

SOUTH GEORGIA ADVOCATE – JUNE 1 EDITION

South Georgia prepares for 2023 Annual Conference session

South Georgia United Methodists will gather June 4-6, 2023, at the UGA Tifton Campus Conference Center in Tifton, Ga. to worship, fellowship, celebrate mission and ministry, and discuss the future of the South Georgia Conference.

Meeting under the theme, “When They Prayed,” attendees at the 2023 Annual Conference session will worship together, pray together, and see friends new and old.

This year’s Annual Conference session will be marked by daily worship services and prayer moments woven throughout the 3-day event.

Bishop David Graves, episcopal leader of the South Georgia Conference, will be the preacher for the Sunday evening Opening Worship Service beginning at 6:30 pm.

Rev. Rebecca Duke-Barton, pastor of Jesup First UMC, will preach during the Monday morning worship service, and Rev. Michael Culbreth, pastor of ConneXion Church in Savannah, will preach during the Tuesday morning worship service. Both services begin at 8:30 am.

On Monday, June 5 at 11:20 am, the conference will recognize those clergy who are retiring.

Three people will be ordained Monday evening, June 5 at 7 pm: Joseph Carter, Mark Miller, and Matthew Stout. Many South Georgians will recognize the conference’s Ordination service preacher, Bishop Sharma Lewis. Bishop Lewis has South Georgia roots, served as a pastor and district superintendent in the North Georgia Conference, and was elected to the episcopacy in 2016. She now serves as the resident bishop of the Mississippi Conference of The United Methodist Church.

On Tuesday, June 6 at 11 am, the conference will celebrate and honor the lives of South Georgia clergy and clergy spouses who have died during the past year. The Rev. Dr. Derek McAleer, retired South Georgia minister, will preach. All worship services will be live streamed.

A prayer team consisting of Rev. Teresa Edwards, associate pastor of Vineville UMC in Macon, Rev. Precious Hawkins, pastor of Asbury UMC in Savannah, and the Rev. Dr. Ted Goshorn, pastor of Mulberry St. UMC in Macon, will lead conference members in times of prayer.

During the 2023 Annual Conference session, South Georgia United Methodists will have the opportunity to support church planting and revitalization through the opening worship service’s special offering. Congregations are encouraged to send and present their offering during the opening worship service on June 4. [Click here for additional information and promotional materials.](#)

Also this year, the South Georgia Conference will elect persons to fill vacancies in its delegation to the postponed 2020 General Conference (to be held in 2024) and the 2024 Jurisdictional Conference. [Clergy and laity who have declared their interest in being a delegate have submitted a short interest form that can be read here.](#)

For more detailed information and a daily agenda, visit www.sgaumc.org/annualconference.

Live Stream

[Live Stream Link](#)

Schedule

The 2023 Annual Conference Session will begin with an Opening Worship Service on Sunday evening, June 4, at 6:30 pm. Conference will conclude with the Sending Forth Service on Tuesday, June 6. [Click here for a link to the agenda.](#)

Social Media for the 2023 Annual Conference

- Facebook: www.facebook.com/sgaumc
- Twitter: www.twitter.com/sgaumc / #sgaumc
- Instagram: www.instagram.com/sgaumc

Business Related Items

- [Book of Recommendations and Reports](#)
- [Detailed working agenda](#)

Missional Giving Opportunities

- [Mission Emphasis to support our conference agencies](#)
- [Special Offering for church planting and revitalization](#)

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Bishop Graves delivers hope for a new season, oversees special session to vote on disaffiliations

The South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church ratified [193 local church disaffiliations](#) at its special called session held online Sunday, May 21, 2023.

Bishop David Graves, episcopal leader of the South Georgia Conference, opened the 158th session of the South Georgia Annual Conference with a message of hope to the 274 congregations remaining with the conference.

Recognizing that disaffiliation conversations have consumed so much time and focus for our United Methodist Churches in this season, Bishop Graves said “it is time” to put our focus on those in our communities who feel this day they have no hope.

“This is heavy. This is overwhelming. At times it is paralyzing. But it is time for us to focus on reaching out and reaching new people,” said Bishop Graves. “We need to be people who are proclaimers, to put our focus on mission and ministry, to make disciples, and to change our corner of the world where people see the light in the midst of the darkness, hope in the midst of hopelessness, and we are viewed as people of integrity.”

Provisions passed at the called 2019 Special Session of the General Conference outlined in paragraph ¶2553 of the United Methodist *Book of Discipline* and two policies passed during the 2019 South Georgia Annual Conference session – a [Disaffiliation Policy](#) and a [Pension Liabilities Proposal](#) – laid the groundwork for churches to disaffiliate. The *Book of Discipline* is the denomination’s book of law, doctrine, and policy.

Per the policies adopted, once each congregation pays their pension liabilities, two years of apportionments - which are the local congregation's responsibility to support the regional, national and global ministry of The United Methodist Church, and any legal fees involved, they will be released from the trust clause and will own their property. Now that the disaffiliation requests have been ratified by a simple majority of clergy and lay members of the South Georgia Annual Conference, these congregations have until June 30 to completely fulfill their disaffiliation agreement with the Conference Trustees.

"Today is a day of sadness in the life of the South Georgia Annual Conference," said Bishop Graves. "We grieve in saying farewell to the 193 churches disaffiliating from The United Methodist Church and wish them the best in ministry. We pray for these churches as they navigate ministry in a new season.

"I especially want to express my appreciation for the 274 churches who have chosen to remain United Methodist and those who heard my call to refrain from holding discussions around leaving the denomination until we have more information," said Bishop Graves. "I appreciate their faithfulness to their call and covenant all while leading their churches in a most difficult season."

According to the United Methodist News Service, at this point, [3,580 congregations](#) across the entire denomination have completed the required steps and withdrawn under paragraph 2553 of the United Methodist *Book of Discipline*. That's about 11.7% of U.S. churches since the law took effect in 2019.

For laity who are a member of a disaffiliating church and wish to remain United Methodist, conference leadership has [created a process to move membership](#) to the General Church Membership Roll. The [General Church Membership Roll](#) is designed for those individuals who wish to remain active in The United Methodist Church by supporting it with their prayers, their presence, their gifts, their service, and their witness while discerning their next steps.

Steps are already being taken to start new congregations and ministries in areas where current United Methodist congregations are leaving.

There are fresh expressions and new faith communities beginning all over the South Georgia Conference in Thomasville, Albany, Brunswick, Valdosta, and St. Marys, and conference leadership is looking at more places throughout the Annual Conference. Bishop Graves recently announced a new [ministry strategy team](#) to help cultivate new expressions of ministry and help established churches vision and seek new ways of sharing Christ with new people.

Bishop Graves acknowledges this has been a hard season, but he is ready to turn the page as clergy and laity partner together to focus on reaching new people with the gospel message.

"This has been a labor-intensive and emotional process for our cabinet and staff," said Bishop Graves as he reflected on the emotions of the past year. "In the most difficult of times I see so many signs of hope and renewal. Today we are turning a page in the South Georgia Conference and will be focusing on life-giving and life-changing ministry."

Bishop Graves says he is privileged each and every day to see first-hand how God is using United Methodist churches to proclaim the gospel, feed the hungry, comfort the broken, and resist the evils of this world.

"God has called us, God has equipped us, and God will carry us forward to reach new people and new generations for Jesus Christ," said Bishop Graves. "I'm excited to see the Kingdom work this conference and our connection will accomplish with God's guidance."

Minutes of the special called session will be included in the 2023 South Georgia Annual Conference Journal, which will be available later this fall.

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UMCOR Sager Brown Depot to welcome volunteers again

UMCOR Sager Brown Depot, which has hosted thousands of volunteers who support the United Methodist Committee on Relief by working on relief supply kits, reopened to volunteer teams in March 2023. Part of the United Methodist Relief Supply Network, UMCOR Sager Brown Depot was closed at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic to protect the safety of volunteers, staff, and supplies.

