

## **SOUTH GEORGIA ADVOCATE – DECEMBER EDITION**

### **A Christmas Message from the Bishop: A time of waiting**

Greetings to my brothers and sisters in the South Georgia Conference.

Here we are just about to conclude another year, and 2024 is upon us. It seems like ever since Covid came on the scene we've been waiting. We waited to get through Covid. We have been waiting for a General Conference. We have been waiting for so many things in the Annual Conference. We have been waiting for people to make decisions. For all of us, this has been a time of waiting.

Now here we are in December – the Advent season is upon us. I don't want us to miss a moment of waiting on the Christ-child to come. Sometimes we want to move so quickly to Christmas that we miss what God wants to give us in this moment of waiting. We read this all through the scriptures of God's people who sometimes grew impatient, but it was in those moments of waiting that God did wonderful things.

It's been a blessing to serve the Alabama West-Florida and South Georgia Conferences. This is my eighth Christmas with the Alabama West-Florida Conference, and it's my third Christmas with the South Georgia Conference. It really is hard to believe that we've been in this partnership almost three years, and what a blessing it has been for me. I have met so many wonderful people over these many years. I often say that I have more people praying for me than I ever have in my life, and I truly feel the power and the presence of the Lord.

On behalf of Nancy and myself, I want to wish you a blessed Christmas. But, more importantly, it is my prayer that in these moments of waiting during this Advent season that you don't miss a moment of what God is doing in our lives. In the midst of all that's happening in our world, we still believe in the power and the presence of the Holy Spirit that comes, and it came as a Christ-child.

Friends, thank you for all the ways that you have blessed me. I pour blessings upon you and wish you a Merry Christmas.

May we not miss what God is doing in our midst, and may you have a Christ-filled Christmas!

David Graves

**[Watch a video message from Bishop Graves](#)**

.....

### **Baxley area churches come together for a night of music, fellowship, and service**

By Denise Rooks, South Central District Lay Leader

There is no better way to “Count Your Blessings” than spending an evening with sisters and brothers in Christ giving thanks, singing, and praising God together.

On Sunday, November 19, 2023, the United Methodist churches in the Baxley area (Appling County) came together to host a musical community Thanksgiving service. They connected for a night of music, singing,

fellowship, and giving in the Life Center at Baxley First United Methodist Church. All of the area United Methodist churches - Baxley First, Bethel, Graham, Harper Chapel, and Surrency – were represented.

Every church made beautiful music as attendees glorified God. Several local groups - including the praise team from Harper Chapel UMC - shared their music. Also performing were Station #7, Keeping Up with the Jones', and Dr. Neal Lovett. While the groups performed, attendees were treated with a plethora of Christmas cookies, coffee, and hot apple cider. Individuals were also asked to write down what they were grateful for on colorful leaves that were put together to create a Blessing Tree in the Life Center.

A highlight of the evening was being part of an act of giving back to the community. Organizers of the event had recently learned of a need in the community, and just as Jesus reminds us in Matthew 25:31-46 to feed “the least of these” they wanted to offer a way for attendees to give back.

“We collected snacks and donations for the local library to support the after-school programs there,” said Dr. Nita Crump, senior pastor of Baxley First UMC. “The items collected filled the back of a car and included \$188.”

The director of Baxley’s public library was there for the event – even reading a book to the children – and was thankful for the donations and money to help with needs as they arise.

For the churches of Appling County, they were blessed and got to be a blessing to others. It was a night of joy and thanksgiving for the good things God has done in each of their lives, and they were thankful to do good in the lives of others.

"The connection in the UMC is a gift from God, and it reminds each of us that we are not alone and we need each other," said Dr. Paula Lewis, District Superintendent of the South Central and North Central Districts. "It reminds us that we are called to bear one another’s burdens in the body of Christ; that when one of our churches needs help, because we are connectional, we can turn to each other through the connection for that help. But more importantly, it reminds us that the body of Christ is much larger than our local church and that we can do more together than we can individually."



## **South Georgia United Methodists participate in Rural Church Rising conference**

By Rev. Stephanie Smith

Over 80 leaders from across the United States who believe that the rural churches matter came together for the first-ever Rural Church Rising Conference this past October in Florida. Rural Church Rising was filled with three days of learning, connection, and worship.

Stephanie Smith, Agnes McKinney, Lynn Barber, Dorsia Atkinson, and Anne Bosarge – all from South Georgia – were present to learn and listen to the way fresh-expressions are taking root in rural contexts. The rural church was defined loosely as a church in any local area where the population is not urban. While that definition is very loose, 80% of churches in South Georgia are from rural areas.

The presentations at Rural Church Rising shared that we do not need to change ‘the Church,’ nor do we need to invent new ideas; we simply need to reclaim our essence within the established local community. The rural church needs to begin its journey of incarnation in the community where it is located. The people of

God must enter into the particularity of a real place, with real people, with real names, real stories, and real wounds.

And while our rural churches are rooted deeply in a particular place, incarnational ministry calls and inspires us to take a community of the kingdom of God “into the everyday rhythms and spaces where people already do life. Christian communities are forming at the barn, bar, lakeside, local diner, farmers market, and so on. But it’s also forming in telephone conferences, Zoom rooms, and virtual-reality headsets.”

The South Georgia Congregational Development team has named resourcing the Rural Church as a priority for the coming year. There will be additional training, conversations, and listening sessions to focus on the health and development of our small churches.

A few upcoming events to note:

**Small Church Focus: Growing Smaller to Grow Deeper – Jan. 11 & Jan. 12:** Discipleship is the main purpose and calling of the church. The size of the church doesn't change the ultimate calling of the church, but it does often look a little different in the way we approach discipleship. Join in a conversation around discipleship that will help you realize that small churches can grow deeper in discipleship because of the advantage they have over larger churches whose members may not really get to know each other well. Join Anne Smith and Stephanie Smith for a conversation about what discipleship really is and how we can use the size of the small church to your advantage in discipling those God brings into your midst. Two days/times are being offered to give you flexibility and with the hope one will meet your schedule: Thursday, Jan. 11, 6:30-8pm or Friday, Jan. 12, noon-1:30pm. Both will take place via Zoom. If you have questions or need more information, please contact Anne Bosarge at [abosarge@sgaumc.com](mailto:abosarge@sgaumc.com). [Register here](#).

**Small Church Focus: Revisioning and Remissioning for Small Churches – Feb. 8 & Feb. 9:** "The way we've always done things" isn't working anymore, yet it is still the way many churches continue to do things. What is needed to reach people in this day and time and move from a mindset of survive to thrive is a fresh wind of vision and mission. While this is necessary for churches of all sizes, small churches present some unique challenges and advantages when it comes to revisioning and remissioning. Join Anne Bosarge and Jeremy Alexander for a conversation about how to leverage the uniqueness of small churches and begin the journey of reimagining what missional impact will look like for your congregation. Two days/times are being offered to give you flexibility and with the hope one will meet your schedule: Thursday, February 8, 6:30pm-8pm or Friday, February 9, noon-1:30pm. Both will take place via Zoom. If you have questions or need more information, please contact Anne Bosarge at [abosarge@sgaumc.com](mailto:abosarge@sgaumc.com). [Register here](#)

*Rev. Stephanie Smith is the associate pastor at Pittman Park UMC in Statesboro and is working with district and conference communications.*



## **2023 Conference Journal now available**

The 2023 Journal of the South Georgia Annual Conference is now available for purchase. Those wishing to purchase a Conference Journal will order their copy(ies) online directly from the printer. The cost of the Journal is \$25 each plus tax and shipping.

“I am appreciative of the time and effort that our Journal Editor, Rev. Dr. Ted Goshorn, put into this year’s publication,” said Meredyth Earnest, Conference Secretary. “The Journal is our official record of conference ministry, and I am grateful for this and Ted’s many other contributions to our annual conference.”

### Order a 2023 Print Journal

The Conference is using [www.Lulu.com](http://www.Lulu.com), an online print-on-demand publishing company, to print the 2023 Journal of the South Georgia Annual Conference. Orders will be made and processed via their secure website and shipped directly from their facility. [Order the 2023 Journal of the South Georgia Annual Conference.](#)

### Download a 2023 PDF Journal

As in year's past, the Journal is also available as a free PDF download. In response to growing concerns about internet privacy, the electronic version of the Conference Journal has been placed on a password-protected section of our website. This digital version can be found by logging in to the [Church Dashboard](#) or [Extension Ministry Dashboard](#). Every local church has a username and password for their church dashboard. South Georgia lay members and retired clergy not serving a church may obtain a digital copy from their local church.



