contained in the previous chapter. The people believed that when there was an ecological disaster that resulted in famine, their first instinct should be to pray. This is what the temple was designed and built for. Whether we believe God causes disasters in response to sin, or whether we believe God allows disasters to test us, disasters and how we respond reveal a lot about us. When misfortune falls upon us, it reveals whether or not we are ready spiritually to cope with the situation. It reveals how active or inactive our faith is. I would venture to guess that all of us find ourselves wanting to marshal as much faith as we have and then some. It is a good thing when we find our faith wanting to call out to God in prayer. It is a good thing to do that individually and also as a community of faith. There is something powerful in the way that we band together through struggle. It is often how we come together best as a community of faith.

Let’s break down the fourteenth verse:

If my people...

God reminds us that Israel is his special possession. God laid his claim on them long before. They had a shared an intimate history. The New Testament reminds us that all who are believers have been grafted into that family, so that we, too, are God’s special possession. **What does it mean that God knows your name and calls you by name and claims you as his?**

Who are called by my name...

Since God has claimed us, we represent God to the whole world. Have you ever been ashamed when someone knows your faith and they saw you act in a way that reflected poorly on your faith? When people know our faith, we become reflections of God, for better or worse. When we identify as Christians, “Christ”

is literally a part of that identification. We are called by his name. We did not just claim it for ourselves, but we believe he claimed us. God's reputation is at stake. **How does it make you want to be a better Christian knowing that you bear the name of Christ?**

Humble themselves...

When we have sinned, when we have reflected poorly upon God in our actions, then we must humble ourselves. This is the time to admit how we have not represented the God we claim to serve. Christians are often too prideful to begin with. Even before we fall. Setting ourselves up on a pedestal puts us in a vulnerable position. People who put themselves up on a pedestal are often the ones who walk on their fellow human beings. Being humble puts us right where we need to be—on many different levels. **What are some concrete ways that you can become a more humble person in relation to God and your fellow human beings?**

Pray...

We need to admit that many people who want to say they believe in prayer, do not pray that much. We can read about prayer, talk about prayer, resolve to pray, but it is in actually praying that we can say that we attend the school of prayer. I talk as if praying is work, and it often is. The more we put in the work, the less prayer becomes a chore. I do not mean to downplay reading about prayer. The way I have benefitted from reading about prayer is to unlock more avenues to prayer. **Ask yourself, "How often do you really pray, and how much time do you spend in prayer each time?" How might you resolve to spend more time praying this year?**

Seek my face...

Prayer is relational. Say this ten times. To seek God's face is to learn more and more about the character and personality of God, which we can only really do by praying and by a deep devotional life. The more time we spend with God, the more God's countenance is reflected in us. **How might you mix in your devotional study of scripture with prayer so that you endeavor to learn as much about God as you are wanting God to know about your needs?**

And turn from their wicked ways...

The more time we spend with God, the more God is going to reveal about your character and actions that do not please God. If we never spend time in reflection we are going to miss this. Every day we live is a crucible for change if we pay attention. Each day you can engage in an examination of conscience and an examination of consciousness. **Where did you disappoint God (sin) today by your actions and inaction? When were you most conscious of God (closest) and the least conscious of God (most distant)?**

Then I will hear from heaven...

It is easy to feel distant from God sometimes, because he hears from heaven, but God does hear us. God is at the same time both transcendent and the one who is closest to us than we are to ourselves, because he knows us better than we know ourselves. Ponder this. Believing God really does hear us from heaven is the best way for heaven to become more real to us. **How might you journal or keep track of the evidence that God hears you?**

And will forgive their sin...

When God forgives us God releases us. This is why we must forgive others, because we are releasing them and we are releasing ourselves. God releases us to begin again. One of my favorite prayers is the pray of beginning again. It is where I receive God's forgiveness. It is where I am confronted with my own spiritual immaturity. It is okay though because I am a child again, and I am free to feel loved by God. God never stopped loving me, but in receiving God's forgiveness, the barrier I had erected is gone. **How do you plan to bring more requests to God for God to forgive you in the coming year? How might you deepen your experience of God's forgiveness? How might you grow through this experience and reach greater**

maturity in your faith? How might you find the liberation that you long for and truly leave behind the habits, hurts, and hang-ups that have kept you from experiencing all the peace and joy God offers?

And heal their land.