In past years, more than 2,000 volunteers annually have prepared approximately \$4 million on average in relief supplies for shipment from the UMCOR Sager Brown Depot in response to disasters in the United States. Volunteer teams have also worked on community projects in nearby Baldwin. Sager Brown collaborates with affiliate warehouses within the United Methodist Relief Supply Network, including one in Alabama, one in Illinois, one in Missouri, two in Pennsylvania, and two in Texas.

Volunteer teams that were scheduled to visit in 2020, and whose visits were canceled or postponed because of the COVID-19 pandemic shutdown, were informed of the reopening and invited to move forward with their plans, according to Amy Fuselier, director of UMCOR Sager Brown Depot. The current plan is to open the new team registration calendar in June 2023 for teams who wish to visit in 2024.

“Assembling a relief kit is one of the special ways people show their support for UMCOR,” said Roland Fernandes, general secretary of the General Board of Global Ministries and the United Methodist Committee on Relief. “We are pleased to welcome volunteer teams back to such a storied place as UMCOR Sager Brown Depot and look forward to even more volunteer teams visiting in the future when we are fully open.”

“The UMCOR Sager Brown Depot team is looking forward to hosting short-term mission volunteer teams once again,” said Amy Fuselier, director of UMCOR Sager Brown Depot. “We have missed them just as much as they have missed us.”

While there have not been any changes to the team registration process, fees have been adjusted to meet the rising costs of food, utilities, and maintenance.

New for 2023, COVID-19 protocols have been instituted. Volunteers will be required to have been vaccinated, have had a negative COVID-19 test within 48 hours of arrival and affirm both during the check-in process. Individuals who believe they have been exposed to someone with COVID-19 within five days of their scheduled trip will be directed not to travel to UMCOR Sager Brown. Volunteers will be encouraged to wear a face mask while in any indoor congregational setting during their visit.

During their visits, volunteer team members assemble, verify and pack relief supply kits. Learn more about kits here: <https://umcmmission.org/relief-supplies/>. UMCOR recently introduced a new menstrual hygiene kit and donations are encouraged to help build needed inventory.

Visiting teams may also participate in UMCOR Sager Brown Depot’s outreach to its local neighbors through food distribution, housing rehabilitation projects, and other community efforts.

Churches gathering supplies for relief supply kits can send those items to any of the affiliate warehouses listed and select the one that is most convenient. Find additional information here: <https://umcmmission.org/umcor-supply-depots/>.

Support the work of UMCOR

- **Pray:** UMCOR’s work is undergirded by the power of prayer – both in the hours after a disaster strikes and through recovery.
- **Make supply kits:** Assemble relief supply kits to help keep UMCOR’s Relief Supplies Network ready to deliver goods in the hands of survivors (U.S. only).
- **Volunteer:** U.S. volunteer efforts are arranged through annual conferences; reach out to your conference disaster relief coordinator to learn more.
- **Give:** To provide support where it is most needed, give to Advance #999895. To specifically support UMCOR’s international disaster response efforts, you can give to Advance #982450. To specifically support UMCOR’s U.S. disaster response efforts, you can give to Advance #901670. To support the maintenance and repair of Sager Brown Supply Depot, you can give to Advance #901515.

About the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR)

Founded in 1940, the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR) is the global humanitarian relief and development agency of The United Methodist Church. A part of Global Ministries, UMCOR works in more than 80 countries worldwide, including the United States and its territories. The agency’s mission, grounded in the teachings of Jesus, is to alleviate human suffering with open hearts and minds to all people. Working in the areas of disaster response and recovery and migration, UMCOR responds to natural or civil disasters that are interruptions of such magnitude that they overwhelm a community’s ability to recover on its own. Learn more about Global Ministries by visiting www.umcmmission.org or by following www.facebook.com/GlobalMinistries and [Twitter.com/UMCmission](https://twitter.com/UMCmission).



\$1.5 Million Gift Establishes Andrew College Nursing Chair

Andrew College has announced the establishment of the Aderhold Chair of Nursing thanks to an endowed gift of \$1.5 million from Andrew Alumni Tom and Kay Aderhold in support of the College’s nursing program. Dr. Linda R. Buchanan, President of Andrew, describes the gift as one of the largest individual gifts in the history of the College and a ringing endorsement of the importance of Andrew’s efforts to graduate superior registered nurses to serve Southwest Georgia.

“We are so grateful to Tom and Kay Aderhold for their continuing and significant generosity,” said Dr. Buchanan. “We could not have started our nursing program in 2017 without their initial support, and this gift just solidifies their commitment to their alma mater.”

Board of Trustee Chair George Flowers added, “This gift solidifies Andrew’s commitment to nursing education and will motivate others to support the College and our nursing program. We are deeply grateful to the Aderholds for their generosity.”

About Andrew College

Established in 1854, Andrew College is related to The United Methodist Church and is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges. Situated in the rural southwest

Georgia community of Cuthbert, Andrew College offers the Associate of Art, Associate of Science, Associate Degree in Nursing, Bachelor of Science and Certificates.

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When They Prayed

FROM THE BISHOP DAVID GRAVES

I chose the theme of our 2023 Annual Conference session, “When They Prayed,” based on Acts 4:31: “*And when they had prayed, the place in which they gathered together was shaken, and they were filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the word of God with boldness.*”

While it seems so obvious that prayer is the center of our work, sometimes we need to make intentional efforts. It is so 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 God’s will for our churches and lives. This collective focus on prayer allows space for the Holy Spirit to guide our work.

Each day will offer a specific prayer focus centered around praying as certain Biblical figures prayed.

Sunday: When They Prayed: When they prayed like Naomi
When we pray blessings on others, God redeems, Ruth 1:8

Monday: When They Prayed: When they prayed like Nehemiah
When we acknowledge our shortcomings, God rebuilds, Nehemiah 1:5

Tuesday Morning: When They Prayed: When they prayed like Mary
When we rejoice and give thanks, God reveals, Luke 1:46-56

Tuesday Afternoon: When They Prayed: When they prayed like Peter
When we pray boldly, God revives, Acts 9:40

As I pray for our time at Annual Conference, I am hopeful that we can leave our time together with a renewed sense of purpose for our life and ministry in each local church. Let’s put the distractions of the past few years behind us for we know that further decisions about The United Methodist Church are a year away. Let’s not waste a moment on anything but what God is calling us to do now!

I am praying we can be poised with a sense of confidence, boldness, and courage to be Christ to our communities.

I am praying we discover our purpose and do so with a prophetic voice. Remember, all we do is to magnify God.

I am praying, hoping, and expecting God’s people to do great things.

Yes, that’s what happens when God’s people pray! May it be so!

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2023 prayer emphasis: June prayer guide, district prayer days, book studies

June Prayer Guide

The South Georgia Conference is centering itself around prayer in 2023. June's prayer guide, written by Elisa Reece, Alexandria Dickey-Tipton, Jack Caldwell, and Jesse Thompson, is now available at www.sgaumc.org/year-of-prayer.

District Prayer Days

This year for Annual Conference our theme is, "When They Prayed." During the six weeks leading up to Annual Conference each district has been assigned one week to pray for our Annual Conference. Laity and clergy from each district are gathering over Zoom and spending time praying through scripture, liturgy, response, and silent individual prayer. There is still one opportunity to join us. Hope to see you there!

- **Week 6: [June 1 - Coastal District](#)** – 6:30 pm

Next Book Study – August 21

In addition to the prayer guides and prayer days, book studies centered on prayer and hosted by Connectional Ministries, will expand our minds, challenge our hearts and encourage our prayer walks. [Click here for a synopsis and links to register for these fruit-filled conversations.](#)

Book Three: “From Burned Out to Beloved” by Bethany Dearborn Hiser
Book talk hosted by Grace Guyton on Monday, Aug. 21, noon-1pm

Book Four: “Dynamite Prayer” by Rosario Picardo and Sue Nilson Kibbey
Book talk hosted by the author, Rosario Picardo, on Monday, Nov. 27, noon-1pm



7-part video resource for local churches: discerning your mission and values

Is your local church starting something new and needing to solidify the foundation of your ministry or congregation before you get started?

Has your local church experienced mission drift and find you are in need of a way to get your leadership team refocused and back on mission?