## **2024 Pre- and Post-General Conference Gatherings announced**

Bishop David Graves, along with the South Georgia Conference Cabinet and Conference Leadership, has announced dates for pre- and post-General Conference clergy lunch gatherings as well as a post-General Conference informational webinar for laity.

The pre-General Conference clergy lunch gatherings are set for the following dates. These gatherings will be a time for Bishop Graves to check in with clergy, offer pastoral support, talk about the timeline for 2024, and provide General Conference and Jurisdictional updates to take back to share with local churches. Registration is now open for these gatherings.

- **January 30** - St. Paul UMC in Columbus at 10 am | [Register now](#)
- **February 1** - Tifton First UMC in Tifton at 10 am | [Register now](#)
- **March 5** - Richmond Hill UMC in Richmond Hill at 10 am | [Register now](#)

The 2024 General Conference will take place April 23 - May 3 in Charlotte, North Carolina. A live stream link will be made available for clergy and laity to view the conference. Regular updates will be made by Bishop Graves and the delegation before, during, and after General Conference.

The post-General Conference clergy lunch gatherings are set for the following dates. These gatherings will be a time for Bishop Graves and members of the delegation to report factual information around any decisions made at General Conference. Registration will be available closer to the dates.

- **May 13** - Tifton First UMC in Tifton at 10 am
- **May 14** - St. Paul UMC in Columbus at 10 am
- **May 23** - Goshen UMC in Rincon at 10 am

A laity webinar has also been scheduled to provide local church lay members with information following General Conference. The date for this webinar is **May 14, 2024**, at 6 pm. Registration information will be available closer to the date.

In addition, Bishop Graves has scheduled the following clergy gatherings and laity webinar in the Alabama West-Florida Conference. These are also open to South Georgia clergy (lunch gatherings) and laity (webinar) if the dates are a better fit for an individual's schedule.

Alabama West-Florida Clergy Gatherings

- February 8 - Providence UMC, Mobile, AL at 10:00 am CST
- February 22 - St. Luke UMC, Enterprise, AL at 10:00 am CST
- February 27 - Montgomery First UMC, Montgomery, AL at 10:00 am CST
- February 29 - Trinity UMC, Ft. Walton, FL at 10:00 am CST
- May 15 - Dothan First UMC, Dothan, AL at 10:00 am CST
- May 16 – Gulf Breeze UMC, Gulf Breeze, FL at 10:00 am CST
- May 20 – Montgomery First UMC, Montgomery, AL at 10:00 am CST
- May 21 – Dauphin Way UMC. Mobile, AL at 10:00 am CST

Alabama West-Florida Laity Webinar

- May 20 - 6 pm CST

“As we continue to focus on making disciples in our local churches, we are also mindful of the important work that will take place in Charlotte this Spring,” said Bishop Graves. “I invite all South Georgia clergy and laity to join me in prayer for our United Methodist Church and for our delegation as they prepare for General Conference 2024. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, may those things of God and each other connect us so we can lean into all God is calling the South Georgia Conference to be today and in the days to come.”



**2023 prayer emphasis: December prayer guide**

The South Georgia Conference is centering itself around prayer in 2023. December’s prayer guide is written by Rev. Teresa Edwards and Mr. Gerald Boyd and is now available at [www.sgaumc.org/year-of-prayer](http://www.sgaumc.org/year-of-prayer).



**December 17 Lesson: The Family of Faith**

**Winter Quarter 2023-2024: Faith That Pleases God**

**Unit 1: Profiles In Faith**

**Sunday School Lesson for the week of December 17, 2023**

**By Jay Harris**

**Lesson Scripture: Matthew 1:1-17**

**Key Verse:** “An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.”  
(Matthew 1:1)

**Lesson Aims**

- To introduce the fact that this profile in faith involves Jesus’ genealogy beginning with Abraham
- To reflect on the titles of Jesus mentioned in our key verse
- To learn about the structure of the genealogy, the way it is reinforced, and its meaning
- To recall God’s promise made to Abraham and his connection to God’s people and to Jesus
- To learn the stories about the women mentioned in the genealogy: Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth

- To recall God’s promise made to David and his connection to the reign of God and to Jesus
- To understand the problems that plagued David’s dynasty that led to the deportation to Babylon
- To learn about the generations from deportation to Jesus and the hope for a Messiah that grew
- To ponder how fitting it is that the New Testament begins with this genealogy

## **Introduction to this Very Unique Profile in Faith**

In this first of three units, we have been looking at various profiles in faith in order to gain insight into our Winter Quarter’s focus: Faith that Pleases God. We first looked at a profile that featured the faith of Ruth, and then we looked at one that featured the faith of David.

This week’s lesson is supposed to continue this focus, but you will notice right away a departure in this particular profile in faith. We are not looking at a *story* of faith, but a *genealogy*. A genealogy is very different from the narratives we have explored. Across the years, I have heard more than one critic of the Bible disparage all the “begats” in the Bible. Their tendency is to gloss over the genealogies. Some even use the genealogies in the Bible as one of their excuses for not reading the Bible, which is of course a lame excuse.

Yet, the Gospel of Matthew, and all of the New Testament, begins with a genealogy. We all know, however, that the number of people doing genealogical research is increasing with new internet-based programs making this kind of research much more accessible to the masses. Even before these tools were available, people have found meaning and deep significance in learning about their family tree.

Still, how are we supposed to connect Jesus’ genealogy with our study of profiles in faith? Presented with the names of over 40 men and five women, we might rightly wonder, “Whose faith are we exploring?” Are we bound to study each of the persons listed in this genealogy and learn each one’s profile in faith?

Perhaps the best way to approach this lesson is to look at this genealogy as a profile in Matthew’s faith and that of his Church. The Early Church then placed Matthew’s gospel first among the four gospels in the New Testament canon. Not only Matthew’s gospel, but also the whole New Testament, begins with the genealogy of Jesus. You could say, then, that the profile in faith we are exploring is the faith of the Early Church. The center of that faith is, obviously, Jesus Christ. We will explore some of the possible meanings that are conveyed in this genealogy and what it says about faith that pleases God.

It should also be noted that the date of this lesson is the Third Sunday of Advent in the liturgical calendar of the Church. Advent is the season in which we prepare to celebrate the coming of the Christ on Christmas Day. Matthew’s genealogy precedes the Nativity story and could even be thought of as part of the Nativity story.

**How have you viewed the genealogies in the Bible up until now? What do you hope to gain in this lesson about Jesus’ genealogy?**

## **The Structure of this Genealogy and its Meaning**

The scripture passage we are studying has two bookends: a statement at the beginning and another statement at the end that connects with the first statement and brings the passage full circle.

<sup>1</sup> **An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.**

There is a lot in this first statement. First, we encounter three titles of Jesus. Jesus is the Messiah, or the Christ. Jesus is the Son of David. And Jesus is the Son of Abraham. Both “Messiah” and “Christ” mean the same thing. “Messiah” comes from the Hebrew, and “Christ” comes from the Greek, but they both mean “anointed.” This title is a statement of belief that Jesus is God’s anointed One. Anointing is associated with the application of oil over the head of a priest who is being ordained or a king who is being coronated. To be God’s anointed One is to be the Priest and King promised by God to bring God’s reign into reality in the world.

“Son of David” and “Son of Abraham” are also important titles. David and Abraham both present important profiles in faith in their own right, but perhaps their greatest connection to Jesus is that both David and Abraham were recipients of a divine promise. Those promises were fulfilled in part during the lifetimes of both Abraham and David, and beyond their lifetimes in the ongoing life of God’s people, Israel. The New Testament Church believed that the greatest fulfillment of both promises occurred in the life, death, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus.

Matthew wants to say in this first statement that the beginning of the gospel of Jesus did not happen in Bethlehem. It began a thousand years earlier in God’s promise to David, and centuries before that in God’s promise to Abraham.

We will see in the next verse that the genealogy presented by Matthew appropriately begins with Abraham. So, this first “bookend” statement in Matthew 1:1 (which is also our key verse) gives us a preview of what is about to follow. The titles “Son of David” and “Son of Abraham” reveal the inspiration for the structure of the genealogy that is to follow.