With forgiveness comes healing. To speak of God healing the land in the particular context of our scripture means the rains coming again, the locusts and the pestilence going away. It means the land becoming fertile again and supporting human life. Healing and redemption go hand in hand. I believe God is in the business of healing and redeeming souls and circumstances. Do you believe this? **Where might you draw a mental circle in your life around that which needs healing and redeeming? How might you circle around this in your prayers, even if it takes all year?**

Here is God's promise to heal and forgive when we humble ourselves, pray, seek, and turn. This is a promise we can count on throughout the year and throughout our lives.

A Fixed Place

¹⁵ Now my eyes will be open and my ears attentive to the prayer that is made in this place. ¹⁶ For now I have chosen and consecrated this house so that my name may be there forever; my eyes and my heart will be there for all time.

Recall why David desired to build God a house. His reasoning was that the place of worship until that time had been a tent of meeting. It was the portable worship center that had accompanied God's people since the time of Moses when God's people wandered in the wilderness and then made their way to the land of promise that God showed them. The tent compound had been designed according to God's specific instructions. Every space had a special purpose. It could all be moved wherever God directed his people by the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. It was when the pillar stopped moving that God's people knew where they were to set up for worship until the next time they moved.

When they were shown that Jerusalem was to be the place for God's house to dwell permanently, it was natural for David to think it was time for a more permanent dwelling, the temple, to be built. God questioned David saying that the tent compound had served the purpose of divine worship adequately enough. God agreed however that the time for a more permanent place was upon them. Although David was ready to build it, God intended for Solomon to build it. The instructions for the more permanent temple were also given in the time of Moses.

Did God need a place? Or did God's people need a place? God's people needed a place that was authorized by God for divine worship, because God gets to set the terms for how God is encountered in worship. We cannot just make worship what we want it to be. God wanted his people to have a place where they, in their mortal human minds could count on God being there. Perhaps this is why God made a big deal about God's eyes being open and his ears being attentive to the prayer that is made in the temple. God reiterated that he had chosen the place and consecrated his house so that his name may dwell there forever. God's eyes and, moreover, God's heart will be in this special place for all time.

Based on what we are about to read, we might ask, "How permanent is permanent?"

A Conditional Promise

Some promises come without conditions, and some promises come with conditions. The tell-tale sign is when we find the words "if" and "then."

¹⁷ As for you, if you walk before me as your father David walked, doing according to all that I have commanded you and keeping my statutes and my ordinances, ¹⁸ then I will establish your royal throne, as I made a covenant with your father David saying, ‘You shall never lack a successor to rule over Israel.’

On the day the temple was dedicated, Solomon recalled that it was his father, David, who had first desired to build the temple. God told David however that his son, Solomon, was the one God intended to build it. Instead of David building a house for God, God intended for it to work the other way around. God would build David a house. By “house” God meant a dynasty—an everlasting dynasty. God wanted to build a dynasty around David. (1 Chronicles 17)

God promised David, “you shall never lack a successor to rule over Israel.” It was the way David walked with God. It is instructive to keep in mind all the psalms attributed to David. David had a heart for God. David was not perfect, but he never wavered in his faith in God. When other rulers would forsake God for other gods, David remained true to God. He walked a straight path, straying neither to the right or the left.

So, at this pivotal moment in Solomon’s life and reign, God reminded Solomon of the promise God made to David. There was a condition however: IF Solomon walked before God as his father David walked, and did according to all that God commanded him and keeping God’s statutes and ordinances, THEN there would never lack a descendant of David to rule on the throne over God’s people.

A conditional promise begs the question, “What happens if the condition is not met?”

¹⁹ “But if you turn aside and forsake my statutes and my commandments that I have set before you and go and serve other gods and worship them, ²⁰ then I will pluck you up from the land that I have given you, and this house, which I have consecrated for my name, I will cast out of my sight and will make it a proverb and a byword among all peoples. ²¹ And regarding this house, now exalted, everyone passing by will be astonished and say, ‘Why has the LORD done such a thing to this land and to this house?’ ²² Then they will say, ‘Because they abandoned the LORD the God of their ancestors who brought them out of the land of Egypt, and they embraced other gods and worshiped them and served them; therefore he has brought all this calamity upon them.’ ”

God wanted to go on record that if God’s people were taken into exile by a foreign army and the temple was destroyed, it would not be because God failed to keep his promise. It would not be because God was weak and powerless. If, in the future, people passed by abandoned cities and saw only ruins where the Jerusalem temple, in all of its magnificence, had once stood, they would surely be astonished. The reputation of such a people would become a byword, a proverb, and a cautionary tale told of a defeated people. They would no doubt wonder, “Why did the Lord allow such a thing to happen?” Before that happened, God wanted to go on record so that people would know the truth: it would be because the people abandoned the Lord and embraced other gods. In other words, it would not be due to God backing out of the covenant; but because God’s people did not hold up their side of the covenant. They brought the calamity upon themselves.