If your local church finds itself in either of these places, the Office of Connectional Ministries has developed a 7-part video series to guide you through the process of determining your mission statement and values and aligning your church for maximum effectiveness. [Click here to learn more.](#)



June 4 Lesson: God Reigns

Summer Quarter 2023: The Righteous Reign of God
Unit 1: The Prophets Proclaim God's Power

Sunday School Lesson for the week of June 4, 2023

By Jay Harris

Lesson Scripture: Isaiah 52:7-12

Key Verse:

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns." (Isaiah 52:7)

Lesson Aims

- To introduce "The Righteous Reign of God" as the theme for the Summer Quarter
- To recognize the "reign of God" as one of the grand themes of the Bible
- To link the activity of the "messenger" with the announcement of God's reign becoming more real
- To connect the reign of God with the God who prevails
- To learn how this good news for the exiles was good news for people of all nations
- To reflect on their return home as a way to return to God and a life of faithfulness
- To explore the relationship between the reign of God, the good news, and evangelism

Introduction to the Summer Quarter and our Theme

The theme for the Summer Quarter is "The Righteous Reign of God." One of the benefits of reading the whole Bible (which I recommend) is that you get to discover the running themes which are repeated, emphasized, and developed in scripture. The kingdom of God or reign of God is one of the grand themes running through scripture.

Just the size and scope of the reign of God makes it one of the central themes of the Bible. It is deep, wide, high, and long. It is deep in terms of its significance and weight, wide in terms of all that God's reign embraces and includes, high in terms of its heavenly and divine origins and sheer idealism, and long in terms of its beginnings in eternity past and all that culminates and continues in its eternal future.

I heard the story once of a preacher visiting a missionary in Africa and having the opportunity to go on a safari. At one point they circled a large elephant. The visitor asked the guide why the trip seemed to stall on this one elephant when there were clearly more animals to be seen. The guide said, "Our animals are so magnificent in Africa that they must be seen from many angles." The same can certainly be said of the reign of God. Every angle we will pursue in this study will have something to offer in our exploration of God's reign.

As is typical in a quarter's study, we will spend time in different parts of the Bible: a unit in the prophets, a unit in the teachings of Jesus, and a unit exploring letters of Paul to congregations in the New Testament Church. Through thirteen scripture passages we will gain various perspectives on the reign of God.

How much have you reflected on the theme of God's reign or the Kingdom of God? What do you look forward to learning?

A Startling Announcement to Be Spread

We begin our exploration of the reign of God with the first verse of our scripture passage, which is also the key verse.

**⁷How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,
who brings good news,
who announces salvation,
who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.”**

This verse presents such a vivid picture. Notice it is not “how beautiful is the *voice* of the messenger,” but “how beautiful...are the *feet* of the messenger.” The emphasis is on the purposeful action of the messenger to cover territory, ascend mountains, and find the best vantage points to amplify and broadcast the message.

What is the message? The message is about peace. The messenger brings good news. It is an announcement of salvation. The message is that “*your* God reigns.” The word “your” is significant because it recalls a special relationship between God and the people who considered their spiritual home address to be Zion.

Zion is the name of the temple mount, which is the center of Jerusalem, which is the spiritual center of the universe for Jews. This is the dilemma. The Jews who were hearing this announcement were not physically located in Zion at the time. In this time in their lives, they were exiled from their homeland and held in captivity in Babylon. Jerusalem lay in ruins. The destruction of Jerusalem occurred during the second of three deportations that took many of Judah’s inhabitants into captivity in 586 B.C. Jerusalem, the capital city, was destroyed along with its royal palace and the temple. All the symbols of their political, cultural, and spiritual identity were leveled to the ground. The exiles would have remembered marching into captivity accompanying their defeated king, Zedekiah, who was bound and his eyes gouged. It was the mighty Babylonian army that did this to them. The exiles would have presumed that their condition was hopeless to say the least. How could it be anything but hopeless?

Yet, in this hopeless situation they were being challenged to imagine this messenger and his sense of determination, resolve, and perseverance, who traverses mountains to get out a very important announcement. The urgency of the messenger, together with the hope and optimism of the message, and the divine action at the center of it all can only be described as beautiful.

Have you ever thought about giving witness to the good news of your faith as something beautiful? How is it beautiful to the one receiving this news? How is it beautiful to God? How is it beautiful to the one sharing their experience?

Linking the Reign of God to the God Who Prevails

What we will continue to unpack, in this particular context, is the meaning of the words, “Your God reigns.” We want to understand how God’s reign would be made evident in their experience.

**⁸Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices;
together they shout for joy,
for in plain sight they see
the return of the LORD to Zion.**

God’s people were being called to imagine not only the messenger, but also to imagine the voices of the sentinels. These were the sentries, the lookouts, the watchmen, who were posted on the periphery to keep watch for what was coming toward God’s people—whether it be friend or foe. In this instance, their voices were expected to convey excitement. They are shouting for joy. For *in plain sight* they see the return of the Lord to Zion. To see in their mind’s eye a future in which the Lord is returning to Zion, was to see the fortunes of their homeland turning dramatically.

It is the practice of prophets to announce events before they happen. They do this to energize God's people. They do this to awaken God's people from a state of complacency and move them to action. Without God's message, the people would remain apathetic, unaware, and in despair. The prophet's job was to get the community of faith to imagine the future. The question for us is, "What would God's people be seeing that signaled the return of the Lord to Zion?"

**⁹ Break forth together into singing,
you ruins of Jerusalem,
for the LORD has comforted his people;
he has redeemed Jerusalem.**

What makes God's people break forth into singing is when they see God prevailing over the ruins of past failures and defeats. Only through the power of God could the ruins of Jerusalem be restored into being the center of life together among God's people. This kind of transformation shows a God who prevails, and a God who prevails is a sign of a God who reigns and rules.

God's transformation of the ruins of a people's past failures and defeats is what we mean by the word redemption. The best transformation stories are redemption stories. Redemption not only points to the transformation of ruins, it points to a price paid for that transformation.

Some people remember "redemption centers" when people would clip "green stamps," lick the sticky backs of the stamps, and adhere them to pages in a book. When the pages of the books were filled, you could take the books to a redemption center and use them to purchase things.

The redemption that God brings into our lives costs something. God provides something we do not deserve and cannot earn. When God transforms our lives we understand the esteem which God places on our lives, not because we are worthy of such esteem, but because the redemption of our lives brings delight to the heart of God. Redemption flows from the unconditional love of God.

In our scripture, the ruins of Jerusalem sing because there is a real expectation of future transformation. Notice though that the language being used is about something that has already happened or is already happening: "the Lord *has* comforted his people, he *has* redeemed Jerusalem." God has already turned his heart toward his people, and the grace and mercy of God is already being offered, which offers comfort immediately in the present, and begins the transformation that will be unfolding. In all this, God shows himself as the One who prevails, and therefore rules and reigns.

Where has God prevailed in your life or someone close to you? How did this make the reign of God more real for you? How do you think God is redeeming you? What stories of transformation can you recall?

How the Nations Will Know God Reigns

If God truly reigns, then God reigns over the universe. There is therefore an expectation that what is being announced to those who call Zion their home is of interest not only to them but to all people well beyond the bounds of what was their homeland.

**¹⁰ The LORD has bared his holy arm
before the eyes of all the nations,
and all the ends of the earth shall see
the salvation of our God.**

The picture of God baring his holy arm is a picture of the power that God wields, which we're told will be seen before the eyes of all the nations. Many of the nations that had formerly been plowed into the ground by the Babylonian war machine would see their fortunes change dramatically. Unlike the other nations, God's people would know that these changes would represent the salvation of their God, the one true God of the universe. Many nations and peoples would experience salvation, but at the center of it all was the God of Abraham, of Jacob, of Moses, and of David. The God who was worshiped from Zion would be worshiped again from that place in a rebuilt temple.

How would God do this? How do small conquered nations defeat a vast empire? They don't. The victory would come from an unexpected corner. God would raise the king of the Persian army, Cyrus, to save the day and defeat the Babylonian army. God was to demonstrate that he was not merely the God of the former nations of Judah and Israel. God was the Ruler of the universe. God has all nations at his disposal. The sentinels represent those who would begin to see these events from a distance. The prophets would see this beginning from afar and know the implications.