The “bookend” statement at the other end of our passage, found in verse 17, confirms this. It says, “So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.” The New Testament saw great significance in this three-part recitation of Jesus’ genealogy.

A comparison with the genealogy in Luke’s gospel (yes, there’s one there too) reveals that a few generations seemed to have been skipped in Matthew’s gospel, and we also see that David is counted twice. The symmetry to which Matthew is pointing has less to do with the math, and everything to do with symbolism and significance. The symbolism is meant to affirm the divine continuity between Israel’s story and the Christian story. Matthew’s gospel is perhaps the gospel that goes to the greatest effort to show that the Christian story represents the fulfillment of Israel’s story.

**What have you thought about the meanings of Jesus’ titles as the Messiah, as the Son of Abraham, and as the Son of David? What are you most curious about in these titles?**

### **Father Abraham and the Connection to Jesus**

Occasionally, we will make comparisons between the genealogy in Luke’s gospel (Luke 3:23-38) and the genealogy in our passage in Matthew’s gospel in order to get at the unique meaning found in Matthew’s genealogy. One of the most obvious differences is that Luke’s genealogy starts with Jesus and works back in time, generation by generation, each ancestor being the son of the next ancestor mentioned. Matthew’s genealogy, in contrast, starts with Abraham and goes forward in time, generation by generation, each generation being the father of the next one mentioned.

Luke's gospel goes back in time much earlier than Abraham, earlier than even Noah, to "Adam, son of God." Luke's genealogy emphasizes that Jesus is the Second Adam, the one to reverse the curse brought to humankind by the First Adam. As we mentioned earlier, Matthew's gospel emphasizes that Jesus is the Son of Abraham.

## **<sup>2</sup> Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers,**

The part of the genealogy contained in this verse alone takes us through the Book of Genesis. One of the reasons for the numerous genealogies that are found in the Bible is because genealogies help recall and summarize Israel's journey with God. God's engagement with His people is never just about one generation. The arc of the story between God and his people must be traced through generation after generation. The story of God's people is a grand epic, the source of which is found in the heart of God.

When we recall Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and "Judah and his brothers" in the genealogy, we are recalling the events we read about from Genesis 12 to the end of Genesis. We see each generation come to an understanding of their place in the covenant story that began when God spoke to Abraham, which outlined the covenant that God was making with Abraham and all the generations to follow:

*"Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."* (Genesis 12:1-3)

The willingness of Abraham and Sarah to launch into a strange land and an unknown future while trusting in God to guide them says so much about their faith. The covenant says that if Abraham and Sarah and their descendants trust, obey, and follow God, then they will model a life of faith for all the families with whom they come into contact. This is God's plan to take a people and form them and use them to reach and bless all the families of the earth.

Knowing that Isaac was a "miracle baby" because of Sarah's age and previous inability to conceive is a big part of the story. The stories involving Jacob show us all the twists and turns that the story can take in just one person. We see Jacob's journey from scoundrel to one who wrestled with God and is transformed by all his experiences. Through God's grace and persistence, Jacob is renamed Israel and takes his place in the story of the covenant.

The mention of Judah and his brothers speaks volumes. These are the twelve sons of Jacob who are forever remembered as the heads of the twelve tribes of Israel. Genesis focuses on Joseph more than any other son because of his role in the migration of God's people to Egypt and saving them from famine. Judah, however, is the son whose tribe eventually emerges as the most prominent tribe in the story of God's people—the land in which Jerusalem will be located. Also, it is Judah's line from which Jesus will come after many generations.

**How does the mention of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the twelve sons of Jacob help you recall the foundational stories of God's people? What do you remember the most from this part of the story of the Covenant People?**

## **The Women Mentioned in the Genealogy**



Like many genealogies in the Bible, the focus is on the fathers, the “patriarchs.” So, when mothers are mentioned, as they are in several places in the genealogy, it is particularly noteworthy. The first of these women is Tamar. The story of how Perez was born to Judah by Tamar is found in Genesis 38.

**<sup>3</sup> and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, <sup>4</sup> and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon,**

Before Perez came, Judah and Shua gave birth to three sons: Er, then Onan, then Shelah. Tamar first enters the story as Judah’s daughter-in-law after being married to the eldest son of Judah, Er. Er did what was wicked in God’s sight, and died. Judah told the next eldest son, Onan, to marry his brother’s widow, Tamar, and when Onan refused, Onan died. Judah intended for the third son in line, Shelah, to be married to Tamar, but Shelah was not old enough yet to become a father.

Judah worried that history might repeat itself and put Tamar in a kind of exile until Shelah was old enough to marry, as if Tamar had something to do with the death of his first two sons. When Shelah got old enough, Judah seemed to have forgotten about Tamar, which left Tamar unmarried and vulnerable in terms of her welfare. Tamar felt forced to take matters into her own hands and took off her widow’s garments and stood at a certain street corner with her face veiled.

Judah, thinking her to be a prostitute, propositioned Tamar, not knowing who she was. Before Tamar consented, she required payment. He promised to give her a goat from his flock. Tamar required a pledge until the goat could be delivered. She asked specifically for Judah’s signet, cord, and staff. He consented, and after they had relations, they parted ways with Judah never knowing the woman was Tamar. Tamar went back to wearing her widow’s garments. When Judah sent the promised goat by his servant, the servant could not determine where it was to be delivered because no one knew who this prostitute would have been.

Three months later, it became known that Tamar was pregnant, which had been her goal in order to guarantee her welfare, since she had been forgotten. Word got back to Judah, however, that his daughter-in-law, Tamar, had become a prostitute and had gotten pregnant. He ordered that Tamar be burned not thinking for a moment that he had anything to do with it. When Tamar was being brought out, she produced Judah’s signet, cord, and staff and said that their owner was the one who made her pregnant. Producing these items saved her life. Judah realized those items had belonged to him and acknowledged that he was the one who made Tamar pregnant. Judah also acknowledged that he had put Tamar in the position to do what she did. He said, “She is more in the right than I, since I did not give her to my son Shelah.”

We might question why Tamar had to be mentioned at all in this genealogy since the patriarchal lineage of Jesus seems to be its overall focus. Matthew’s genealogy seems quite willing to expose the parts of Jesus’ family tree that appear to be touched by scandal. Tamar used deception, but Judah admitted that she was more in the right because his negligence and abandonment of Tamar forced her to do what she did. The scandal was on Judah. Perhaps the lesson in the mention of Tamar is that God’s mission has unfolded undeterred despite occasional scandals along the way. What could be construed as potential detours along the way were never detours at all because God’s mission is intended to be redemptive in nature from beginning to end. It involves people who are far from perfect. The scandalous parts along the way remind us of this.

**<sup>5</sup> and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, <sup>6</sup> and Jesse the father of King David.**

The mention of Rahab and Ruth among Jesus’ ancestors is also notable. Rahab was none other than the Canaanite prostitute in Jericho who saved the lives of Joshua’s two spies by hiding them on her roof. The king of Jericho and his men knew the men had entered her house, but Rahab lied to the king and told him

that she did not know who they were and that they had already left. After the king and his men left, she went to the two men she was hiding and told them that the reputation of their Lord had preceded them. She believed that the Lord of the Israelites was the one true God of heaven and earth, and her people knew they did not stand a chance. She promised to help them escape and keep their visit a secret in exchange for sparing the lives of her and her family. They made a promise to her and worked out a plan. When the Israelites came to bring down Jericho, they fulfilled their promise to Rahab and her family.

Matthew's genealogy provides us with an important postscript to the story of Rahab. The Canaanite woman, Rahab, left her former occupation and eventually married into God's people. She married Salmon and they became the parents of Boaz. We learned about Boaz a couple of lessons ago in the story of Ruth. We learned how Boaz fell in love with Ruth, the Moabite woman who had so unselfishly devoted herself to her mother-in-law Naomi and Naomi's God. In this way, Ruth also was incorporated into God's people. Little did either Rahab or Ruth, both foreigners, know that from their line would come King David just a few generations after them.

**What is most notable to you about the stories of Tamar, Rahab, and Ruth and their inclusion in the line that led to David and eventually led to Jesus? What significance does this lend to the story of humankind's redemption? What do you think the inclusion of these women said to the New Testament Church?**

### **King David and the Promise God Made to Him**

We know that the opening verse of Matthew's gospel proclaims Jesus to be the Son of David. Additionally, the way that the genealogy is structured also gives David a prominent place in the list of the generations. This is partly due to David's faith. We looked at a profile in faith in the life of David in the last lesson—when his faith in God gave him the courage to take on Goliath and slay him. There are numerous other stories that show us David's passionate devotion to God.

