

SOUTH GEORGIA ADVOCATE – ANNUAL CONFERENCE EDITION

A sense of excitement and hope felt amid annual conference session focused on prayer

By Kelly Roberson

Detailed recaps of each day's events, including listings of those who retired and the ministers and spouses who were remembered during the memorial service, as well as the appointment list, photos, and bulletin insert can be found by clicking [here](#).

On the heels of a tough and trying season, the spirit of the 2023 Annual Conference was one of excitement and hope as South Georgia United Methodists gathered to worship and pray, conduct the business of the annual conference, and elect delegates to the General and Jurisdictional Conferences.

Held June 4-6 in the UGA Tifton Campus Conference Center, Bishop David Graves led his second regular annual conference session in South Georgia and focused on turning the page and moving forward together in South Georgia.

“There was a beautiful, peaceful, and loving spirit among us,” said Bishop Graves in reflecting on the three days of holy conferencing. “We have had wonderful worship and tremendous preaching. I heard so many people say there was just such a wonderful spirit here. People have come away inspired and encouraged. Most importantly, we turned the page this week, and we are moving forward. We are going to be focused on making disciples, and we are going to be focused on changing our communities. There was a spirit of empowerment as we came away from this annual conference. Thanks be to God for what all happened here in Tifton!”

Meeting under the theme of “When They Prayed,” for clergy and laity across the South Georgia Conference one overriding idea prevailed: when they prayed, God showed up.

With vibrant and meaningful worship sessions, prayer moments woven throughout, and powerful messages, South Georgia United Methodists said they saw hope.

“I know firsthand the tremendous amount of work that always goes into planning the Annual Conference session, but the wind of the Holy Spirit caught this one and the flames took off,” said J. Knapp, conference lay leader and part of United Methodists of Thomasville. “Annual Conference was positive, inspiring, prayerful, and productive.”

Bishop Graves agreed.

“God’s presence was in this place. Even in the midst of all we have had going on, the majesty of God’s greatness and faithfulness prevailed,” Bishop Graves said. “I’m thankful for the people of the South Georgia Annual Conference, for being here and for their participation. We saw God at work, and we are excited about what God has next for South Georgia United Methodists.”

Opening Worship

Bishop Graves opened the annual conference session with a pointed and inspiring sermon focused on this year’s theme, “When They Prayed,” based on Acts 4:31.

“If ever there was ever a time for this scripture in my lifetime, it is right now,” said Bishop Graves. “A time where God's people would come together and pray, where the Holy Spirit would begin to speak the Word of God with boldness, and where the place would shake - all because they had gathered.”

Bishop Graves encouraged those in attendance to be poised, purposeful, and prophetic as they move forward as God’s people and pray bold prayers.

“Friends, God is looking for those who want to be bold and courageous in these days and to proclaim the Good News of Christ in ways we've never seen before,” said Bishop Graves. “I believe the best days of the Church are in front of us, but we have to do the work. We have to meet God where God is at work.”

The [2023 Special Offering](#) for South Georgia’s church planting and revitalization efforts was collected during the service totaling over \$8,200.

The first day of the 2023 Annual Conference session was brought to a close with separate laity and clergy sessions.

Monday, June 5

Monday morning, June 5 began with morning worship led by Rev. Rebecca Duke-Barton, pastor of Jesus First United Methodist Church. Reading from the book of Nehemiah, Rev. Duke-Barton invited those in attendance to “pray like a Methodist”.

“When we're praying like a Methodist, we pray knowing that the Holy Spirit is going to take us somewhere,” said Rev. Duke-Barton. “Because we believe in the God of steadfast love, because we have repented and turned to Him, God rebuilds.”

Rev. Duke-Barton reminded conference members that when we pray, God acts.

“I believe that what God did in Nehemiah's time, he wants to do for us right here in the South Georgia Annual Conference,” said Rev. Duke-Barton. “You know what we need to do? We need to get to praying like a Methodist and let the Holy Spirit take us where he will.”

Bishop Graves then called the 159th session of the South Georgia Annual Conference to order. This was Bishop Graves’ second regular Annual Conference session to preside over as the resident bishop of the South Georgia Area. He has also presided over two called special Annual Conference sessions.

In Monday morning’s business session, the conference was led in a prayer moment by Dr. Ted Goshorn, pastor of Mulberry St. UMC in Macon; welcomed Bishop David and Mrs. Nancy Graves to their second in-person South Georgia Annual Conference; recognized and showed appreciation for Jodi Atkinson, Sharon Wolfe, Jane Seaman, Gail Grantham and Cindy Rollins, district administrative assistants; approved the [Consent Calendar](#); celebrated Fully Connectional and Evangelistically Fruitful Churches; and closed the session with a prayer moment led by Rev. Teresa Edwards, associate pastor of Vineville UMC in Macon.

During the morning’s business session, Conference Lay Leader J. Knapp gave the Lay Leader’s Address in which he celebrated the faithfulness of the laity of the South Georgia Conference and gave a challenge to laity and clergy alike.

“South Georgia, it is time to put this ‘disaffiliation distraction’ behind us and focus on the mission and ministry to which we have been called,” said Knapp. “We have an opportunity to live into a new and

reinvigorated vision of the South Georgia Conference. Our Conference is still here, still strong, and still making disciples for Jesus Christ!”

Following the business session, the South Georgia Annual Conference celebrated with those clergy who have served in ministry for 50 years and those who are entering into a retired relationship with the Annual Conference.

Clergy recognized for having served 50 years in ministry include Wayne B. Anthony and David C. Seyle.

Clergy honored for retiring this year were Kevin Baker, Sandi Conley, Hal Grimmatt, John Haney, Brenda Johnson, Derek McAleer, Steve Meguiar, Steve Patton, Ivelisse Quinones, and Gerald Reppert, Jr.