Cyrus, the Persian king, was a conqueror and empire builder, and therefore followed in the footsteps of the Assyrian and Babylonian conquerors before him. There were, however, very important differences that separated him from his predecessors. He instituted a vastly different policy than the Assyrians and Babylonians before him.

We actually have a record outside the Bible of the policy that Cyrus followed. The name of this record is called the Cyrus Cylinder. It was discovered almost 140 years ago in the ancient ruins of Babylon in what is now Iraq. Its home today is in the British Museum. It tells of the conquest of Babylon and the capture of the last Babylonian king in 539 B.C. by Cyrus. It tells how Cyrus was led to bring peace, to improve the lives of the Babylonians, and to send home all the people who had been displaced by the Babylonian army. It tells of his policy to let people worship the god of their choice and not the god of the conqueror. It tells of his efforts to restore temples all across Mesopotamia and letting people go back to their way of life in their home lands.

This policy was unheard of at the time. Some have called this clay "document" the first charter of human rights. The Jews are not mentioned specifically, but the record found in the Bible reflects this policy of Cyrus. According to the Book of Isaiah, Cyrus, though not a Jew, was nevertheless being used as God's instrument. God was influencing the affairs of the nations in favor of God's people. The salvation God was bringing would touch many nations, but God's people Israel would know the special role they were being called to play as God's messengers and ambassadors.

God's people were soon to have the awesome opportunity to be a witness before the nations, because they would know the identity of the God who was making this happen. In this sense, God's people collectively had the opportunity to serve as sentinels announcing the return of God to Zion. The feet of all God's people could become beautiful as they rush to spread the good news that our God reigns. They could help others see the salvation God was offering.

In what good news do you believe? How has it been good news to you personally? How is it good news for all people? How might you use that knowledge to build a bridge between yourself and others with whom you might share your faith and share your hope?

Returning Home Under the Reign of God

As God's people contemplated returning home, they could also reflect on the lessons learned in exile. God's people had been slowly transformed while in captivity. According to the prophets, the exile and captivity of

God's people represented God's judgment for their past idolatry and unfaithfulness. The hardships they endured had the effect of chastening and disciplining them. Using the imagery Jesus would later use, it was as if the dead branches were being pruned from them, so the branches that were bearing fruit could grow even more. In exile, God's people returned to God. Without the temple in their midst, their spiritual identity was allowed to form again, but this time it formed around God's word.

So, with the announcement of their return to their homeland and the rebuilding of God's house from the ruins of the former temple, they could envision a fresh start. This would take, however, a lot of intentionality.

**¹¹ Depart, depart, go out from there!
Touch no unclean thing;
go out from the midst of it; purify yourselves,
you who carry the vessels of the LORD.**

God's people were being called to holy living. If God's people were to be witnesses to the majesty, power, and goodness of God's holy reign, then they need to live in such a way that reflected God's holiness. Purifying themselves involved their commitment to their continued renewal and not falling back into their idolatrous ways. They needed to imagine returning the vessels of the Lord to be used in worship in a rebuilt temple. These vessels needed to be carried with the clean hands of a people with clean hearts.

As people who follow Christ, purifying ourselves involves dying to self and dying to sin and rising to new life in Christ. We are empowered in this work through our crucified and risen Lord.

For the exiles, the thoughts of returning home across a desert had to have made them recall the exodus of their ancestors from Egypt during the time of Moses. The return of the exiles from Babylon, after all, amounted to a second exodus. According to Isaiah, there were important differences to be noted, however, between the first exodus and the second exodus.

**¹² For you shall not go out in haste,
and you shall not go in flight,
for the LORD will go before you,
and the God of Israel will be your rear guard.**

In the first Exodus, the Hebrew slaves had to go out in haste and go out in flight because the Egyptians were in hot pursuit. In the second Exodus from Babylon, the former captives were told that they would not have to go out in haste or go out in flight. Cyrus would see to it that they could return across the desert in safety. Just as the pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night went before and behind God's people in the first Exodus, the Lord would go before God's people and the God of Israel would be their rearguard in the second Exodus.

Another feature of the first Exodus from Egypt was that God's people wandered in the wilderness for forty years because of their faithlessness. In the second Exodus from Babylon, God was to go before and behind them in a way that should inspire them to remain faithful in their return.

Because the Holy Spirit is working in our lives to root out sin and its effects, and we are therefore continually returning to the Lord, how might the vision of God's people returning to Zion inspire the way you look at your own journey of faith? Are there times when we make the journey back to God difficult and drawn out, and times when we let God make the journey easier? What is the difference?

Announcing the Reign of God

As we said at the beginning of our lesson, the kingdom of God is one of the grand themes of the Bible that is emphasized, repeated, and developed throughout scripture. Moreover, you can make the case that Jesus talked about the kingdom of God more than any other single subject. The central invitation of the gospel is to repent and believe the gospel of the kingdom of God.

However, because the kingdom of God is such a big subject, there is something elusive about trying to describe it and even grasp it. Returning to our key verse, we are being encouraged to embrace the reality of God's kingdom:

**⁷How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,
who brings good news,
who announces salvation,
who says to Zion, "Your God reigns."**

Imagine again the messenger in this scripture and his sense of determination, resolve, and perseverance, who traverses mountains to get out a very important announcement. As I said before, the urgency of the messenger, together with the hope and optimism of the message, and the divine action at the center of it all could only be described as beautiful. The overall thrust of the message is that "Your God reigns!"

The God who created it all is your God, and this God reigns over all. The importance of this for our lives cannot be overstated. The good news of the righteous reign of God is something we are being invited both to receive and share with joy.

I remember when the kingdom of God came alive to me like it had never come alive before. It was an evangelism class in seminary taught by my professor, Dr. George Morris. He assigned a book for us to read written by Mortimer Arias entitled, *Announcing the Reign of God: Evangelization and the Subversive Message of Jesus*. Mortimer Arias was a pastor who got his start in Uruguay, became a Methodist bishop in Bolivia, then a professor of evangelism in the U.S. at Claremont School of Theology, growing into a recognized leader in world mission and evangelism.

What struck me first was the way his book reframed evangelism for me. Evangelism is not just about growing the church or people getting saved, although these are very worthy objectives. Ultimately, evangelism is no less than announcing the reign of God and calling people to participate in the reign of God. The good news is the gospel of the kingdom of God.

The book, by using the phrase "the reign of God," also reminded me that the kingdom of God is not a static sort of destination, but the kingdom of God is the very dynamic *reign* of God. Ever since, when I read or hear or think about the kingdom of God, I think of the ongoing, active reign of God we're being invited to recognize, experience, and join. I try to use the terms "kingdom of God" and "reign of God" interchangeably. As believers, we're subjects of the world-wide reign and rule of God. Dwelling on something so big as the reign of God rescues me from the provincialism that all too often infects Christians. Being a believer is not just about me or my tribe or my culture.

It is a good thing that we are not going to try to define the reign of God in one lesson. Instead, we are going to spend another twelve weeks on this subject. Hopefully, by the end of this quarter, the phrase "kingdom of God," or "reign of God" will never go in one ear and out the other.

How are you thinking about the reign of God more after contemplating this scripture passage? What are some ways you might see yourself announcing the reign of God? If the enormity of the task overwhelms you, how would you break the message you want to get across into smaller pieces—

something relatable to your own experience and the needs, wants, and broken places in others who need the message that their God reigns?

Prayer

Gracious God, for centuries you have brought your people through difficult seasons and showed them that you reign. Help us pay attention to the ways you are working in us now, that we might see your overall purpose for us and others, through Christ our Lord, who reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever, Amen.