We should remember, however, that the greatness of David did not come from David himself. After all, David was far from perfect. The greatness of David comes mostly from the great promise that God made to David in 2 Samuel 7.

*<sup>12</sup> "When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. <sup>13</sup> He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. <sup>14</sup> I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me. When he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings. <sup>15</sup> But I will not take my steadfast love from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. <sup>16</sup> Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever."*

The offspring of David mentioned in God's promise was David's son, Solomon. It is the last line in the passage just quoted that should receive our greatest attention. God was making the promise that David's throne was to be established forever.

**Why do you think God would make such a promise? What is the significance of an everlasting reign? What connections do you think God was making to God's own eternal reign? Why would God make such a connection between God's own reign and the reign of David and his line?**

### **From David to the Exile**

The genealogy takes a turn in this grouping of generations from David to the Exile. This part of the genealogy reveals the royal line among Jesus' ancestors when God's people were ruled by kings.

**And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah,<sup>7</sup> and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph,<sup>8</sup> and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah,<sup>9</sup> and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah,<sup>10</sup> and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah,<sup>11</sup> and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.**

Notice that Matthew's genealogy makes the astounding choice to mention that Solomon came from the union of David and "the wife of Uriah." David had Uriah killed by having him put on the front line in battle, all to cover up David's affair with Uriah's wife, Bathsheba. As we have already discovered, Matthew's genealogy is not afraid to air Israel's "dirty laundry."

History tells us in 1 Kings 11 that Solomon, for all his wisdom, committed the sin of apostasy by worshiping the gods of the foreign women he married. In the next generation, the foolish grandstanding of Solomon's son Rehoboam resulted in the division of the kingdom and the loss of the ten northern tribes of Israel. Rehoboam and his descendants served as the kings of the southern kingdom, Judah.

The Old Testament gives us a report on each of these kings and whether they did what was good or evil in the sight of the Lord, and those who did what was evil outnumber the ones who did good. The evil that the kings did was to worship idols. The good kings were those who were remembered for having "walked in the way of their father David." Despite David's shortcomings, his steadfast faith and passionate devotion to God was the standard by which other kings were measured.

Two of the good kings, Hezekiah and Josiah, deserve special mention because they were reformers during their reigns. They tore down the worship centers devoted to idol worship and helped bring God's people back into a faithful relationship with God. Unfortunately, the reigns of the kings who followed them did not walk in their way. In Matthew's genealogy, it was not necessary to reiterate the record of each king, because everyone would remember that these generations led eventually to the deportation of God's people into a 70-year exile in Babylon.

The deportation of God's people marks the end of their existence as an independent, sovereign nation. Jewish independence ended when they were conquered by the Babylonian army. Although they did not remain under Babylonian rule after the Exile, they remained under the rule of subsequent empires, including the Persian, Greek, and Roman empires, in that order. During this time, they were granted very limited self-rule, but they had to uphold their allegiance to the ruling empire. All this means that, after the deportation, David's royal dynasty came to an end, though his descendants continued.

### **From the Deportation to Jesus**

Although the existence of God's people as an independent, sovereign nation ended with the deportation, it is important to remember that they will continue to exist as a people after the deportation. So, Israel's story will continue. The generations will continue. The descendants will continue to be listed, but they no longer represent a royal dynasty. We know that their listing is very important because they provide the links between David and Jesus.

Before we move on, let's ponder a question. What about God's promise that David's kingdom and throne would be established forever? This is no doubt a question God's people would ponder. When David knew his time on earth was ending, he sat down with his son Solomon and reminded him of the promise. The Lord had said to David, *"If your heirs take heed to their way, to walk before me in faithfulness with all their heart and with all their soul, there shall not fail you a successor on the throne of Israel."* (1 Kings 2:4) In other words, there was a conditional nature to this promise. God's people had clearly not upheld their side of the covenant. They had not remained faithful.

Yet, God's people knew that God remains faithful even when we are not faithful. They believed that somehow God would raise up God's anointed One. They were not wrong to think this way. They kept their hope alive in their belief in a coming Messiah or Christ. The prophets, speaking for God, kept this hope alive. Think of this as we recall the generations between the deportation and Jesus.

**<sup>12</sup> And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Salathiel, and Salathiel the father of Zerubbabel, <sup>13</sup> and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, <sup>14</sup> and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, <sup>15</sup> and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, <sup>16</sup> and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, who bore Jesus, who is called the Messiah.**

This group of Jesus' ancestors takes us through the years of exile, through the years of the return of God's people to their homeland from exile, and through the years of rebuilding from the ruins of Judea and Jerusalem. David's descendant, Zerubbabel, played a significant role in the rebuilding and restoration of God's people as a provincial governor. The descendants after Zerubabel until Joseph cover the silent period between the close of the Old Testament and the opening of the New Testament.

One of the features that stands out in this part of the genealogy is the difference between the genealogy in Matthew and the one in Luke. Most notably, the genealogy in Matthew proceeds from David through Solomon, and in Luke, it proceeds through David's son, Nathan. Perhaps, this can best be explained by the fact that Matthew emphasizes Joseph's line and Luke seems to emphasize Mary's line, just as Matthew emphasizes Joseph's role in the nativity of Jesus, and Luke emphasizes Mary's role.

Why would Matthew emphasize Joseph's place in the genealogy, when Joseph was the adoptive father of Jesus and not his biological father? Perhaps this was Matthew's tribute to Joseph and the fatherly role he could have chosen not to fulfill but lovingly decided to fulfill. Perhaps it was because Joseph's line traces back to the royal lineage that proceeded from David, unlike the line traced in Luke's genealogy. Jesus' connection to David through the kings of Judah is something Matthew would want to emphasize to show us that Jesus is the fulfillment of the covenant made first to Abraham and then to David.

**<sup>17</sup> So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.**

Reflect on the beautiful way that Matthew makes his case in this genealogy: Jesus is the Son of David and the Son Abraham. Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah. Jesus is the Christ. In a very succinct way Matthew begins his gospel showing that Israel's story culminates in the story of Jesus and the New Testament Church. The Church fathers who put together the New Testament canon put Matthew's gospel first in the order because Matthew's genealogy really is the most fitting way to begin the gospel of Jesus.

**As you reflect on how far we have come in this genealogy, what themes stand out to you the most? How do you sense Old Testament longings being fulfilled in the coming of Christ in the New**

**Testament? What newfound connections do you make through this genealogy between Christ and Abraham or David or any of the others mentioned in the list? What do you think of Matthew’s choice to begin the gospel of Jesus in this way?**

**Prayer**

God of the ages, who has authored the grand story of our redemption from generation to generation, help us to prepare in this Advent Season to receive the news of the birth of the Christ anew, that we may give more of ourselves to more of Christ that we come to understand, through Christ our Lord, who reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, One God, now and forever, Amen.

*Dr. Jay Harris serves as the Superintendent of Clergy and District Services for the South Georgia Conference. Email him at [jharris@sgaumc.com](mailto:jharris@sgaumc.com). Find his plot-driven guide to reading the Bible, the “Layered Bible Journey,” at [www.layeredbiblejourney.com](http://www.layeredbiblejourney.com).*



**December 24 Lesson: Expectant Mothers’ Faith**

**Winter Quarter 2023-2024: Faith That Pleases God**

**Unit 1: Profiles In Faith**

**Sunday School Lesson for the week of December 24, 2023**

**By Jay Harris**

**Lesson Scripture: Luke 1:36-45, 56**

**Key Text:** *When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb”. (Luke 1:41-42)*

**Lesson Aims**

- To introduce Elizabeth, her news, and the experience of expectant mothers shaping their faith
- To introduce Mary and Gabriel’s news about the child she was to bring forth into the world
- To ponder the significance of Mary being told that her relative Elizabeth was also pregnant
- To wonder at the reasons why Mary went with haste to visit Elizabeth
- To recall the details of the meeting between Mary and Elizabeth and what they foreshadowed
- To reflect on God’s favor and the response we are called to make
- To contemplate the themes of Advent that resonate with the faith of expectant mothers

**Introduction to Elizabeth and this Lesson’s Theme**

The theme of the Winter Quarter is “Faith that Pleases God.” The theme of the first unit is “Profiles in Faith.” For today’s lesson, there are not one but two subjects that make up this particular profile in faith. The two subjects are Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Elizabeth, her relative. The title of this lesson is “Expectant Mothers’ Faith.” The idea is that these two particular expectant mothers exhibit something special about the nature of faith because of their unique situation. Yet, this special quality of faith can be translated in ways to any believer’s faith.