During the afternoon business session, the conference heard a John Wesley prayer moment from Rev. Dave Hanson; was led in a prayer moment by Rev. Precious Hawkins, pastor of Asbury UMC in Savannah; recognized extension ministers and two local pastors who have completed all 20 classes of the basic Course of Study: Jeff Alligood and Michael Jones; affirmed three clergy as full conference members/elders: Joseph Isaac Carter, Mark Jeffrey Miller, Matthew Steven Stout; approved church closings; approved the Conference Trustees report; heard an exciting update on the Bishop’s Priorities - disrupting and dismantling racism, clergy mental health, resourcing the local church for ministry, and church planting & revitalization; and celebrated with three individuals who received denominational awards:

Frances Asbury Award from Higher Education and Ministry: Rev. CJ Harp, Valdosta State University Wesley Foundation; One Matters Award from Discipleship Ministries: Rev. Jerry Hudson, Bemiss UMC; and the Harry Denman Evangelism Award from the Foundation on Evangelism: Mr. Johnny Updike, Georgia Southwestern University Wesley Foundation; and closed the session with a prayer moment led by Revs. Ted Goshorn, Teresa Edwards and Precious Hawkins.

The conference then enjoyed a BBQ meal generously provided by The Methodist Home for Children and Youth.

Delegates elected

Because of the pandemic and then scheduling challenges, the 2020 General Conference was postponed and will now meet April 23-May 3, 2024, in Charlotte, North Carolina. The Judicial Council ruled that conferences may hold elections to fill vacancies in its delegation due to the lapse in time between election and service. Lay and clergy who were elected in 2019 and who remain part of the South Georgia Conference continue to serve on the delegation.

These persons previously elected and continuing to serve are: Laity - Richard Shinhoster, member of ConneXion United Methodist Church in Savannah; and Clergy - Rev. Doreen Smalls, superintendent of the Northwest and Southwest Districts; Dr. Scott Hagan, superintendent of the Coastal and Northeast Districts; and Rev. Alaina Harrison, deacon in the South Georgia Conference.

Along with Rev. Smalls, Dr. Hagan, and Rev. Harrison, Dr. Jimmy Asbell, senior pastor of Vineville United Methodist Church in Macon, will now serve on the General Conference clergy delegation.

In addition to Shinhoster, the laity delegation now includes Allison Lindsey, member of St. Mark United Methodist Church in Douglas; Patsy Thomas, member of M.L. Harris United Methodist Church in Columbus; and Karen Forrester, member of Bainbridge First United Methodist Church.

Jurisdictional Delegates

The clergy Jurisdictional Conference delegation includes Dr. Ben Martin, senior pastor of Wesley Monumental United Methodist Church in Savannah; Rev. Michael Culbreth, senior pastor of ConneXion United Methodist Church in Savannah; Rev. Tony Crosby, senior pastor of Vienna and Shiloh United Methodist Churches; and Rev. Stephen Grantham, senior pastor of Isle of Hope United Methodist Church in Savannah.

Dr. Ben Gosden, senior pastor of Trinity United Methodist Church in Savannah; and Rev. Precious Hawkins, senior pastor of Asbury United Methodist Church in Savannah, were elected alternate Jurisdictional Conference clergy delegates.

The Jurisdictional Conference laity delegation includes John Ray, member of Statesboro First United Methodist Church; Denise Rooks, member of Harper's Chapel United Methodist Church in Baxley; Dana Goshorn, member of Mulberry St. United Methodist Church in Macon; and Scott Cleaveland, member of Wesley Monumental United Methodist Church in Savannah.

Scott Lewis, member of Bemiss United Methodist Church in Valdosta, and Mark Allen, member of Isle of Hope United Methodist Church in Savannah, were elected alternate Jurisdictional Conference lay delegates.

Ordination Service

The Conference gathered Monday evening in the sanctuary of Tifton First United Methodist Church for the Service of Ordination to celebrate the ordination of Joseph Carter, Mark Miller, and Matthew Stout. Bishop Sharma Lewis, episcopal leader for the Mississippi Annual Conference, was the preacher for this service.

In her sermon focused on Acts 13, Bishop Lewis challenged the ordinands to be set apart for ministry as servants of God and to recognize the voice of the Holy Spirit.

“Ordinands, you should desire to be set apart for the work of ministry,” said Bishop Lewis. “You shouldn't desire to blend in with this world, but to recognize that God has gifted and called you. For such a time as this you are to make a difference in The United Methodist Church. My prayer for you is that you recognize that there is no limit to what God can and will do through you in this unusual season.”

Then reading from Ephesians 4:11, Bishop Lewis reminded those being ordained of all they are being commissioned for as believers of the faith called to go out and make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

“You are commissioned to the task of loving our neighbors as we love ourselves. You are commissioned to help the downtrodden by improving their lives in their communities. You are commissioned to utilize your spiritual gifts and talents within the body of Christ. You are commissioned to stand up and fight the injustices of poverty, homelessness, and food insecurity. You are commissioned to be an ambassador for Christ and not only to read and study the word but to embody the word of Jesus Christ. You are commissioned to bring sight to the blind and to set the captives free. You are commissioned to go to the highways and to the hedges and prepare folks to come into the house of the Lord so the Lord's house will be filled,” Bishop Lewis said as she spoke to the three ordinands. “You are commissioned tonight by the Holy Spirit, and will be confirmed by the church through praying, fasting, and laying on of hands to be an instrument to carry the name of Jesus Christ. You are commissioned to go out and make disciples for the transformation of the world.”

Bishop Graves presided over the ordinal rites and was assisted by Mr. J. Knapp, Conference Lay Leader, representing the laity, and the Rev. Dr. Nita Crump, acting Chair of the Board of Ordained Ministry, observed the ordinal rites.

Tuesday, June 6

Tuesday morning began with worship led by Rev. Michael Culbreth, pastor at ConneXion UMC in Savannah. He preached from Luke 1:46-55, Mary's song of praise.