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June 11 Lesson: God’s Kingdom of Peace

**Summer Quarter 2023: The Righteous Reign of God
Unit 1: The Prophets Proclaim God’s Power**

**Sunday School Lesson for the week of June 11, 2023
By Jay Harris**

Lesson Scripture: Isaiah 65:17-25

Key Verse:

The wolf and the lamb shall feed together; the lion shall eat straw like the ox, but the serpent—its food shall be dust! They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the LORD. (Isaiah 65:25)

Lesson Aims

- To introduce the features of an end-time vision and its purpose
- To explore the theme of God’s new creation and a new Jerusalem
- To reflect on the curse associated with the fall of humankind and what its removal looks like
- To imagine a world without war, conflict, oppression, and antagonism
- To fill our minds with images of what God’s peaceable reign looks like within us and among us
- To commit ourselves to becoming a part of the change we want to see in the world

An End-Time Vision of the Reign of God

We are continuing the Summer Quarter’s study of “The Righteous Reign of God.” The reign of God is one the grand themes that is emphasized, repeated, and developed throughout scripture. When we talk about the reign of God, we are talking about the same thing as the kingdom of God. For this reason, it is helpful to use the terms “kingdom of God” and “reign of God” interchangeably. This reminds us that the kingdom of God is not a static sort of destination, but the kingdom of God is the very dynamic *reign* of God. We’re being invited to recognize, experience, and join in a movement that is ongoing, active, and flowing from God, the Ruler of the universe. As believers, we’re subjects of the world-wide reign and rule of God.

As Christians, we should have keen interest in the righteous reign of God because Jesus talked about the kingdom of God more than any other single subject. The central invitation of the gospel is to repent and

believe the gospel of the kingdom of God. We do not start in the New Testament however to learn about the reign of God. The prophets shed a lot of light on this subject, and they do so rather dramatically.

We began last week looking at words from the Book of Isaiah. The Book of Isaiah is known for being filled with visions of the future. The first 39 chapters present a series of warnings focused on the events that unfolded in the 8th Century B.C., but God's calls to repentance are interlaced with hopeful, divine visions that were intended to encourage and energize God's people. Divine visions of God's reign have the power to do this.

The next 16 chapters (Isaiah 40-55) jump ahead to the 6th century B.C., addressing a new group of God's people: the exiles held captive in Babylon. In this section, God shows them visions of their eventual restoration and return home from captivity. Our lesson last week came from this section of Isaiah. At the center of this hopeful passage of scripture was the news, "Your God reigns!"

The final 11 chapters of Isaiah (Isaiah 56-66) focus on a more distant future. The vision in today's scripture can properly be called an end-time vision. It's called an end-time vision because what it foresees has not happened yet in human history. It's a vision of how the history between God and the human race will culminate. When everything God has promised comes to complete fulfillment what will it look like?

Have you ever sat down and tried to think what it would look like if God got everything God wanted? What would it look like for you and your personal life? What would it look like for your community and your church? What it would look like for the least, the last, and the lost around you?

God's Reign, a New Creation, and a New Jerusalem

An end-time vision of God's reign shows us God's preferred future. We see what should have been from the beginning had things not gone seriously wrong. What if you could rewind and go back to the beginning? Although God's history does not rewind exactly, God does believe in beginning again.

**¹⁷ For I am about to create new heavens
and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered
or come to mind.**

**¹⁸ But be glad and rejoice forever
in what I am creating,
for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy
and its people as a delight.**

God created the original heavens and earth in the beginning. The symbol of God's good creation was Eden. Adam and Eve sinned in the garden paradise of Eden and were banished from Eden. They could not go back to Eden through the way they left it. The story of the Bible is essentially about the long and winding journey of redemption back to an Eden-like paradise, which is pictured at the end of the Book of Revelation. The vision in Revelation is of a new heaven, a new earth, and a new Jerusalem. Our scripture in Isaiah is where the seeds of this vision are introduced.

Isaiah's announcement that God intends to create new heavens and a new earth constitutes the promise of a new creation. Consider the magnitude of this divine new beginning. It will amount to a new beginning that is so complete that the former things will no longer be remembered or even come to mind. The "former things" include the ways God's original creation was marred through sin and its consequences. This is what will no longer be remembered or even come to my mind. Imagine waking up in the new creation as if from a

nightmare and discovering that the reality in which one lives is in God's grace and unconditional love and complete delight in you.

What does it mean to create Jerusalem as a joy and its people as a delight? The new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God at the end of Revelation is a picture of the Church. What would the original audience have heard? How would they think this picture of a new Jerusalem applied to them? It would have represented the restoration of their spiritual home and all that meant in terms of their spiritual identity, their sense of belonging, and the quality of their life together as God's people. It includes the renewed faithfulness of God's people. This vision includes the gladness and the eternal joy of God's people, as well as the sense of delight this brings to the heart of God concerning his people.

Notice the tenses and timing in verses 17 and 18. Our joyful response is in what is *about* to happen and in what God *is creating*. God is creating God's preferred future—what should have been from the beginning. What should have been *will someday be* with God's leading. In the meantime, there is a sense in which God is already creating the new reality. The vision tells us what God wants us to see even in the midst of sin, evil, and suffering. God is creating God's preferred future in the heart and lives of his people. The vision of what *will be* tells us what *could be now* when we live as faithful and obedient subjects in God's reign.

I love the affirmation of faith from The United Church of Canada that is included in the United Methodist Hymnal. It affirms that we are not alone, that the world in which we live belongs to God, that God is still creating it, and God has called the Church to be involved.

We are not alone; we live in God's world.

We believe in God:

who has created and is creating,
who has come in Jesus, the Word made flesh,
to reconcile and make new,
who works in us and others by the Spirit.

We trust in God.

We are called to be the Church:

to celebrate God's presence,
to love and serve others,
to seek justice and resist evil,
to proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen,
our judge and our hope.

In life, in death, in life beyond death,

God is with us.

We are not alone.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

What does it mean to you that the God who created it all is still creating? What is God still creating? How is God calling the Church to be involved? How is God calling you, personally, to be involved?

The Removal of the Death-Dealing Curses Plaguing the Human Family

In Genesis, when Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of Eden, there were far-reaching consequences. The Lord told Adam and Eve that if they ate the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil they would die. The serpent enticed Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit, saying that they surely would not die, which

was a half-truth of the worst kind. It is true that they did not die immediately, but their mortal nature became a prominent feature of their lives.

According to Genesis 3, the serpent became a snake whose offspring would forever present a mortal danger to humans and their children. Childbirth would be greatly complicated resulting not only in severe pain, but also introducing the specter of infant mortality and the emotional suffering associated with that. The ground was cursed so that thorns and thistles grew in the fields that Adam farmed to provide food for his family. This introduced toil into his life's vocation along with the constant threat in the generations to come of pestilence, famine, and starvation.

Also, shame and blame, with all of their death-dealing effects, were introduced into the relationship between Adam and Eve and God. Their son, Cain, killed his brother, Abel. Disproportionate vengeance killing quickly became the norm until God had to make the difficult decision to start the human race over again with Noah and his family. Beginning with Abraham and Sarah, God began his grand plan of redemption.

Remembering the curse that accompanied the fall of humankind helps us take in the full weight of the gracious announcement contained in the next verses of this vision.

**19 I will rejoice in Jerusalem
and delight in my people;
no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it
or the cry of distress.
20 No more shall there be in it
an infant who lives but a few days
or an old person who does not live out a lifetime,
for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth,
and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed.**

Notice how the effects of the fall are removed in the new creation, the new Jerusalem, God's divine new beginning. This vision foresees what lies at the end of the long road of redemption. It shows what it looks like when God's reign has spread completely throughout all facets of life. Infant mortality is a thing of the past. An incredibly long life will be the norm. All the death-dealing effects of sin will be removed to the extent that the sound of weeping will no longer be heard throughout God's righteous reign.

The vision next moves to a world without war and conflict.

**21 They shall build houses and inhabit them;
they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.
22 They shall not build and another inhabit;
they shall not plant and another eat,
for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be,
and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.
23 They shall not labor in vain
or bear children for calamity,
for they shall be offspring blessed by the LORD—
and their descendants as well.**

When war and conflict plague a nation as much as it did Israel and Judah, the words in verses 21 through 23 would speak volumes to God's people. How many times throughout the centuries had generations of God's people built houses and planted vineyards only for a foreign nation to come and displace them through war?