In the liturgical calendar of the Church, we are in the season of Advent. In fact, the date of today's lesson is the Fourth Sunday in Advent, which also happens to fall this year on Christmas Eve. There are connections we can make between the season of Advent and this theme of expectant mothers. We will draw out these connections in the course of our lesson.

We want to learn about the overall context of our scripture passage since it comes from a story already in progress. The first two chapters of Luke's Gospel contain the Nativity Story of Jesus. Interestingly enough, the Nativity Story starts before the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. Knowing how the Gospel of Luke begins shows us what has happened in the lives of both Mary and Elizabeth before the event recalled in our scripture passage. This lead-up shows what has brought Mary and Elizabeth together.

Luke's gospel begins with the angel Gabriel visiting a man named Zechariah, the husband of Elizabeth. We are told that Zechariah and Elizabeth were very devout, that they were on up in years, and that they had never been able to have children. Zechariah was fulfilling his annual duty in the Temple when Gabriel appeared and told him that his wife Elizabeth was going to bear a son and his name was to be John. John would be brought up in a devout home and lead a devout life. Before John was even born, he was being set apart to preach to the masses one day with the spirit and power of the legendary prophet, Elijah. John would move the hearts of people to the Lord in order "to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." (Luke 1:17)

Elizabeth conceived a child and remained in seclusion for five months with the knowledge that God had blessed her and had removed the stigma that she had carried all those years among her people for not being able to conceive children. Elizabeth and Zechariah also carried the secret of their son's destiny. The connection to Elijah was a signal that their son would grow to prepare the way for the Messiah.

**What do you think it would be like to be in Zechariah and Elizabeth's shoes? What would it be like to be expecting a child who would be shared with all of God's people and change history? Why do you think God chose a woman who had been unable to have children without divine intervention?**

### **Introduction to Mary**

It was at this time when the angel Gabriel visited Nazareth and appeared to a young virgin named Mary and made an amazing announcement. Gabriel announced to Mary that she had found favor with God and would conceive and bear a son whom she was to name Jesus. What Gabriel said next let Mary know that her child was to be unlike any child who had ever been born in the past or who would ever be born in the future.

*<sup>32</sup> "He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. <sup>33</sup> He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."*

Mary's child would not only be rightly described as "great," but he would be called "Son of the Most High." His relation to the Divine would make him divine. To be named as the heir to the throne of David meant that Mary's child would be God's anointed One, the promised Messiah to expand God's rule and to reign forever. Imagine all the thoughts that must have filled the mind and heart of this young maiden.

Unlike Elizabeth who was married, Mary was unmarried and was only engaged to her future husband, Joseph. So, Mary asked the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel explained, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God."

Can you imagine receiving this announcement? If she was prepared to ask more questions she would not have gotten the opportunity to ask them because Gabriel had another announcement to add. This is where our scripture lesson begins.

**<sup>36</sup> “And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. <sup>37</sup> For nothing will be impossible with God.”**

Mary would be hearing this news for the first time. It was a part of Gabriel’s mission to share the news of Elizabeth’s pregnancy in conjunction with Mary’s announcement. What a connection Mary and Elizabeth shared! They were relatives. Although their ages were very different, they would both be expecting at the same time. Although their conception stories were different what was happening to each of them would have been thought to be impossible. In one case, a barren woman was able to conceive a child through her husband. In another case, a virgin would conceive a child without a human father. For in the opening of this new chapter of history nothing will impossible.

**<sup>38</sup> Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.**

It is noteworthy that the angel Gabriel was not tasked with asking for Mary’s consent. The truth is that God knew Mary. God knew what Mary knew about herself and even what Mary had not yet learned about herself. God knew all that of which Mary was capable. Gabriel announced that Mary had found favor with God, and that said volumes.

God’s favor conveys God’s grace. To be in God’s favor means to be chosen and selected. God’s favor toward Mary in this particular instance meant that she had been singled out by God among women to carry the Son of God and then raise him.

The words Mary said should not surprise us. She was ready to offer herself as a servant, a handmaiden of the Lord, no more and no less. When she said, “Let it be to me according to your word,” it signaled her obedience to the word Gabriel announced to her on behalf of God. One cannot miss the humble quality which comes forth through Mary’s words.

**What do you think it would have been like to be in Mary’s shoes? What early indications do you think Mary gives that God found favor on the right person? What would be added to Mary’s experience upon hearing that her relative Elizabeth was going to bear a child?**

### **The Meeting of Mary and Elizabeth**

Interestingly, this story that we read from Luke’s gospel does not tell us about Joseph. It is Matthew’s gospel that tells us about Joseph. Matthew’s gospel tells us that Joseph had some initial misgivings about Mary’s pregnancy and wondered whether it might lessen the potential for scandal by quietly ending the engagement. Thankfully, Joseph was visited by an angel who helped Joseph understand the importance of the role he was being called to play. The marriage of Joseph and Mary might have helped quell any rumors about the timing of Mary’s pregnancy. Still, we are left to wonder whether life in Nazareth would have been difficult for Mary if she had stayed in Nazareth. As it happened, Mary did not stay.

**<sup>39</sup> In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, <sup>40</sup> where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.**

Mary left Nazareth, but as much as we might speculate about any difficulty in Mary staying in her hometown, it should be stated that Luke's gospel remains completely silent on this matter. There is no mention of Mary "escaping" Nazareth. The emphasis is on Mary going with haste to the house of Zechariah to see Elizabeth, leading us to believe that it was the message from the angel Gabriel that motivated her.

Imagine Mary entering the house and greeting Elizabeth. Had Mary been able to communicate with Elizabeth ahead of time through a messenger that she was coming or was this a surprise visit? What did Mary say when she entered the door? How much did she divulge about her situation in the greeting?

**Why do you think Mary went with haste to visit Elizabeth? What all do you think could have been going through Mary's mind?**

### **Elizabeth's Response to Mary's Visit**

Perhaps it was Gabriel's announcements to Zechariah and Mary, and no small bit of intuition, that conveyed enough to make the greeting a joyous one. We are also told that more than intuition was at work as they greeted one another.

**<sup>41</sup> When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb.**

The child that Elizabeth was carrying leaped in her womb. Elizabeth felt it. The unborn child in her womb reacted to the unborn child in another mother's womb! We know this to be a sign of the connection that God has ordained between Elizabeth's child and Mary's child. Their destinies are intertwined. Although John and Jesus are not even born yet, the roles chosen for them were the stuff of prophecies that were centuries-old.

**And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit <sup>42</sup> and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.**

Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit at the same time that her child leaped in her womb. It is not hard to imagine Elizabeth making connections between what the angel Gabriel told her husband and her child leaping in her womb. Her son was the one to move the hearts of people to the Lord in order "to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Not only did this mean her son was special beyond measure, it also meant that she was in the presence of a young woman chosen among all women to carry the promised Messiah. Indeed, Mary really was blessed among women because the fruit of Mary's womb was singularly blessed by God for the grandest purpose ever given to a human being.

**Which details stand out to you the most in this special connection that was made between the two expectant mothers and their unborn children? What do you think they foreshadowed?**

### **Elizabeth's Recognition of Mary and Her Child's Place in Salvation History**

Through the Holy Spirit filling her Elizabeth recognized the moment unfolding before her and the meaning of it, and she gave words to these thoughts and feelings. What she said, she exclaimed with a loud cry. She could not contain her joy.

**<sup>43</sup> "And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? <sup>44</sup> For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy."**



Elizabeth recognized also the divine order of what was unfolding. Elizabeth was a mature, older woman who was past normal child-bearing age, and Mary was a humble young maiden. But we see Elizabeth showing Mary deference due to someone significantly above Elizabeth's own station in life. That's not all. Notice what she calls the unborn child in Mary's womb. She calls him "Lord."

The Holy Spirit working in Elizabeth, the words of the angel Gabriel, and her own child leaping in her womb for joy all led Elizabeth to understand that Mary was none other than the mother of her Lord. The mother of her Lord honored her by visiting her. She could not believe why this was happening to her and the favor she was being shown.