"We see why God showed favor to Mary by allowing her to become the mother of our Savior," said Rev. Culbreth. "God knew we needed a Savior. We needed somebody to show us love and compassion. We needed somebody to forgive our sins. We needed somebody to give us hope, peace, joy, and love. That's why God favored Mary."

We have also received God's unmerited favor, Rev. Culbreth says.

"We haven't earned it; we don't deserve it; but all we can do is accept it," said Rev. Culbreth. "And through Jesus, God favored us and gave us forgiveness, love, and peace. We are recipients of God's favor. We are recipients of God's grace."

In Tuesday morning's business session, the conference was led in a prayer moment by Dr. Goshorn; approved the [2023 Report from the Committee on Nominations](#) and elected Rev. Ramon Hernandez, Flo Sapp-Martin, Lisa Salveter, and Dana Goshorn as at-large members of the Nominating Committee; approved one resolution: The South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church Evangelism and Church Initiative; approved standing rules changes; heard a report about the future of the South Georgia Conference, a future that is Christ-centered, connectional, collaborative, compassionate, and kind and were invited to "keep dancing" and keep moving forward together as the South Georgia Conference of The United Methodist Church; and was led in a prayer moment by Rev. Teresa Edwards.

That morning, a memorial service was held to honor the 36 faithful clergy and clergy spouses who have died since the 2022 Annual Conference session. The Rev. Dr. Derek McAleer, South Georgia retired minister, asked those gathered to think about that great Hall of Faith found in Hebrews 11.

"We know their stories. And we know they have moments of great glory, but they've also got scars," said Dr. McAleer in speaking of those mentioned in Hebrews 11. "Occasionally they stretch to the heights of grace and then they fall to the depths of sin. The Bible is unflinching about the character of God's people. It holds no secrets and minces no words. But knowing that they are far from examples of untarnished glory, God nevertheless sets them before us as examples of what it means to walk in faith with Him."

Those we honor today, says Dr. McAleer, are neither more perfect nor less perfect than Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph.

"God sees them with all their flaws," said Dr. McAleer. "They have provided for us examples of what it means to walk in faith. Sometimes that example is what it means to stand up for God. Sometimes that example is what it means to stand before God and bow your head and say, 'will you take me back?' They recounted their vision, they regained their obedience, and they walked that path a little bit further to that city whose maker and builder is God."

In Tuesday afternoon's business session, the conference was led in a prayer moment by Rev. Precious Hawkins; heard another John Wesley prayer moment from Rev. Dave Hanson; approved the recommendations from the Conference Board of Pensions and Health Benefits and heard a report from the board on the importance of focusing on clergy mental health; approved the report of the Equitable Compensation Report; approved a budget of \$5,472,651 for 2024, a reduction of 29% compared to last year's budget so that more funds will be used for local church ministries; accepted an invitation to hold the

2024 Annual Conference session in Tifton with a start date of June 2, 2024; showed appreciation for the hard work and gracious hospitality of the Tifton First UMC Local Arrangements Committee and the South Central District as well as the Conference Worship Committee, Conference Secretary, and all of those who work to put on Annual Conference; and closed the session with a prayer moment led by Revs. Ted Goshorn, Teresa Edwards and Precious Hawkins.

Reading of the Appointments

Annual Conference 2023 ended with the reading of the appointments.

The District Superintendents read [the 2023-2024 Clergy Appointments](#). Each district lay leader stood with the superintendent as the clergy names and churches were read.

The 2024 Annual Conference Session will be held in Tifton, GA beginning June 2.

Daily Recaps

- [Sunday, June 4](#)
- [Monday, June 5](#)
- [Tuesday, June 6](#)

Photos

- [Sunday, June 4](#)
- [Monday, June 5](#)
- [Tuesday, June 6](#)



Bishop Graves sets 2023-2024 pastoral appointments

On Tuesday, June 6, during the 2023 South Georgia Annual Conference session, Bishop David Graves fixed the 2023-2024 pastoral appointments for the South Georgia Conference of The United Methodist Church.

[Click here to download and view the list of appointments by district.](#)



South Georgia United Methodists elect delegates to General and Jurisdictional Conferences

By Kelly Roberson

During the 2023 annual conference session, held June 4 through June 6, South Georgia United Methodists elected delegates to fill vacancies in its delegation to both the postponed 2020 General Conference (to be held in 2024) and the 2024 Jurisdictional Conference.

Because of the pandemic and then scheduling challenges, the 2020 General Conference was postponed and will now meet April 23-May 3, 2024, in Charlotte, North Carolina. The Judicial Council ruled that conferences may hold elections to fill vacancies in its delegation due to the lapse in time between election and service. Lay and clergy who were elected in 2019 and who remain part of the South Georgia Conference continue to serve on the delegation.

These persons previously elected and continuing to serve are: Laity - Richard Shinhoster, member of ConneXion United Methodist Church in Savannah; and Clergy - Rev. Doreen Smalls, superintendent of the Northwest and Southwest Districts; Dr. Scott Hagan, superintendent of the Coastal and Northeast Districts; and Rev. Alaina Harrison, deacon in the South Georgia Conference.

In total, the South Georgia Conference is allowed four (4) clergy and four (4) lay delegates to General Conference and an additional four (4) clergy and four (4) lay delegates to complete the Jurisdictional Conference delegation. Two (2) alternate clergy delegates and two (2) alternate lay delegates to the Jurisdictional Conference also serve on the delegation.

The first two members of the jurisdictional delegation are also considered alternate delegates to General Conference and will prepare to attend that conference as well. The two additional alternate delegates who were elected will attend Jurisdictional Conference.

To deal with vacancies created, during this year's Annual Conference session, South Georgia laity elected three lay delegates for the General Conference delegation and an additional four for the Jurisdictional Conference as well as 2 alternates. South Georgia clergy elected one clergy delegate for the General Conference delegation and an additional four delegates for the Jurisdictional Conference as well as two alternates.