This promise had a prophetic dimension to it. According to 1 Kings 11, Solomon entered into marriage with many foreign wives who worshiped other gods, and this had a tragic effect on Solomon’s heart: “For when Solomon was old, his wives turned away his heart after other gods, and his heart was not true to the LORD his God, as was the heart of his father David.” (1 Kings 11:4) For the sake of his father, David, God did not divide the kingdom in Solomon’s day, but it did divide in the following generation. The northern kingdom was taken out from the line of David. In the southern kingdom of Judah, the kings in the line of David, with only a few notable exceptions, were unfaithful to God. Several centuries after Solomon, the temple was destroyed, the city of Jerusalem was demolished into ruins, and God’s people were taken into captivity by the Babylonian army.

Although this is all covered in the last chapter of 2 Chronicles, destruction does not have the last word. The last word is about restoration: “In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, to fulfill the word of the LORD spoken by Jeremiah, the LORD stirred up the spirit of King Cyrus of Persia so that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom and also in writing, saying: “Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Let any of those among you who are of his people—may the LORD their God be with them!—go up.” (2 Chronicles 36:22-23)

What does this mean? God holds up God’s side of the covenant even when we do not. There are consequences, for sure, when we break covenant. God, however, by upholding God’s side of the covenant, finds a way to restore covenant.

We know that through the prophets that God sent into the Exile, God kept on relating to God’s people in Exile. They learned through this experience that God had not died when the temple was destroyed. Communing with God through prayer was never dependent on the temple. It was in the Exile that people began meeting together to worship God around the message of the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings—what was becoming the Hebrew scriptures—called the Old Testament by Christians.

The temple was rebuilt. In Jesus’ earthly ministry, he talked about the temple that stood in his day. He made predictions that soon not one stone would be left upon another. The temple would be destroyed again in 70 A.D. by the Romans. Temples can be destroyed, but the ability we have to worship God cannot be destroyed. Jesus, the Son of David, whose birth we just celebrated, lived, died, and rose again, and ascended into heaven to sit on the throne and reign. His reign is eternal, and it is made real for us through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.

The promise of 2 Chronicles 7:14 is made more real for us because it is set within the Christian Story as contained in the Old and New Testaments.

How might you build on the foundation of your faith in the coming year through the study of God’s word? How do you plan to follow through?

Prayer

Gracious Lord, who claims us as Your people and hears our prayers, enable us to humble ourselves before you, pray, seek your face, and turn from our sinful ways, that we may find forgiveness and healing, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever, Amen.

Dr. Jay Harris serves as the Assistant to the Bishop for Ministerial Services for the South Georgia Conference. Email him at jharris@sgaumc.com. Find his plot-driven guide to reading the Bible, the “Layered Bible Journey,” at www.layeredbiblejourney.com.



In Name and Spirit

**WHAT’S OLD IS NEW AGAIN
ANNE PACKARD**

On May 17, 1954, the United States Supreme Court ruled unanimously in Brown versus Board of Education that [racial segregation](#) in public schools violated the [Fourteenth Amendment](#) to the [Constitution](#), which

prohibits the states from denying [equal protection](#) of the laws to any person within their jurisdictions. The decision declared that separate educational facilities for white and [African American](#) students were inherently unequal. This ruling overturned the Supreme Court's decision of 1896 in Plessy versus Ferguson mandating separate public facilities and ended countless years of segregation and inequality.

The Brown versus Board of Education ruling put the Methodist Church into turmoil because the denomination in southern states was also segregated with all African American churches organized in to the Central Jurisdiction. If the government could end segregation in public schools, could it also end segregation in Christian denominations?

The General Conference meeting of 1954 did not alleviate the concerns of the south regarding integration. This meeting, held in Minneapolis, Minnesota adopted a resolution urging the abolition of racial discrimination. It was noted that this resolution was not mandatory and could not be enforced and the delegates also passed an amendment that annual conferences could be transferred to other jurisdictions if the annual conference did not agree with the jurisdiction's decision to end segregation.