I go back to the angel Gabriel telling Mary that Mary had found favor with God. Mary was the recipient of God's special favor. Elizabeth, in turn, felt that she was being shown special favor by being visited by the mother of her Lord. Perhaps they were beginning to understand that the whole world was being shown God's special favor. The means of their salvation was coming into the world.

**45 "And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."**

When we are shown divine favor, the honor belongs to the Lord, not to us. For Mary's part, she responded to the angel Gabriel humbly and appropriately by offering herself as a servant of the Lord. Elizabeth, however, saw fit to pronounce upon Mary a blessing for believing "that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." Mary did believe everything that the Lord had spoken to her. Mary was a witness to Elizabeth.

When we are shown God's favor it is right and good to give God all the credit. We have no right to boast. Yet, there is a role we play in responding to God's prerogative, grace, and favor. The action we take is our grateful response to God's grace. God's grace, favor, and initiative comes to us in the form of God's forgiveness, salvation, call, and everyday blessings, large and small. The more attention we give to acknowledging God's initiative in our lives and the more we offer our life as a thankful response to God's grace, the better our life is ordered.

What pleases God is when this thankful response becomes a "whole life" response—a response we make with our whole lives and the way it is lived daily. You could say that this is what faith looks like. Andre Crouch's song, "My Tribute," expresses this well. It begins with the question, "How can I say thanks for the things you have done for me, things so undeserved, yet you give to prove your love for me?" Then the song answers, "The voices of a million angels could not express my gratitude." This is when the song gets to the only fitting response we can attempt to make: "All that I am and ever hope to be, I owe it all to you." When we live out our faith this way it truly pleases God, and it provides a powerful witness to all those around us.

**What do you make of the favor shown Mary by God? What do you make of Elizabeth recognizing the favor she was being shown by having the mother of her Lord visit her? If grace is defined as God's underserved favor what examples can you name of God's grace and God's favor that has been shown to you? How do you understand your own thankful response to God's favor?**

## **Jesus and John the Baptist**

In Luke's gospel, Mary responded to this special moment with Elizabeth with a song we call the "Magnificat," named after the opening words, "My soul magnifies the Lord." Mary's song is in part an echo of the song Hannah sang when God responded to her prayers for a child and allowed Hannah to conceive and

bear a son who became the great prophet, Samuel. Although Mary's song contains echoes of Hannah's song, most of it is a song only Mary could sing because of what God was doing for her, through her, and for the whole human race.

What else did Mary and Elizabeth talk about? We can only wonder.

**<sup>56</sup> And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.**

Three months is a long time to visit someone. This would take Elizabeth through the remaining months of her pregnancy. Mary returned home not long before Elizabeth gave birth to John. Mary was at her home in Nazareth for the remaining months of her pregnancy until Mary and Joseph found out that they had to travel to Bethlehem, their ancestral hometown, to be registered for a census that the emperor in Rome was imposing on the Roman empire. It was in Bethlehem, of course, that Mary gave birth to Jesus.

We are not told about any more visits between Mary and Elizabeth or between their families. We do not know whether Jesus and John got together during their childhood, teenage, or young adult years. We can only imagine them growing into their respective destinies.

When we reflect on John living into his destiny, we must recall the event that happened when he was eight days old and he was taken to be circumcised. For more than nine months, Zechariah had not been able to speak—not a word. Why had he not been able to speak? You could say that Zechariah had been put in “time out” when he expressed his disbelief to the angel Gabriel nine months earlier. At that time, Zechariah had trouble believing how his barren wife, who was on up in years, could conceive and bear a son. Gabriel thought Zechariah needed time out to reflect.

So, it was at John's circumcision where something big happened. They were at the point in the ritual which called for the naming of the child. The community assumed the child would be named after his father, Zechariah. But Elizabeth told them that his name was to be John in accordance with what Zechariah had been able to convey to Elizabeth. The community was not satisfied though and wanted to hear it from Zechariah himself. Zechariah asked for a writing tablet, and when he wrote, “His name is John.” That was when he was able to speak again, and he talked up a storm.

This miraculous turn of events caused quite a stir in the community: *“Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. All who heard them pondered them and said, ‘What then will this child become?’ For indeed the hand of the Lord was with him.”* (Luke 1:65-66) The whole community knew John was a child of destiny.

John would also be reminded of his destiny in the way he was raised by his parents. The angel Gabriel had told Zechariah that his son, John, “must never drink wine or strong drink.” Zechariah was told that even before John's birth “he will be filled with the Holy Spirit.” John's devout upbringing would serve as a constant reminder that he was set aside for a special calling.

The last thing that we are told about John's formative years is that “the child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.” We know that Jesus lived his life out of the public eye until the age of 30, and the first thing he did was to join John in the wilderness where John's ministry was in full swing. The impression we are left with is that John seems to have been at it for a while when Jesus joined him. We can surmise this because John's following had grown quite large. John had been fulfilling his destiny.

So, when Jesus joined him, it was John and Jesus with each other again, just as they had been together when Elizabeth and Mary were expectant mothers. They were destined to reunite 30 years later. John was preparing the way for Jesus the Messiah just as the prophets had foreseen centuries earlier.

### **Some Characteristics of Expectant Mothers' Faith**

So, what can we say about the faith of these two expectant mothers? They were in tune with their own parts in the unfolding story of the salvation God was offering. They were in tune with each other's part in the story. Elizabeth, especially, was in tune with Mary's role and the role her child would play in salvation history. Elizabeth knew that the way her unborn child stirred in her womb was him leaping for joy, and she certainly expressed her own joy. Both Elizabeth and Mary were filled with a mixture of humility and joy at the privilege of serving the Lord as mothers of special children. Elizabeth knew that her son would serve Mary's son, and Elizabeth saw great joy and significance in this servant role. Even John, in the womb, seemed to have felt this same joy.

We can draw out other qualities of these expectant mothers' faith stories that we all can share in this season of the year. A good lens for us is the season of Advent and its meaning. Although we are at the end of the season, there are qualities of Advent that are worth taking into the new year.

One theme of the Advent season is anticipation. Elizabeth and Mary would certainly have been filled with a sense of anticipation. In a world where we often tend to expect instant gratification, nine months of pregnancy is bound to create a sense of anticipation and expectation because of the natural delay between conception and birth. The father experiences this also, and it is a big deal for the father. I would dare say, however, that a mother feels the anticipation more intensely because it is accompanied with what is happening in her body.

In the Common Lectionary, the scriptures of the first Sunday of Advent often center around the theme of anticipation associated with the coming of the Lord. The New Testament scriptures that focus on this theme are about Christ's second coming. It may seem strange at first, in a season preparing for the celebration of Christmas, to jump forward in time and talk about the future return of Christ. This tradition, however, makes Advent more relevant in a sense. It is not enough for Advent to fill us with a sense of nostalgia for the past. Advent should make us long for the return of Christ, when Christ will come and finish what he started at his first coming. Every generation of believers should prepare for the return of Christ. We are either preparing for the return of Christ in our lifetime or we are continuing to kindle the flame for the next generation to carry the torch.

Another theme of Advent is the theme of waiting. The faith of the two expectant mothers in our scripture was about waiting. Waiting is about patience. We often say that good things come to those who wait. This is certainly true for expectant mothers.

Think about farmers. The farmer plants the seed and waits for the harvest. Until the harvest, the farmer has work to do, but the farmer also knows that the time of waiting is when God does his part in bringing the seed into a plant and the plant growing to produce the fruit.

These themes lead to another theme of Advent, which is preparation. The farmer does not just wait, the farmer prepares. Expectant parents prepare. In every Advent season, there are lectionary scriptures that focus on John the Baptist. The message that he had been preaching to the masses on the day that Jesus joined him was a message of repentance. John was turning hearts to the Lord. John was telling them to bear the fruits that befit repentance. In other words, repentance is not just a feeling of remorse. It is a desire to turn from one's sinful ways. People were going to John in the wilderness, and they were undergoing the baptism that

John led in order to signify the cleansing that needed to occur among God's people in preparation for the coming of the Messiah.

We have a wonderful, time-tested path to take in this profile of faith. This path has been provided through the tradition of Advent and the faith of Mary and Elizabeth as expectant mothers.