General Conference Delegates

Along with Rev. Smalls, Dr. Hagan, and Rev. Harrison, Dr. Jimmy Asbell, senior pastor of Vineville United Methodist Church in Macon, will now serve on the General Conference clergy delegation.

In addition to Shinhoster, the laity delegation now includes Allison Lindsey, member of St. Mark United Methodist Church in Douglas; Patsy Thomas, member of M.L. Harris United Methodist Church in Columbus; and Karen Forrester, member of Bainbridge First United Methodist Church.

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About the conferences

The General Conference is the global gathering of The United Methodist Church where mission and ministry priorities are established and the Book of Discipline is reviewed for possible revisions. The General Conference is the policy setting body of United Methodism.

The purpose of the Jurisdictional Conference is to coordinate the connected ministry and mission of this region and to elect and assign Bishops for leadership in the Church. The 2024 Southeastern Jurisdictional Conference will meet July 10-13, 2024, at Lake Junaluska in North Carolina.

Heads of the delegation

Leading the General Conference clergy delegation is Rev. Doreen Smalls. Rev. Smalls served on the Jurisdictional Conference delegation in 2016 and was elected to serve on the General Conference delegation in 2019.

Richard Shinhoster will lead the General Conference laity delegation. Richard served as a delegate to the 2012 Jurisdictional Conference and an alternate delegate to the 2012 and 2016 General Conference. He was elected as an alternate delegate to General Conference in 2019.

“Richard and I are honored to lead the delegation with other faithful and committed individuals who are ready to serve for such a time as this,” said Rev. Smalls, who has been a United Methodist all of her life. “I have witnessed and experienced the joys and the struggles of the church, and I don’t think that God has brought us this far to leave us. I am hopeful and confident for the future because of God’s grace and power.

“I think we should allow the Holy Spirit to lead us while not ignoring the gravity of the issues before us. I stay committed to the South Georgia conference and the work that it continues to do to advance the kingdom of God,” said Rev. Smalls.

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Celebrating Ministry Milestones and Achievements at the 2023 Annual Conference session

Annual Conference is a special time to celebrate ministry milestones and achievements, from those just entering the ministry to those taking the next step of their journey into retirement.

During the Board of Ordained Ministry report Monday afternoon, individuals were recognized for achieving milestones and achievements.

Received into their new relationship with the conference as Elders and Full Conference Members were Joseph Isaac Carter, Mark Jeffrey Miller, and Matthew Steven Stout.

“The Board of Ordained Ministry is charged with walking with people as they hear and respond to God’s call to ordination as elders in our church,” said the Rev. Dr. Nita Crump, acting chair of the Board of Ordained Ministry. “An elder is ordained to preach the word, lead worship, perform baptisms, serve communion, lead the church in serving the community, and order the daily business of the church. Joining the Board in this responsibility are the district committees and the local church SPR committees.

“If you believe that God is calling you to ministry, please talk to your pastor or a member of your SPRC. Church members, if someone in your church is considering a call to ministry, please pray for them and offer words of encouragement and support as they consider answering God’s call. Together, clergy and laity, we

become the body of Christ working to build God's kingdom across south Georgia,” said Dr. Crump.

Others highlighted during the report on Monday afternoon were South Georgia’s newest graduates who completed all 20 classes of the Basic Course of Study: Jeff Alligood and Michael Jones.

Another source of celebration is a new incoming Chair of the Board of Ordained Ministry, Rev. Michael Culbreth, pastor at ConneXion UMC in Savannah, and a new incoming Chair of the Order of Elders, Rev. Stephanie Smith, associate pastor at Pittman Park UMC in Statesboro.

"Celebrating these milestones provides another way of celebrating our connection," said the Rev. Dr. Jay Harris, Assistant to the Bishop and Director of Clergy and District Services.

The Conference gathered Monday evening in the sanctuary of Tifton First United Methodist Church for the Service of Ordination to celebrate the ordination of Joseph Carter, Mark Miller, and Matthew Stouth. Bishop Sharma Lewis, episcopal leader for the Mississippi Annual Conference, was the preacher for this service.

In her sermon focused on Acts 13, Bishop Lewis challenged the ordinands to be set apart for ministry as servants of God and to recognize the voice of the Holy Spirit.

“Ordinands, you should desire to be set apart for the work of ministry,” said Bishop Lewis. “You shouldn't desire to blend in with this world, but to recognize that God has gifted and called you. For such a time as this you are to make a difference in The United Methodist Church. My prayer for you is that you recognize that there is no limit to what God can and will do through you in this unusual season.”

Then reading from Ephesians 4:11, Bishop Lewis reminded those being ordained of all they are being commissioned for as believers of the faith called to go out and make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.

“You are commissioned to the task of loving our neighbors as we love ourselves. You are commissioned to help the downtrodden by improving their lives in their communities. You are commissioned to utilize your spiritual gifts and talents within the body of Christ. You are commissioned to stand up and fight the injustices of poverty, homelessness, and food insecurity. You are commissioned to be an ambassador for Christ and not only to read and study the word but to embody the word of Jesus Christ. You are commissioned to bring sight to the blind and to set the captives free. You are commissioned to go to the highways and to the hedges and prepare folks to come into the house of the Lord so the Lord's house will be filled,” Bishop Lewis said as she spoke to the three ordinands. “You are commissioned tonight by the Holy Spirit, and will be confirmed by the church through praying, fasting, and laying on of hands to be an instrument to carry the name of Jesus Christ. You are commissioned to go out and make disciples for the transformation of the world.”

Bishop David Graves, episcopal leader of the South Georgia Conference, presided over the ordinal rites and was assisted by Mr. J. Knapp, Conference Lay Leader, representing the laity, and Dr. Nita Crump, acting chair of the Board of Ordained Ministry, observed the ordinal rites.