Bishop Arthur J. Moore, being born and raised in south Georgia, had been bishop of the Atlanta Episcopal area, North and South Georgia Conferences, for fifteen years. He would continue as bishop of this area for another five years, retiring in 1960. As 1954 drew to a close and 1955 was just beginning, thousands of people wrote to Bishop Moore regarding their disgust at the rest of the country for misunderstanding the southern states and the importance of racial segregation. He responded with this address.

“We are met as a group of Christian men and women to pool our resources of faith and good will, hoping to find a working solution for what we all recognize as a stubborn problem. The practical thing for a traveler who wants to make sure that he is on the right road is not to proceed with speed, but to stop long enough to make sure that he is on the right road and is moving in the right directions. That is what we seek to do today...”

“We are not here in any official capacity. We have come together in an atmosphere of Christian understanding to speak frankly and constructively to each other. We are seeking to bring the spirit of brotherhood into our dealings with each other, so that if tensions increase, we will not be out of touch with each other. Some of us are convinced that the Christian gospel could draw off from our nation the poison which has been produced by some of the measures which are being employed to solve this problem. In the confusion we are all tempted to insist upon our rights and to forget our duties. The purpose of this meeting is to approach the problem in an atmosphere of cooperation and good will... Distrust and rivalry will disrupt, while respect and cooperation will heal. Therefore because we have confidence in the healing forces of friendship, we have come to sit down and talk together.”

“In the confusion of this present situation men are lashing out blindly at each other. That there are abuses to be corrected, injustices to be abolished and wrongs to be righted no Christian would deny. The church must always provide a voice for those who have no speech and lend its strength to every movement which seeks the betterment of the human family... The thoughtful Christian readily perceives that the redemption of the individual member of society, or of the entire social order, will not be achieved by the readjustment of institutions alone, but by the regeneration of the human heart. When the Christian gospel is received, it changes man's thought concerning all fundamental matters of life...”

“The injustices of the American social order may not be dismissed with a general statement. There are acute and intricate problems associated with them, which, if approached in an atmosphere poisoned on the one hand by contempt and on the other by resentment, may easily become dangerous and explosive. If, however, these problems are approached in an atmosphere of determined good will and patience, they can be solved...”

The whole question can be resolved when, in the spirit of Jesus, our groups approach each other motivated by respect, trust and service.”

“...As Christianity spreads, the inequalities of man grow less, and as the light of Christ rises over the earth, more of freedom, brotherhood and equality come to His children. The final establishment of the Kingdom of God will not come in some sudden and dramatic fashion because it is built upon the indestructible foundation of brotherly good will. While waiting and working for that better day, we must not make an armistice with injustices and oppression. Christ wills the spirit of unity between all peoples and calls upon His followers to live as members of a redeemed family which enfolds all mankind.”

“In the name and spirit of science and education we will seek to find and to tell the truth. In the name and spirit of democracy we will seek the way of equal opportunity. In the name of patriotism we will strive for loyalty to the democratic ideal, for leadership to guide, and for statesmanship adequate to carry the burden of the new day. In the name and spirit of Christianity, we will search for the new faith of fellowship. In the name and spirit of Him who carries all men in his eternal purpose we dedicate ourselves to the task of doing the most and the best that can done here and now.”

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.



And then some: gratitude, humility and excellence

By Hal Brady

How do you spell success? How do I spell it? A retired business executive was once asked the secret of his success. He replied that it could be summed up in these words: “and then some.”

“I discovered at an early age,” he said, “that most of the difference between average people and top people could be explained in three words. The top people did what was expected of them – and then some. They were thoughtful of others – and then some. They met their obligations and responsibilities fairly and squarely – and then some. They were good friends to their friends – and then some. They could be counted on in an emergency – and then some.”

Dennis Waitley, a national authority on high-level performance and personal development, lists in his book “Seeds of Greatness” the ten best kept secrets of total success. According to Waitley they are: self-esteem, creativity, responsibility, wisdom, purpose, communication, faith, adaptability, perseverance, and perspective.

But how do you spell success? How do I spell it? Success means different things to different people. Success also means different things to us at different times in our lives. And sometimes we cannot even define what we mean by success.

When Hamilton College celebrated its centennial, one of its most famous alumni, Alexander Woollcott, was asked to give a major address. Woollcott opened his speech this way: “I send my greetings today to all my fellow alumni of Hamilton College, scattered all over the world. Some of you are successful and some of you are failures – only God knows which are which.”