**What themes of Advent do you want to carry past Advent and Christmas into the new year? How do you see yourself doing this?**

### Prayer

Gracious Lord and Author of our salvation, thank you for sending your Son, Jesus, and for the amazing way you used Mary and Elizabeth in the Advent of the Messiah. Give us that same sense of expectant waiting and anticipation, and help us to prepare our hearts for a fresh advent of the Christ into our own lives, that we may also make a whole life response to You worthy of our gratitude for all that You have done and are doing in our lives, through our precious Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

*Dr. Jay Harris serves as the Superintendent of Clergy and District Services for the South Georgia Conference. Email him at [jharris@sgaumc.com](mailto:jharris@sgaumc.com). Find his plot-driven guide to reading the Bible, the "Layered Bible Journey," at [www.layeredbiblejourney.com](http://www.layeredbiblejourney.com).*



### Our Advent Prayer

What's Old Is New Again  
by Anne Packard

Throughout 2023, Bishop Graves asked the South Georgia Conference to pray for God's faith, hope, and love as the United Methodist Church navigates changing times. The Ministry of Memory gratefully fulfilled this request by remembering the prayers of other well-known Methodists who also navigated changing times with prayer. Beginning with John and Charles Wesley, moving on to Francis Asbury and Richard Allen, and ending with prayers for women's full inclusion and greater racial equality, this monthly article has shown a spotlight on the power of prayer, most especially in difficult moments. For the last column of the last month of the year 2023, the Ministry of Memory would like to remember the most difficult of times and the greatest prayer which has already been fulfilled. This is our Advent prayer.

*Of Solomon. Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to the royal son! May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice! Let the mountains bear prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness! May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the children of the needy, and crush the oppressor! May they fear you while the sun endures, and as long as the moon, throughout all generations! ...*

Psalm 72:1-20

*For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this. Isaiah 9:6-7*

*Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more. Jeremiah 31:31-34*

*"Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel" (which means, God with us). Matthew 1:23*

*And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was from the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. Luke 2:4-7*

*"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. John 3:16*

*Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. John 14:6*

May the season of Advent be to you a season of faith, hope, and love - no matter the times - knowing that the greatest prayer has already been fulfilled. We will find the baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and laid in a manger. He has come to defend the poor, deliver the needy, and crush the oppressors. He was given by God with love to be the way, the truth, the life and is called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Merry Christmas!

*Anne Packard serves as Conference Historian and director of the Arthur J. Moore Methodist Museum on St. Simons Island. Contact her at [apackard@epworthbythesea.org](mailto:apackard@epworthbythesea.org).*



## **Abound in Hope**

By Hal Brady

The apostle Paul, in his letter to the Romans, might have believed that "hope should abound" (Romans 15:13). But we are not quite so sure, are we? In times like these, "abound in hope"? Almost every newscast reminds us of the many dreary problems we face in the world today. Justice, for many, continues to be an elusive quality. People are angrier than ever. Wars continue. Crime is out of control. Drugs are destroying lives. The economy is shaky. Terrorism threatens. Family life is breaking down. Depression characterizes too many. And the list could go on.

The point is that it is very difficult to have hope in a world like this. However, it is our world - our responsibility - and we had better not forget it. It behooves all of us during this Advent/Christmas season to hear a fresh word of hope. Having mentioned the importance of hope, I want to say a few words about it.

First, sometimes hope is hard to come by! In the movie “Finding Nemo,” Nemo has been kidnapped. His father Marlin and his sidekick Dory have gone in search for him. At this point Marlin and Dory have been swallowed up by a whale. As I said, sometimes hope is hard to come by. Truthfully, having hope for anything is seldom easy. There are times in the lives of individuals and nations where there seems to be little or no hope. Who would ever have guessed that the Berlin Wall, which stood so imposingly mighty, would come down in our lifetime? On a personal level, what man or woman diagnosed with a deadly form of cancer would have thought that he/she could be a 5 or 10 or even 15-year survivor of that dreadful disease?

Second, there’s power in hope! A well-known minister was visiting in South Africa several years ago. He said he couldn’t help himself, and he had to ask the question. He had listened to stories people told in the crowded flats of Johannesburg, in the squatter settlements outside of Cape Town, and in a Methodist pastor’s home in Soweto. He said he had sensed in a tiny measure the fear and suffering these brothers and sisters in Christ had faced in the struggle for freedom in South Africa. He saw how these very ordinary people had confronted the entrenched evil of apartheid in an absolutely extraordinary way. They had every reason to feel discouraged and defeated. But to be with them was to experience inescapable, contagious joy! Finally, he asked the question: “What keeps you going? How can you be so joyful?” With amazing consistency, they responded with one word: hope. What is hope? One definition is “to expect with confidence.”

Third, hope is based on the contemplation of God’s Promises and victory! The church exposes us to Advent to remind us of God’s promises and that God keeps His promises. As Jeremiah prophesied, “A righteous branch will spring up for David and he shall execute justice and righteousness” (33:15). God keeps God’s promises in Christ. What kind of world was it that Christ first came to? Do you remember? Sure you do! It was a dark world, a barren world, a scary world, a hopeless world. A heartless Roman government oppressed the people. There was great agony and bewilderment and suffering. And then suddenly He came; God himself came in the form of the tiny babe of Bethlehem. At last, hope!

*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).*



### **Confirmation Retreat set for March 1-3**

Registration for the 23rd annual South Georgia Conference Confirmation Retreat is now open. The 2024 retreat will take place March 1-3 at Epworth By The Sea on St. Simons Island.

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 for the entire event!

For more information and to register your group, [click here](#).



### **Conference Updates & Happenings**

**Lay Servant Ministry:** [Lay Servant Ministries & Certified Lay Ministry dates & registration](#)

- In-Person Advanced Lay Servant Class: January 5-6 in Macon
- Online Basic Lay Servant Ministries: January 16, 18, 23, 25
- Online Advanced Lay Servant Ministries: February 13, 15, 20, 22
- Online Basic Lay Servant Ministries: August 13, 15, 20, 22
- Online Advanced Lay Servant Ministries: Sept 10, 12, 17, 19

**Small Church Focus: Growing Smaller to Grow Deeper – Jan. 11 & Jan. 12:** Discipleship is the main purpose and calling of the church. The size of the church doesn't change the ultimate calling of the church, but it does often look a little different in the way we approach discipleship. Join in a conversation around discipleship that will help you realize that small churches can grow deeper in discipleship because of the advantage they have over larger churches whose members may not really get to know each other well. Join Anne Smith and Stephanie Smith for a conversation about what discipleship really is and how we can use the size of the small church to your advantage in discipling those God brings into your midst. Two days/times are being offered to give you flexibility and with the hope one will meet your schedule: Thursday, Jan. 11, 6:30-8pm or Friday, Jan. 12, noon-1:30pm. If you have questions or need more information, please contact Anne Bosarge at [abosarge@sgaumc.com](mailto:abosarge@sgaumc.com).

**3Practice Circle Conversations - Jan. 25:** There are 3 practices that - when named - help us cross the “difference divide” and create space for real conversation. These 3 practices help and inform our interactions with others, ourselves, and God. Revs. Teresa Edwards, Meg Procopio, and Jared Wilson are going to set the stage for us on how to use 3Practice Circles. Learn more: [www.sgaumc.org/3practice-circles](http://www.sgaumc.org/3practice-circles).

**Basic ERT Training & Chainsaw Safety Class – Jan. 27:** An ERT training is set for Saturday, January 27 at 8 am at Cordele First UMC. This training is a collaborative effort of the United Methodist Committee on Relief and United Methodist Volunteers in Mission. [Learn more](#)

**Small Church Focus: Revisioning and Remissioning for Small Churches – Feb. 8 & Feb. 9:** "The way we've always done things" isn't working anymore, yet it is still the way many churches continue to do things. What is needed to reach people in this day and time and move from a mindset of survive to thrive is a fresh wind of vision and mission. While this is necessary for churches of all sizes, small churches present some unique challenges and advantages when it comes to revisioning and remissioning. Join Anne Bosarge and Jeremy Alexander for a conversation about how to leverage the uniqueness of small churches and begin the journey of reimagining what missional impact will look like for your congregation. Two days/times are being offered to give you flexibility and with the hope one will meet your schedule: Thursday, February 8, 6:30pm-8pm or Friday, February 9, noon-1:30pm. If you have questions or need more information, please contact Anne Bosarge at [abosarge@sgaumc.com](mailto:abosarge@sgaumc.com).