War not only creates refugees, homelessness, and starvation, it wipes away the accumulated results of the work of one's hands. It means you never get to build something or plant something that you get to enjoy.

When a husband and wife consent to marry and to bring children into the world, they do not do so in order to bring them into a world of war and homelessness. Yet, numerous generations of God's people bore children only for war to come at the absolute worst time.

Think of the mental anguish associated with this experience. Think of the shared psychic memory of a people who had endured so much over spans of generations. Now, think of the impact of an announcement where all of this hardship is removed when God's reign spreads over and permeates through all. When the pall of war and oppression is lifted, will that not be a sign of a new creation?

People do not mind working with their hands when they are assured that their labors will be blessed. The first vocation given to humankind was when God commanded Adam to till and keep the earth. God gave this calling when Eden was perfect and before Adam had sinned with all of its devastating effects. In God's reign, all members of the human family have a role to play, but it makes all the difference in the world when they get to enjoy the fruits of their labors. They build houses that they get to inhabit and share. They get to plant vineyards and enjoy the fruits of their labors and share them. They bring children into a world where the specter of war and oppression has totally been lifted and removed.

Make no mistake, God is the Creator of the universe. God created the universe and is still creating. In the sense, though, that God gives us work to do alongside him, we can be said to be co-creators in the reign of God. We still live in a world with sin, conflict, and much evidence of oppression, but God invites us to work with him as subjects within his reign.

Isn't it great to know that "we are not alone" and that "we live in God's world"? We believe in a God who has not only created but is still creating. We also believe in a Ruler who is not like an absentee landlord. The God whom we worship and serve "has come in Jesus, the Word made flesh, to reconcile and make new." The amazing thing is that the Word made flesh "works in us and others by the Spirit." Therefore, "we trust in God." In the world, "we are called to be the Church." Together, we "celebrate God's presence, love and serve others, seek justice and resist evil." We acknowledge and affirm our mighty Ally as we "proclaim Jesus, crucified and risen, our judge and our hope." We believe that "in life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us—we are not alone." Thanks be to God. We are Easter people!

What are examples you see of the death-dealing curse of sin? How does your view of the curse change when you practice empathy and widen the spotlight to include all the broken places where people live? What does the statement mean to you that God is not an absentee landlord? How would you persuade a skeptic who sees no evidence of God's involvement in the world?

God's Kingdom of Peace

Whenever we speak of God's peace, God's Shalom, we are talking not just about the absence of war and conflict, we are also talking about the presence of complete well-being and fulfillment. In other words, we are talking not just about the absence of something but the presence of something. An exercise we might engage in would be to go through today's study and make two columns. Both columns would represent the situation that results when God's reign breaks through into our present lives and when God's reign will one day be complete. In the first column, list what God says we will *not* experience in the reign of God—all the things that steal, kill, and destroy the abundant life God desires for us (John 10:10). In the second column, list all the wonderful things that we *will* experience in the reign of God. Both columns help us envision God's shalom.

God's peace fills the void in your life. Think about your prayer life. Your prayers contain two movements: 1) praise and thanksgiving for things already present in your life because of the Lord, and 2) petitions for God to grant that for which your heart longs to be present or at least present in greater measure. You could say that God's kingdom of peace corresponds to longings of our heart expressed in both praise and prayer. The next verse of our scripture speaks to this:

**24 Before they call I will answer,
while they are yet speaking I will hear.**

Through prayer and praise, we form with our lips and our minds the longings of our heart. We strive to bring form to our thoughts, dreams, and attitudes concerning God's reign. We do this for our own spiritual formation. We do not live in fear, however, that we will miss out if we neglect to include something in our prayers. Before we call out our petitions in prayer, God already knows and answers. As we struggle sometimes to form our words and thoughts, God already hears. The reason is that God's reign responds to the purest longings of our heart.

Think of the Lord's Prayer. It is a kingdom prayer. We address God as our Father who "art in heaven." A kingdom prayer longs for it to be on earth as it is in heaven. To say "hallowed by thy name" is not just a declaration (holy is Your name) but a petition (holy be Your name). If we connect this petition to the words that follow, we are praying for God's name to be holy on earth as it is in heaven. We pray for God's kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven, and for God's will to be on earth as it is in heaven. With these words, we set the context for the rest that follows. We pray for daily bread. We pray for God's forgiveness for our sins, and we link the forgiveness that we desire to receive to the forgiveness we are willing to bestow on those who have sinned against us. Forgiveness, both the forgiveness we receive and the forgiveness we give, is a part of God's shalom. Deliverance from evil is a part of God's reign. When we pray for God's leading to take us away from temptation, we are saying that we join God in doing our part to avoid temptation. In all this, we are praying for God's Shalom to reign over our lives.

The scripture we have been studying culminates with a vision moment unlike any other.

**25 The wolf and the lamb shall feed together;
the lion shall eat straw like the ox,
but the serpent—its food shall be dust!
They shall not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain,
says the LORD.**

This is a vision of God's peaceable kingdom. It is an echo of the 11th chapter of Isaiah. The law of the jungle is replaced with its polar opposite. A picture of mutual assured destruction or self-destruction (eat or be eaten) is replaced with a vision where no breathing creature is eating any other breathing creature. The pronouncement against the serpent goes to the very heart of the curse pronounced in Genesis 3 in the garden of Eden. In the new creation, there is a new beginning—a reverse of the curse.

When God says that they shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, it does not mean that God's reign extends only so far as the boundaries of Mount Zion, or Jerusalem. The new creation extends around the globe. The "holy mountain" is code for the holy center of influence. The goal and extent of God's reign is for God to be "all in all" (1 Corinthians 15:28). Jerusalem figures so large in the story of God's people in the Old Testament because it is the place of influence. In the New Testament, the New Jerusalem stands for the Church. In this vision, God is calling his Church to be an influence in the Reign of God.

This reminds me of the song "Let There Be Peace on Earth," which was written by Jill Jackson-Miller and Sy Miller in 1955. It was initially written for and sung by an international children's choir to promote peace among nations. The song had personal meaning for Jill Jackson-Miller, who had been suicidal after the failure of her former marriage. She later revealed that she wrote the song after discovering what she called the "life-saving joy of God's peace and unconditional love." The words that stand out in this song is the refrain that says, "let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me."

This is what God is calling us to do. Visions are meant to energize the recipients of the vision. We see what God wants. We believe that in the end, God gets what God wants. God wants us to want what God wants. We work with God believing that God will make our efforts worth it. In the case of peace, if peace begins with me, I can live in place of peace even while the world around me is in a state of chaos. If I am in a state of peace, this will get noticed by the people in my orbit. I can be a person of influence. I can cause ripples, which affect the people around me. If they buy in, they cause ripples still further out. This is how movements of the Spirit happen and how they are sustained.

When you made the two columns mentioned above, what is it easier to list the soul-killing things that will not be in the reign of God or easier to list the wonderful things that will be in the reign of God? How is the balance in your prayer life between your praises and your petitions? Can you think of times when you did something good that caused a ripple, and the people who were affected, in turn, caused a ripple? How is God inviting you to be a part of the change you want to see in the world?

Prayer

Creator God, who is still creating; help us see what you are creating, that we might be a part of it and inspire others, through 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.



Faith and the Scientific Senses: Awe

By Bishop R. Lawson Bryan

Because I believe science can be a resource for the Christian faith, it was fascinating to me to learn that scientists have developed a tool to measure "awe." The Bible is filled with stories of men and women experiencing awe as a response to God's presence: Moses and the burning bush; Isaiah in the temple; Mary at the annunciation; the Samaritan woman at the well; and Peter after the great catch of fish. Many of the Psalms (8, 19, 65, 66, 139) express a sense of awe toward God: "the whole earth is filled with awe at your wonders" (Psalm 65:8). In its description of the early Christian Church the Acts of the Apostles includes this line, "Awe came upon everyone...." But how can such an experience be studied scientifically?

Researchers from Johns Hopkins University applied "factor analysis" to the answers of hundreds of questions about experiences of awe, which allowed them to create a psychometric scale to rate these kinds of experiences. This research was published in 2018 in *The Journal of Positive Psychology*.