In the rest of this article, I’d like to point out three characteristics of success any way you look at it.

First, gratitude! In reality, there are no self-made people. Everyone who has ever accomplished anything has received help from others. Every one of us has had friends or family who strengthened us by believing in us and giving us encouragement.

When a running back makes a long run, there is almost always a key block that springs him loose. Some strong lineman clears the way. A sense of gratitude accompanies every real achievement.

Second, humility! Most of us have what seems to be an “inborn drive” for success. Yet most of us find it harder to deal with success than with failure. So often we become unbalanced when success comes our way. We start to read our own press clippings, as they say. Thus, we will always need God’s guidance so that we might carry our success gracefully. We recall it was Christ, “who thought he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant” (Philippians 2:6-7).

Third, excellence! There is one standard of success that is always the same: “Have you done the very best you could?” A woman told a concert pianist after a recital, “I’d give half of my life to be able to play the piano that well.” The pianist responded, “Madam that’s exactly what I have done.” If there is any word successful people despise, it is the word “mediocrity.” They refuse to just get by with half efforts. Malcom Muggeridge titled his short biography of Mother Teresa, “Something Beautiful for God.” And that’s the way all of us should carry on our work, whatever it is and however it goes.

So how do you spell success? I spell it this way – gratitude, humility and excellence.

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).



Retired Clergy Birthdays – December 2022

- 12/01 – Virginia Connelly: 11130 Springfield Pike, Apt. B 131; Cincinnati, OH 45246
- 12/06 – Charles Adams: 301 Island St.; Lake Park, GA 31636
- 12/09 – Mollie Danner: 1415 Sunrise Ave.; Moultrie, GA 31768
- 12/10 – Charles Cox: 100 Spring Harbor Dr., Apt. 244; Columbus, GA 31904
- 12/10 – Britt Priddy: 109 Churchview Dr.; Leesburg, GA 31763
- 12/10 – Cephias Williamson: 4815 Tirol Pass; Ft. Wayne, IN 46835
- 12/12 – Alan Miller: 2099 Corsica Way SW; Marietta, GA 30008
- 12/15 – Paula Lytle: PO Box 2905; Statesboro, GA 30459
- 12/16 – Pat Holbert: PO Box 1004; Louisville, GA 30434
- 12/19 – Ed Eschmann: 520 N. Spring Creek Cir.; Cobb, GA 31735
- 12/19 – Morgan Johnson: 5000 Fairbanks Ave. #148; Alexandria, VA 22311-1227
- 12/22 – Larry Giles: 214 Jasmine St.; Sandersville, GA 31082
- 12/22 – Lenton Powell: PO Box 42986; Atlanta, GA 30311
- 12/22 – Joy Wilson: 59 Amanda Lane; Ellaville, GA 31806
- 12/26 – Grady Carter: 3285 Vista Circle; Macon, GA 31204
- 12/26 – Wayne Mitchell: 431 Oak Ridge Dr.; Nashville, GA 31639
- 12/26 – Diane Shedd: 1718 Azalea Dr.; Valdosta, GA 31602
- 12/28 – William Blalock: PO Box 187; Vidalia, GA 30475
- 12/28 – Ellis Carpenter: 604 Quail Ridge Lane; Perry, GA 31069

12/31 – John Carroll, Jr.: 4663 Wesleyan Woods Dr.; Macon, GA 31210
12/31 – Bill Daniel: 2450 N. Oceanshore Blvd., C215; Flagler Beach, FL 32136
12/31 – William A. Smith: 102 Pierce Rd.; Reynolds, GA 31076



Scripture Readings – December 20 edition

December 24

Christmas Eve, Year A

- [Isaiah 9:2-7](#)
- [Psalm 96](#)
- [Titus 2:11-14](#)
- [Luke 2:1-20](#)

December 25

Christmas Day, Year A

- [Isaiah 52:7-10](#)
- [Psalm 98](#)
- [Hebrews 1:1-4 \(5-12\)](#)
- [John 1:1-14](#)

January 1

New Year's Day, Year A

- Matthew 2:1-12

January 8

Baptism of the Lord, Year A

- [Isaiah 42:1-9](#)
- [Psalm 29](#)
- [Acts 10:34-43](#)
- [Matthew 3:13-17](#)