**Confirmation Retreat – March 1-3:** The 23rd annual South Georgia Conference Confirmation Retreat will take place March 1-3 at Epworth By The Sea on St. Simons Island. 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 for the entire event! For more information and to register your group, [click here](#).

**Clergy Spouses Retreat – March 15-17:** The 2024 Clergy Spouses Retreat is set for March 15-17, 2024, at Epworth By The Sea. The retreat theme will be, "Embracing Christian Friendships," with the Scripture focus being from 1 Thessalonians 5:11: "Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing." This will be a gathering with spouses from South Georgia, North Georgia, and the Alabama West-Florida conference. More information will be available soon.



**Leading Through Trauma - March 21:** This one-day retreat for South Georgia clergy will be held at Camp Tygart Pipkin Center in Ray City on March 21, 2024, from 9 am - 3 pm. Led by Cameron Bishop, we will talk about the trauma pastors experience in ministry and learn strategies for processing it so we can continue to lead well and thrive personally. The cost for this event is \$25 (lunch is included). [Click here to learn more and register.](#)

**Summer Camp Connect Leadership Team:** Now hiring for Summer 2024! Do you know a college student who loves Jesus and has a heart to serve kids? If you know of any in your circle or local church, let them know about this opportunity to serve! [Learn more.](#)

**Annual Conference – June 2-5:** Hotel Room blocks are now open for the 2024 Annual Conference Session set for June 2-5 in Tifton. [View list here](#)

[View Full Conference Calendar](#)

.....

### **Retired Clergy Birthdays – December 2023**

- 12/01 – Virginia Connelly: 11130 Springfield Pike, Apt. B 131; Cincinnati, OH 45246
- 12/06 – Charles Adams: 301 Island St.; Lake Park, GA 31636
- 12/10 – Charles Cox: 100 Spring Harbor Dr., Apt. 244; Columbus, GA 31904
- 12/10 – Cephas 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
- 12/17 – Sandra Conley: 151 5<sup>th</sup> Ave; Rochelle, GA 31079
- 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
- 12/26 – Wayne Mitchell: 431 Oak Ridge Dr.; Nashville, GA 31639
- 12/27 - Ivelisse Quinones: P.O. Box 449; Cuthbert, GA 39840
- 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

.....

### **Obituary: Rev. Virgil Ray Lee**

Services for Virgil R. Lee, 86 of Thomasville wer held at 11:00 am, Saturday, November 25, 2023 at Dawson Street Methodist Church. Mr. Lee passed away November 21, 2023 at his residence. Burial took place after the service at 2:00pm, at Sylvania United Methodist Church, 820 Hutchinson Ferry Rd, Faceville, Ga 39828.

Virgil R. Lee was born in Grady County, Georgia in 1937 and completed high school there in 1956. He obtained degrees from Young Harris College, Valdosta State College and Candler School of Theology at Emory University.



Rev. Lee married Sue Howell in May 1965, and they had two children, Allen and Suzanne. Suzanne is married to Troy Stencil and they have 3 children, Chandler, Anna and Barrett. Allen has 3 children William, Abby and Thomas.

Allen was an architect and now a physician, Suzanne is a pharmacist, and Troy is an architect. Chandler has completed medical school and is currently doing his first year of Residency; William and Anna have recently graduated from Samford University; Abby is a Junior at Georgia Tech and Thomas and Barrett are in the 8th grade.

Rev. Lee began his ministry on the Cairo Circuit during his college years and served as a local pastor across the South Georgia from 1958 June 1993. In June of 1993, Bishop Richard Looney, Bishop of the South Georgia Annual Conference, invited Rev. Lee to serve as District Superintendent of the Americus District.

Over the years, he has served in a number of positions which include Conference Chairman of Health and Welfare Ministries, Board of Trustees of the Methodist Home for Children and Youth and Magnolia Manor. He was on the Board of Trustees for Candler Hospital in Savannah and served on the board of the Georgia commission of higher education. He was also on the board of Trustees for the Wesley Foundation at Georgia Southwestern College and at Georgia Tech.

In 1996, Rev Lee published the book "Little Sermons That I Have Seen."

Rev. Lee was preceded in death by his father, Maurice Christian Lee (1987), his mother, Lois Cook Lee (2006), his wife, Carol Sue Howell Lee (2014), and his sister, Leah Lee (2019). He is survived by his brother, Winfred Lee of Cairo, Georgia and sister-in-law, Judy Howell, as well as his children, grandchildren, nieces & nephews.

In lieu of flowers, the family requests that donations be made to the Virgil Lee Family Foundation at TNB Bank.



### **Obituary: Rev. Walter Albert (WA) Parrish**

Walter Albert "WA" Parrish, a dedicated husband, loving father, and cherished grandfather, peacefully returned to his heavenly home on November 22, 2023, at the age of 76. Born on July 21, 1947, in Moultrie, Georgia, WA touched the lives of many and leaves behind an enduring legacy.

WA's journey was one of commitment, resilience, and unwavering patriotism. He proudly served his country as a Specialist Technician Four in Germany, diligently contributing to the betterment of his nation. Following his honorable service, Walter pursued a fulfilling career as a manager in the agriculture industry, where he worked as a farm manager for five years at Dekle Plantation. He then moved to Holly Hill Plantation to serve as a manager for ten years. He was passionate about the outdoors, observing wildlife, being on a tractor, and enjoying God's simplicity in nature. He began a career with the US postal service where he served for about eight years. He enjoyed being a rural carrier, serving and meeting the rural patrons while carrying their mail.

Around the year 2000 to present, WA served in active ministry being a lay minister and later transitioned into the role of a lay pastor. His continued service to Oak Grove and Boston United Methodist churches for

the past eight years and his commitment to continue serving until he was called home show his passion, devotion loyalty, and commitment to his Savior.

Being raised in a large, loving family, he was the middle of seven children, fourth from the top and fourth from the bottom. He was called "my little brother" by all of his siblings, "my baby boy" by his mother, and "Uncle Dubby" by all of his nieces and nephews. Family was very important to him, and he remained close to all family members.

During his retirement years, he enjoyed many traveling adventures with his wife, family, and siblings and was able to explore many of God's creations throughout the US and Canada.

Beyond his professional accomplishments, WA was blessed with a beautiful family. On May 15, 1993, he was married to Becky Harvell Parrish. WA will forever be remembered as a devoted father to his children Daniel and Kristie Parrish, Jonathan and Lindsay Clay, Nicholas and Bowen Clay, and Christopher and Katie Clay. He will also be fondly remembered as "PePaw" to his adoring grandchildren, Kallie, Ivey, Megan, Brooks, Bo, Rives, Leelen, and Ellie Kate. WA was preceded in death by Neal Parrish, Ava Parrish, Wilma Parrish and Devin McGee.

In addition to his immediate family, WA's memory will be treasured by his beloved siblings, Norman Parrish Nelda and Joe Ragsdale, Rachel (Zone) and Jeff Hill, Beth Parrish, Cathy Parrish, Carla and James Bowen, Corky and Dawn Harvell.

Family and friends were invited to pay their respects and honor his memory at the service, which was held on Sunday, November 26, 2023, at 5 pm at Allen and Allen Funeral Home. Services were officiated by Jimmy Clanton. A visitation was held prior to the service from 4-5 pm.

.....

## Scripture Readings – December edition

### December 10

#### *Second Sunday of Advent, Year B*

- [Isaiah 40:1-11](#)
- [Psalms 85:1-2, 8-13](#)
- [2 Peter 3:8-15a](#)
- [Mark 1:1-8](#)

### December 17

#### *Third Sunday of Advent, Year B*

- [Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11](#)
- [Psalms 126](#)
- [1 Thessalonians 5:16-24](#)
- [John 1:6-8, 19-28](#)

### December 24

#### *Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year B*

- [2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16](#)
- [Romans 16:25-27](#)
- [Luke 1:26-38](#)
- [Luke 1:46b-55](#)

**December 24*****Christmas Eve, Year B***

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

**December 31*****First Sunday after Christmas, Year B***

- [Isaiah 61:10-62:3](#)
- [Psalms 148](#)
- [Galatians 4:4-7](#)
- [Luke 2:22-40](#)

**January 7*****First Sunday after the Epiphany/Baptism of the Lord, Year B***

- [Genesis 1:1-5](#)
- [Psalms 29](#)
- [Acts 19:1-7](#)
- [Mark 1:4-11](#)