“What a holy moment it was to celebrate these three individuals who have said ‘yes’ to the call of God to be ordained to the ministry to which they have been called,” said Bishop Graves.

The Board of Ordained Ministry processed with the ordinands as a sign of the covenant community into which these newly ordained persons are entering. Rev. Stephanie Smith represented the Orders of Elder. Rev. Grace Guyton represented the Order of Deacon.

Earlier that day, the South Georgia Annual Conference celebrated with those clergy who have served in ministry for 50 years and those who are entering into a retired relationship with the Annual Conference.

Clergy recognized for having served 50 years in ministry include Wayne B. Anthony and David C. Seyle.

Clergy honored for retiring this year: Kevin Baker, Sandi Conley, Hal Grimmett, John Haney, Brenda Johnson, Derek McAleer, Steve Meguiar, Steve Patton, Ivelisse Quinones, and Gerald Reppert, Jr.

Before those gathered were dismissed, Bishop Graves and Conference members prayed a closing blessing that read, in part:

“Go into the world and respond to the love of Christ in all you do. Live out the vision God has given you. May God's mercy, grace, and peace be with you. May you be channels for God's mercy, grace, and peace to the world wherever you may be!”



Three South Georgia United Methodists recognized with prestigious denominational awards

By Kelly Roberson

During the 2023 South Georgia Annual Conference session, meeting June 4-6, three individuals were recognized for their contributions in their local church and ministry settings and for their disciple-making efforts and faithfulness to their calling with prestigious denominational awards.

Rev. CJ Harp, Valdosta State University Wesley Foundation director, received the Francis Asbury Award from the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry; Rev. Jerry Hudson, senior pastor of Bemiss United Methodist Church, received the One Matters Award from Discipleship Ministries; and Mr. Johnny Updike, Georgia Southwestern University Wesley Foundation director, received the Harry Denman Evangelism Award from the Foundation on Evangelism.

The Francis Asbury Award

Named for early American Methodist Bishop Francis Asbury, the Francis Asbury award honors his call to establish a school in the vicinity of every church. “We must,” he said, “ ... give the key of knowledge to your children, and those of the poor in the vicinity of your small towns and villages.”

Today, the award recognizes United Methodist individuals who have made a significant contribution to fostering United Methodist ministries in higher education at the local, district or annual conference level. It is awarded annually to one honoree per annual conference.

The Rev. Dr. Michael McCord, Executive Director of the Georgia United Methodist Commission on Higher Education and Collegiate Ministry, presented the award and highlighted the impact Rev. CJ Harp is making on the campus of Valdosta State University and in the lives of college students.

Rev. Harp says he is deeply honored to receive the Francis Asbury award, who for him is a hero in the faith and whose legacy has encouraged him many times throughout the years to get back on the horse of vocational ministry.

“God has shown great mercy and favor towards the ministry of the VSU Wesley Foundation,” said Rev. Harp. “My recognition is really a recognition of the hundreds of staff and student leaders that I’ve had the great honor to work with to create a culture of discipleship helping college students come to know Jesus and walk more like Jesus. That’s discipleship, and it’s always been about discipleship.”

Rev. Harp likes to point to a quote by Bishop Francis Asbury: “Oh what people of God we ought to be; and grace can make us so!”

The One Matters Award

Every year, Discipleship Ministries partners with Annual Conferences by offering the One Matters Award to one eligible congregation at each Annual Conference. This award has a strong focus on making disciples. While most Discipleship Ministries Programs focus on existing members, One Matters focuses on new members.

The Rev. Dr. Paula Lewis, superintendent of the North Central and South Central districts, presented the One Matters Award, along with a check for \$1,000 from discipleship ministries, to Rev. Jerry Hudson and Bemiss United Methodist Church.

Rev. Hudson and Bemiss UMC continually look around and ask how they can serve their community, whether it's celebrating with bikers on Biker Sunday, helping displaced United Methodists find their place, or with a hot dog and a prayer, they live out the calling that every one matters.

Serving the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of their community is “kind of our thing” at Bemiss UMC, says church leaders. From providing 24/7 access to food to sharing meals with their neighbors, hosting Back-to-School events, and coordinating numerous other community-oriented activities throughout the year, they believe wholeheartedly in living out Jesus' call to love and serve every life they have the opportunity to encounter.

“To say that I am proud, humbled, and honored to serve the congregation of Bemiss UMC would be a gross understatement,” said Rev. Hudson. “The spirits of compassion and service are thick at Bemiss, and it shows through both their dedication to grow as disciples of Jesus and to go above and beyond to address the spiritual and physical needs of their community.

“Even though we are relatively small in numbers, we have been able to reach others in some pretty mighty ways. God has placed a fire in the hearts of our people, and they have responded faithfully. We truly appreciate the recognition of our efforts by the South Georgia Conference, but, as in all things, all glory belongs to God. I pray He will continue to bless us with wisdom, guidance, and the heartfelt desire to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world in the weeks, months, and years to come,” said Rev. Hudson.

The Harry Denman Evangelism Award

The final award presented was the Harry Denman Evangelism Award, the United Methodist Church’s highest evangelism honor.

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

Each year Annual Conferences and the Foundation for Evangelism recognize persons in each conference. This year's Harry Denman Evangelism award recipient is Mr. Johnny Updike, Wesley Foundation Director at Georgia Southwestern University.

While Updike could not physically be at the 2023 Annual Conference session, a video was shown in which Dr. McCord presented the award to Updike via Zoom, surrounded by his family and several of the youth he is in ministry with.

In nominating him, Dr. McCord said the following: "Johnny is an exceptionally gifted leader who is committed to sharing Christ with youth and young adults. As the Wesley director at Georgia Southwestern State University, he has invested himself in the lives of students in ways that have led to professions of faith, life transformation, and radical change. He has empowered and supported students to become faith leaders on and off campus. This kind of commitment to students has led to significant growth (both depth and breadth) of the ministry to the Georgia Southwestern campus. More importantly, students have shared powerful stories of his witness and care for them."