The abstract describing the research says:

Awe is a complex emotion composed of an appraisal of vastness and a need for accommodation. The purpose of this study was to develop a robust state measure of awe, the Awe Experience Scale (AWE-S), based on the extant experimental literature. In study 1, participants (N = 501) wrote about an intense moment of awe that they had experienced and then completed a survey about their experience.

The study of these responses resulted in the identification of six factors that were consistently present in the hundreds of descriptions of awe. Those factors are:

1. altered time perception
2. perceived vastness
3. self-diminishment
4. physical sensations
5. sense of connectedness
6. need for accommodation

The Awe Experience Scale, or AWE-S, gives those of us working in the laboratory of the church a way to engage more deeply with experiences of awe, both in the Bible and in our own lives.

Awe is the best way I know to describe my own experience of science. I remember feeling a sense of awe when I learned basic scientific concepts and performed rudimentary experiments as early as junior high school. In subsequent years, the study of biology, chemistry, and physics led me to an increasing sense of awe and wonder at the operation of the universe on both the microscopic and macroscopic levels. To this day I am awestruck that sodium (Na) and chloride (Cl) combine to make salt. How can that be? Why should it be? And then there is the microscope. I remember looking at a single cell under a microscope. You could never see this cell with your unaided eye; but it is there. Not only that, the microscopic cell itself contains structures: a nucleus, mitochondria, and other cellular material. It seemed to me that there is a universe within a single cell, and that led to awe at the wonders occurring beyond the range of ordinary human vision.

In the study of botany I was again filled with a sense of awe as I learned about the energy factory that operates in every common plant. Astronomy challenged me to lift my vision to the sky and be awestruck by the magnitude of the universe and the dependable operation of the laws of the universe. Through the sciences, I came to experience what the German theologian Rudolph Otto has called “a sense of the holy” (Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*).

Science has had an evangelistic effect on my life by pointing me to the reality of a power behind the universe that is far greater than human power. The test tubes and experiments did not reduce life to a bunch of chemicals. Rather, the study of science gave me a sense of the holy that is all around us; such awareness leads to a sense of awe. I find that the six factors of the AWE Scale describe my own experience of awe through scientific study.

Awe has long been part of the vocabulary of science. Many scientists are people of faith whose awe-filled sense of the holy in life drives them to want to learn more about the world and how it works. Isaac Newton, the father of classical physics and the inventor of calculus, was a Bible scholar. Gregor Mendel, father of the science of genetics, was a Catholic monk. In his book, *The Language of God*, Francis Collins speaks of the awe he has for the DNA molecule that carries the genetic information of our bodies. “As a chemist, knowing how extraordinary the qualities of DNA really are, I am in awe of this molecule. Let me try to explain just how elegant DNA really is” (101). He ends his description of DNA and how it works in our cells with “how marvelous and intricate life turns out to be!” (35) In the elegance of DNA, he says, he is more in awe of God

than ever before. Collins also connects his scientific experience of awe with other experiences of awe much earlier in his life.

As a boy of ten, I recall being transported by the experience of looking through a telescope...on a...field at our farm, when I sensed the vastness of the universe. At fifteen, I recall a Christmas eve where the descant on a particularly beautiful Christmas carol, rising sweet and true above the more familiar tune, left me with a sense of unexpected awe and a longing for something I could not name.

*More recently, for a scientist who occasionally is given the remarkable privilege of discovering something not previously known by man, there is a special kind of joy associated with such flashes of insight. Having perceived a glimmer of scientific truth, I find at once both a sense of satisfaction and a longing to understand some even greater truth. In such a moment, science becomes more than a process of discovery. It transports the scientist into an experience that defies a completely naturalistic explanation. (Collins, *The Language of God*, 36)*

And it is in that context that he then asks, quoting Annie Dillard, “What is the difference between a cathedral and a physics lab?” (Collins, 39)

Both inspire in us a sense of awe and the humble awareness that behind the observable universe there is a power much greater than ourselves. When this experience of awe is mediated to us through the study of science we can reply to Francis Collins’ question by saying there is no difference between a cathedral and a physics lab. We can find a sense of the holy in both places.

Why is the experience of awe so important to each of us? One excellent understanding of its importance is provided by seminary professor and Christian minister Craig Barnes: “We are dominated by an exaggerated sense of the self. We worry about my life, my kids, my health, my future, and when we’re stuck in traffic we ask, Why me?” Then he says: “By the time we make it to the church on Sunday we’re sick and tired of the self and ready to hear a better story, a glorious story revolving around Father, Son and Holy Spirit” (*Christian Century*, 2 Feb 2009, 33). It is this sense of the holy that carries us beyond the narrow limits of self-concern.

While science teaches us that a laboratory can be a cathedral, might it also challenge us to see that a local church can be a laboratory where awe is recognized and encouraged within the life of the Christian disciple and the community of faith. John Wesley, founder of Methodism, thought just that way. Wesley was born in 1703 and died in 1791. As a priest in the Church of England, Wesley was concerned that people were leaving their spiritual lives up to chance, and the vitality of the Anglican church was at low ebb. He loved the church and wanted to be part of its renewal. He realized that a laboratory of renewal was needed, so he started small groups whose members met during the week for Bible study, prayer, and holding each other accountable for committed Christian living. These class meetings, as they were called, functioned as laboratories in which individuals were enabled to encounter the Holy and respond to it in daily life. Because they were so methodical in their meetings and their spiritual practices, these followers of Wesley were mockingly called “method-ists.” Rather than being offended by this term of derision, John Wesley embraced it, and the name Methodist was born.

The men and women who participated in these class meetings were practicing what John Wesley called “experimental religion.” He meant that the class meetings created an interactive environment in which religion was not just discussed; it was experienced first-hand. This led to a tremendous sense of awe among the early Methodists as they marveled at the new power of the Christian faith in their lives. In the class meetings, Wesley provided a laboratory-type structure that gave people what they needed in order to foster continued growth in the faith.

I believe the experience of awe points to the way in which faith and science can be complementary to each other. Faith grows out of a sense of awe and wonder at the Holy that is all around us. Scientific inquiry itself can support faith by inviting us to experience the awe and wonder of the universe. Awe is not something we create; it finds us. It found me in the science laboratory as I marveled at the complexity of nature and the intricate fine tuning of the universe in physics. That same sense of awe found those early Methodists in their class meetings.

The AWE Scale is an invitation to remember the experiential element that John Wesley and those early Methodists brought to the Christian faith. For it is in the experience of the holy that our little lives are lifted into the greatness of God, so that we can say with the poet,

“Our little systems have their day;
they have their day and cease to be.
they are but broken lights of thee;
and thou, O Lord, art more than they.” (Tennyson qtd. in *The Language of God*, 146)

Prayer

Merciful God, accept the praises we offer You this day. Give us the joy of Your salvation, that with glad hearts we may proclaim Your Word so that the sorrowing may be comforted, the faint in heart made strong, the wayward restored to ways of life and peace, and Your saving health be made known to all the world; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

This series offers an experience for how scientific method and practice can become a renewing agent for our life together in Christ. In deploying the virtues of key scientific “senses,” we can discover a fresh resource for discipleship.

Here’s how to use these tools with an Action—Reflection—Action model:

- *First, **Action**: read through this article, together or ahead of time as a group.*
- *Second, **Reflect**: reflect as a group on how this particular “sense” is revealed here, and how you can collectively engage that “sense” in the week ahead.*
- *Third, **Reaction**: more on this step below.*

In this step, we will put this “sense” into action, critically observing at how reductionism operates in our lives individually and in our purpose together in church.

If you have the time/capacity as a group, go somewhere in your community where you can sit together and get an expansive view of your neighborhood. Maybe it is a corner cafe with outdoor seating, a rooftop restaurant overlooking the cityscape, or hilltop just above town where you can see the whole town easily.