A board member for the Georgia Southwestern Wesley Foundation said: "Johnny Updike is in a class by himself in terms of his dedication, his ability to relate to students, and in his ministry. He is bold, yet tender in his relationship with students. In everything he does, he points to Christ."

One of his students had this to say: "Before going to college, I had been stagnant in my faith and distant from God because of past experiences and situations. I truly believe God used Johnny to work in my life and show me the love of Christ again and to realize that God isn't mad at me, and I'm worthy of His love and to be used to show others that love. He helped me grow into a person of faith, love, confidence, and especially peace that I never thought I would be."

And his son had this to say: "My dad's impact on the lives of students in need has changed so many lives, so many for the better. I can personally attest that he is more than worthy of awards and accolades. However, the aspect of what makes him truly great is that he doesn't do what he does for personal recognition; he does it because it is what he feels the Lord is calling him to do. You'll even hear him say, 'It's not what I did, it's look what God did.' There could not be a better example of a Godly man than my dad."

"I am reminded that we may be recipients of awards like this but the most important thing is that Jesus receives the hearts," said Updike in receiving the award. "This is why we do what we do and why campus ministry matters."



South Georgia Conference prays bold prayers

By Kelly Roberson

Naomi. Nehemiah. Mary. Peter. United Methodists of the South Georgia Annual Conference.

What do all of these have in common? They prayed bold prayers. Because of their prayers, we see how God redeems, rebuilds, reveals, revives, and moves us forward into a hope-filled future.

In a focused effort, the South Georgia Conference centered itself around prayer leading up to and during the 2023 South Georgia Annual Conference, meeting June 4-6, 2023, at the UGA Tifton Campus Conference Center in Tifton, Ga.

“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,’” said Bishop David Graves, episcopal leader of the South Georgia Conference.

He acknowledges that while it seems obvious that prayer is at the center of our work, we sometimes need to make intentional efforts so we don’t get sidetracked by the business and agenda items of our meetings.

“I did not want anything to distract us from listening for God’s voice and seeking God’s will for us, for our churches, and for our Annual Conference,” said Bishop Graves. “I want us to pray bold prayers, and this collective focus on prayer allowed space for the Holy Spirit to guide us and to guide our work.”

South Georgia laity and clergy gathered online each week for the six weeks leading up to this year’s Annual Conference session. Led by Mrs. Anne Bosarge and Mrs. Suzanne Akins, Connectional Ministries staff, and Rev. Rebecca Duke-Barton, pastor of Jesup First UMC, and Rev. Chance Ward, pastor of Goshen UMC, participants focused on praying as certain Biblical figures prayed: Naomi (when we pray blessings on others, God redeems, Ruth 1:8), Nehemiah (when we acknowledge our shortcomings, God rebuilds, Nehemiah 1:5), Mary (when we rejoice and give thanks, God reveals, Luke 1:46-56) and Peter (when we pray boldly, God revives, Acts 9:40).

Those gathered online were asked the questions: What would it look like if we prayed boldly today for healing and for a filling of the Spirit? What does bold prayer look like? How do we have the courage to pray these bold prayers?

This same focus was carried into the Annual Conference session.

Rev. Duke-Barton shared a message Monday morning where she invited those in attendance to “pray like a Methodist”.

“When we’re praying like a Methodist, we pray knowing that the Holy Spirit is going to take us somewhere,” said Rev. Duke-Barton. “Because we believe in the God of steadfast love, because we have repented and turned to Him, God rebuilds.”

Rev. Duke-Barton reminded conference members that when we pray, God acts.

“I believe that what God did in Nehemiah’s time, he wants to do for us right here in the South Georgia Annual Conference,” said Rev. Duke-Barton. “You know what we need to do? We need to get to praying like a Methodist and let the Holy Spirit take us where he will.”

On Tuesday morning, Rev. Michael Culbreth, pastor at ConneXion UMC in Savannah, preached from Luke 1:46-55, Mary’s prayer of praise.

“We see why God showed favor to Mary by allowing her to become the mother of our Savior,” said Rev. Culbreth. “God knew we needed a Savior. We needed somebody to show us love and compassion. We needed somebody to forgive our sins. We needed somebody to give us hope, peace, joy, and love. That’s why God favored Mary.”

We have also received God’s unmerited favor, Rev. Culbreth says.

“We haven't earned it; we don't deserve it; but all we can do is accept it,” said Rev. Culbreth. “And through Jesus, God favored us and gave us forgiveness, love, and peace. We are recipients of God's favor. We are recipients of God's grace.”

Powerful prayer moments led by 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, were woven into every business session.

Each prayer time ended with this simple prayer: “Together, we pray with confidence and proclaim with boldness that Christ is alive and moving among we, the people called United Methodist. Thanks be to God! Amen.”

Prayer stations were set up in the back of the Conference Center auditorium.

It was truly a powerful, Spirit-filled, prayer focused week, says Bishop Graves.

“My prayer leading up to Annual Conference was that we could leave our time together with a renewed sense of purpose for our life and ministry in each local church,” said Bishop Graves. “I am praying, hoping, and expecting God’s people to do great things because that’s what happens when God’s people pray! May it be so!”

Prayer Resources

The following were resources used leading up to and during the 2023 Annual Conference session that are being made available to local churches to tailor for use in their own context.

- [Prayer Stations](#)
- [Outline of pre-conference prayer gatherings](#)
- [Prayer moments](#) | [Gratitude Prayer Sheet](#)
- [Monthly Prayer Resources](#)
- [Prayer focused Book Club](#)



Celebrating God’s faithfulness through mission, ministry & evangelism

Churches throughout the conference continue to demonstrate how great God’s faithfulness is through mission, ministry, and evangelism.

Evangelistically Fruitful Congregations

The mission of the church is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. A significant dimension of the disciple-making process is that of leading people to make a commitment to God through baptism and profession of faith in Jesus Christ.

Reaching new persons with the gospel is at the very heart of every church’s purpose. Below are congregations in each district that charted the largest net gain in membership, the largest number of professions of faith, the best ratio of professions of faith with regard to membership in 2022, and every local church showing a net gain in membership for 2022.

Reynolds Chapel UMC was the overall conference leader with the largest net gain in membership, Vineville UMC led the conference in the largest number of professions of faith, and Greater Trinity UMC had the best ratio of professions of faith.

The churches with the largest net gain in membership in each district in 2022 were:

Coastal: St. Simons Island
North Central: Vineville
Northeast: Pittman Park
Northwest: St. Paul
South Central: Harpers Chapel
Southwest: Reynolds Chapel

The churches with the largest number of professions of faith in each district in 2022 were:

Coastal: Wesley Monumental
North Central: Vineville
Northeast: Pittman Park
Northwest: St. Paul
South Central: Central (Fitzgerald)
Southwest: Moultrie First

The churches with the best ratio of professions of faith in each district in 2022 were:

Coastal: Greater Trinity
North Central: Christ (Warner Robins)
Northeast: Bethany (Burke County)
Northwest: Wesley (Howard)
South Central: Manor
Southwest: Putney

Every local church showing a net gain in membership for 2022 has been designated an Evangelistically Fruitful Congregation.

Coastal District

ConneXion
Hinesville
Jekyll Island
Midway
Pinkney Chapel
Richmond Hill
Speedwell
St. Simons Island
Trinity (Savannah)
Waverly

North Central District

Asbury (Jeffersonville)
Centenary
Christ (Warner Robins)

Jeffersonville
Martha Bowman
Perry
Rockledge
Sandersville
Shurlington
Vineville

Northeast District

Bethany (Burke Co.)
Brooklet
Center
Fairhaven
Habersham
Mt. Vernon
Nepsey-Warren
Pittman Park
Statesboro First
Wadley First

Northwest District

Byron
Ellerslie
Leslie
Midland
St. Paul
Waverly Hall
Wesley (Howard)

South Central District

Bickley
Blackshear First
Graham
Harpers Chapel
Hopewell (Baxley)
Manor
Patterson
Sheltons Chapel
Shiloh (Lowndes Co)
Tifton First
West Green

Southwest District

Bethany (Mitchell Co)
Cordele First
El Faro
Iron City
Midway (Cordele)
Reynolds Chapel

Fully Connectional Churches

Also recognized were those churches that were fully connectional in 2022 by giving 100% or more of their apportionments. [Click here to view a full list.](#)

Mission Giving

The generosity of South Georgia United Methodists in their mission giving makes an impact in the Kingdom of God every single day. Mission giving keeps with our mission to “make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world.”

Second Mile Giving

Second Mile Giving is an exciting and significant element of the stewardship program within our connectional system at both the General Church and Conference levels. One official Second Mile Giving program within The United Methodist Church is The Advance for Christ and His Church. In 1948, the General Conference launched the Advance as a call to Christians to help rebuild a world shattered by World War II.

The first mile, or priority, continues to be for local churches to fulfill their commitment to the World Service Fund, Conference Benevolences, and other apportioned funds. Second mile stewardship through The Advance fosters partnerships between those who give and those who receive. Through Advance gifts, persons determine and support their own individual and local congregation’s giving priorities.

Conference Advance Specials are projects geographically located within the boundary of the South Georgia Conference. They have been screened by the Conference Outreach Team and authorized by the South Georgia Conference to solicit support from local churches.

Three Star Churches

Local churches are challenged by the Conference Outreach Team to achieve stars of excellence in Second Mile Giving by:

- sharing faithfully in the total mission of the church by paying 100% of all apportionments;
- investing a minimum of \$25 in at least one fruitful ministry listed in each of the Six Lanes of the Advance; and
- boldly extending support of at least one ministry listed in the PLUS lane.

[Click here to view a list of Three Star Churches for 2022.](#)

Carruth Mission Awards

The Carruth Mission Awards were inaugurated in honor of Rev. Carlton and Mrs. Augusta Carruth for their many years of faithful service and support of missions.

Highest Total Given to Missions: Isle of Hope

Highest Per Capita Given to Missions: Wesley (Howard Charge)

The churches with the highest total given to missions in each district were:

Coastal: Isle of Hope

North Central: Vineville

Northeast: Statesboro First

Northwest: Epworth (Columbus)

South Central: Central (Fitzgerald)

Southwest: Cordele First

The churches with the highest per capita given to missions in each district were:

Coastal: Isle of Hope
North Central: Davisboro
Northeast: Fair Haven
Northwest: Wesley (Howard Charge)
South Central: Central (Fitzgerald)
Southwest: Ozell

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Memorial Service 2023: 'To Dwell in the Land of Promise'

A Memorial Service for those faithful servants who served in the South Georgia Annual Conference was held Tuesday morning, June 6, at 11 a.m. as conference members gathered at the UGA Tifton Conference Center in Tifton, Ga.

The Rev. Dr. Derek McAleer, South Georgia retired minister, asked those gathered to think about that great Hall of Faith found in Hebrews 11, which he says is one of the most challenging and beautiful passages anywhere in scripture for him.

“We know their stories. And we know they have moments of great glory, but they’ve also got scars,” said Dr. McAleer in speaking of those mentioned in Hebrews 11. “Occasionally they stretch to the heights of grace and then they fall to the depths of sin. The Bible is unflinching about the character of God's people. It holds no secrets and minces no words. But knowing that they are far from examples of untarnished glory, God nevertheless sets them before us as examples of what it means to walk in faith with Him.”

Those we honor today, says Dr. McAleer, are neither more perfect nor less perfect than Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph.