As you reflect together, end by asking:

- *Read Isaiah 6:1-8 together. How would you assess this experience on the Awe Experience Scale? What aspects of awe show up in this moment?*
- *How does Isaiah’s experience of awe connect to his call?*
- *Read Luke 5:1-11 together. How would you assess this experience on the Awe Experience Scale? What aspects of awe show up in this moment?*
- *How does Peter’s awe-inspiring experience relate to his understanding of who Jesus is?*
- *How have you experienced awe in your own Christian life and journey?*
- *How do you see awe at work in the life of your church, in worship and formation?*

- *What is one thing you all could take on or change in the church's life to bring more awareness to awe?*

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Conference Happenings

2023 Lay Servant Ministries & Certified Lay Ministry

Check out the [dates & registration for the 2023 classes](#).

Annual Conference Session – June 4-6

The 2023 South Georgia Annual Conference session will be held Sunday, June 4, 2023, through Tuesday, June 6, 2023. The conference theme will be: *When They Prayed*, based on Act 4:31. [Click here for full Annual Conference details](#).

SUMMER CAMP!!

Camp Connect, the camping ministry of the South Georgia Conference, gives children and youth from rising 4th grade through rising seniors in high school the opportunity to spend a week away from normal everyday life in the beauty of God's creation. Diving into scripture and sharing life stories will show campers they are created in God's image and for a purpose.

Five camps are scheduled for the summer; one week for high school students; two weeks for middle school students and two weeks for elementary students. Held at Epworth By The Sea on St. Simons Island, the week-long camps run from June 12 through July 21.

Our prayer is that every camper will have the opportunity to encounter Christ in a powerful, life-changing way during their week at camp! For more information, visit www.campconnectumc.org.

Immersion Certified Lay Ministry Class set for June 19-23

The Office of Connectional Ministries is excited to announce a summer week-long immersion class June 19-23, 2023, at St. Simons United Methodist Church. This course is designed to dig into the basics of ministry, including worship, discipleship, preaching, leadership, pastoral care, and so much more. This is a great time for leaders who don't have extended time during the year to join together for a quick and thorough walk through of the materials. To learn more or register for this event, visit www.sgaumc.org/certifiedlayministrytraining. For questions, contact Anne Bosarge at abosarge@sgaumc.com.

2023 United Women in Faith Mission u – July 14-16

Each year, United Women in Faith members and friends prepare for faithful living and action by engaging in transformative educational experiences at its annual Mission u retreat. This year's retreat is set for July 14-16, 2023, at Epworth By The Sea on St. Simons Island. Mission u is centered around curricula designed to motivate, inform, and enrich the UWF's commitment to global ministry. [Click here to register and learn more](#).

2023 Georgia Pastors School – July 17-20

Georgia Pastors School is set for July 17-20, 2023, at Epworth by the Sea on St. Simons Island. This spiritual formation event for pastors will feature Rev. Juanita Rasmus, co-pastor of St. John's United Methodist Church in Houston, TX, and Johnny Sears from The Upper Room as this year's teachers. To register and for more information, visit www.georgiapastorsschool.org.

Reset Cohorts - 2023-2024

Do you remember how church used to be? Do you talk about going back to the way things were before the pandemic? Or do your “good old days” go even further back than that? Maybe you’d rather go back to what church was like 40 years ago when you regularly added new members and your Wednesday night dinners were the talk of the town. It’s good to remember what was, but only if that reflection leads you toward resetting your energy and resources toward your mission. The Office of Connectional Ministries is gearing up for year 2 of its "Reset Cohort." In this 7-month cohort, clergy and laity will spend time refocusing on the mission to which we’ve been called, “Making disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.” If you’re longing for more than a return to the “good old days” and are ready to reset your church for missional engagement, Gospel energy, and a passion for people, this cohort is for you! [Learn more and register](#)

Lay Planter’s Training - Fall 2023

Here in South Georgia, we are seizing the opportunity to start new things for new people in new places. We are seeing a resurgence of grassroots efforts among our laity to dive deeply into disciple-making using new models for church planting like home churches, fresh expressions and more. Can you imagine what it will be like in a few years when laity across the conference will be engaged in leading discipleship efforts across the conference? These discipleship groups and home churches will be able to meet in all kinds of places, made up of all kinds of people. Coming up on July 22, we will have an informational zoom session to find out more about an online Lay Planter’s Course we will be offering this Fall to interested laity. Coming to the meeting doesn’t commit you to the course; it’s an opportunity to hear more about it. [Learn more](#)



Retired Clergy Birthdays – June 2023

- 6/02 – Jan Durham: 103 Willeford Dr.; Savannah, GA 31411
- 6/03 – Cindy Garrard: PO Box 39; Midland, GA 31820
- 6/04 – Frank Parr: 24 Wylly Ave.; Savannah, GA 31406
- 6/05 – Pam France: 41 Holsteiner Lane; Dallas, GA 30132
- 6/06 – W. Raymond Wilder, Jr.: 2001 South Lee St.; Americus, GA 31709
- 6/06 – Sandra Wilson: 4657 Twin Oak Dr.; Macon, GA 31210
- 6/08 – Marcia Cochran: 344 Stone Mill Dr.; Brunswick, GA 31520
- 6/09 – Whit Kirkland: 551 Kirkland Dr.; Byron, GA 31008
- 6/09 – Matt Woodbery: Box 4028; APO AE 09096
- 6/10 – Bill Huddle: 5310 Winding Lakes Dr.; Cumming, GA 30028
- 6/15 – Mira Barrett: 433 Paul St.; Portal, GA 30450
- 6/15 – Stephen Webb: 260 Riverchase Dr.; Bainbridge, GA 39819
- 6/17 – Charles Cravey: 6500 Clito Rd.; Statesboro, GA 30461
- 6/17 – William Harris: 111 Ingham St.; St. Simons Island, GA 31522
- 6/17 – Heyward Hiers: PO Box 187; Berlin, GA 31722
- 6/18 – Leland Collins: 130 Surrey Place; Perry, GA 31069
- 6/20 – Saunders Pinckard: PO Box 6555; Americus, GA 31709
- 6/20 – Jim Rush: 160 University Park Dr.; Homewood, AL 35209
- 6/21 – Nancy Lee Cater: PO Box 8547; Warner Robins, GA 31095
- 6/21 – Lonzie Wester: 2616 Winchester Rd.; Waycross, GA 31501
- 6/23 – Sue Diebolt: 2006 Waverly Ct.; Lancaster, SC 29720
- 6/23 – Don King: 140 Long Pines Circle; East Dublin, GA 31027
- 6/24 – Doug Harvey: 5109 River Rd.; Jakin, GA 39861

6/24 – Jack Knight: 255 Cross Country Chase; Stokesdale, NC 27357
6/24 – Benjy Varnell: 100 Militia Hill Way; St. Simons Island, GA 31522
6/25 – Russ Elkins: 104 Oak Dr.; Adel, GA 31620
6/25 – Jim Emery: 3855 Dennis Creek Rd.; Talbotton, GA 31827
6/26 – C. Graton Helms: PO Box 4476; Eastman, GA 31023
6/26 – Tom Johnson: PO Box 1202; Pine Mountain, GA 31822
6/27 – Bill Strickland: PO Box 355; Portal, GA 30450
6/28 – Ethan Strom: 384 Midnight Cypress Dr.; Winter Haven, FL 33881
6/29 – Nancy Scarbrough: 1345 Hardeman Ave. #239; Macon, GA 31201
6/30 – Sally Flowers: 507 Sunnymeade Dr.; Valdosta, GA 31605



Scripture Readings – June 1 edition

June 4

Trinity Sunday, Year A

- [Genesis 1:1-2:4](#)
- [Psalm 8](#)
- [2 Corinthians 13:11-13](#)
- [Matthew 28:16-20](#)

June 11

Second Sunday after Pentecost, Year A

- [Genesis 12:1-9](#)
- [Psalm 33:1-12](#)
- [Romans 4:13-25](#)
- [Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26](#)

June 18

Third Sunday after Pentecost, Year A

- [Genesis 18:1-15; 21:1-7](#)
- [Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19](#)
- [Romans 5:1-8](#)
- [Matthew 9:35-10:8 \(9-23\)](#)

June 25

Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A

- [Genesis 21:8-21](#)
- [Psalm 86:1-10, 16-17](#)
- [Romans 6:1-11](#)
- [Matthew 10:24-39](#)