“God sees them with all their flaws,” said Dr. McAleer. “They have provided for us examples of what it means to walk in faith. Sometimes that example is what it means to stand up for God. Sometimes that example is what it means to stand before God and bow your head and say, ‘will you take me back?’ They recounted their vision, they regained their obedience, and they walked that path a little bit further to that city whose maker and builder is God.”

Dr. McAleer then reminded those gathered that this world is not our home, and despite all of our work in ministry will never be our home for we will dwell in the Land of Promise.

“Our home is with God, and He has prepared a place for us, and He has built the city for us,” said Dr. McAleer. “He who prepared that place for us is preparing us for that place. Just like he prepared those who we have honored today.

“And we are grateful to know that any of that preparation work that is not finished when we die is completed then. We believe in sanctification. And that process completes when we are taken up into glory.”
Those being remembered include:

Clergy

Marshall Simpson Howell
May 14, 1943 – April 8, 2022

Sylvia L. Ross
June 9, 1930 – May 5, 2022

Robert Wesley Clark
August 28, 1926 – June 1, 2022

James William “Bill” Dupree
October 8, 1932 – June 4, 2022

Vergil Lacy “V.L.” Daughtery, Jr.
January 11, 1934 – June 8, 2022

James Martin Ford
January 27, 1943 – June 9, 2022

Charles Gilbert “Gill” Tripp
October 25, 1933 – July 16, 2022

Roy Lee Dial III
June 30, 1944 – August 28, 2022

Charles Douglas “Buddy” Coss
November 27, 1941 – August 31, 2022

Robert Franklin “Bob” Williams, Jr.
June 8, 1942 – September 11, 2022

John Monroe Clements
June 9, 1936 – September 17, 2022

Jimmy Lee Gilbert
May 2, 1948 – September 19, 2022

Robert Lamar “Bob” Herrington, Sr.
September 21, 1928 – September 20, 2022

Frank Henry Harris, Jr.
January 25, 1931 – September 26, 2022

William Alfred Smith
December 31, 1930 – October 12, 2022

Sylvia Ann Brantley Kersey
July 29, 1940 – November 13, 2022

Wayne Allen MacDonald
July 22, 1950 – December 2, 2022

Grady Estes Vance
January 12, 1949 – January 24, 2023

John Milton Bagwell
February 4, 1928 – March 28, 2023

Spouses

Pauline O'Dell Aycock
Surviving Spouse of James David Aycock, Sr.
June 2, 1929 – April 22, 2022

Margaret Rosetta "Rose" King
Spouse of Bishop James King
July 6, 1944 – April 27, 2022

Rosalie Gaye Rentz
Spouse of John Cornell Rentz
October 3, 1950 – April 29, 2022

Janelle Ann O'Neil
Surviving Spouse of Edwin Bryan O'Neil
December 8, 1932 – June 3, 2022

Jacqueline Johnson Varnell
Spouse of Richard F. Varnell
July 29, 1948 – August 10, 2022

Mary Elizabeth Grantham Robertson
Surviving Spouse of Rudolph Edward Grantham
December 30, 1935 – September 12, 2022

Naomi Lorene Reed Ferris
Surviving Spouse of Orville Leroy Ferris
July 17, 1928 – October 20, 2022

Hazel Eugenia Wigglesworth Beverly
Surviving Spouse of Forest J. Beverly, Jr.
March 17, 1928 – October 22, 2022

Brenda J. Lavender Porter
Surviving Spouse of James Freeman Porter, Sr.
January 27, 1944 – October 23, 2022

Cora Anthony Herndon
Surviving Spouse of George W. Herndon
January 10, 1930 – December 15, 2022

O. Doris Vanstone
Surviving Spouse of John F. Vanstone
March 17, 1935 – January 2, 2023

Carolyn May Banker
Surviving Spouse of Kenneth Reinhold Banker

May 28, 1945 – January 27, 2023

Emily Day Wilson Watson
Surviving Spouse of W. Hampton Watson, Jr.
July 5, 1929 – January 28, 2023

Brenda Fay Aldrich France
Spouse of Jesse Wayne France
March 19, 1953 – February 3, 2023

Nona Mae Hodges Foster
Surviving Spouse of S. La Vaughn Foster
October 18, 1927 – February 18, 2023

Ruth Khaw
Spouse of Bernie Khaw
March 3, 1949 – February 21, 2023

Margaret Elizabeth Smith Carruth
Surviving Spouse of Edward H. Carruth
November 4, 1921 – March 7, 2023

The Conference Memoirs Committee and the Conference Worship Committee help plan and lead the Memorial Service. They also put together a Book of Remembrance that contains beautiful tributes to each of these faithful saints who have passed away in the past year and presents one to each family prior to the service.



A beautiful, peaceful, loving spirit among us

**FROM THE BISHOP
DAVID GRAVES**

Friends of the South Georgia Conference, we have just concluded a wonderful 3 days of being together in Tifton, Georgia. There was a beautiful spirit, a peaceful spirit, a loving spirit among us. We have had wonderful worship, tremendous preaching and music, and we were so inspired by our morning and evening times of worship. I heard so many people say there was just such a wonderful spirit here. People have come away inspired and encouraged. One of the surprising things was for people to see there are still a bunch of us in the South Georgia Conference who are still a part of The United Methodist Church. And we turned the page this week. We are moving forward. We are going to be focused on making disciples. We are going to be focused on changing our communities. There was a spirit of empowerment as we came away from this annual conference. So now as you are back in your local church, I hope that you will be encouraged and inspired. Thanks be to God for what all happened here in Tifton!

[WATCH THIS VIDEO FROM BISHOP GRAVES](#)



The Perfect Robe

By Dr. D. Craig Rikard

A dear elderly clergyman loaned me one of his robes for my ordination. Robes are very expensive; thus, I was thankful he cared about me enough to see that I would be ordained in proper attire. Forty-five minutes before the service I removed the robe from the garment bag and put it on. The zipper was torn the entire length of the robe. There were also tears here and there due to the fabric's age and brittleness. I then succumbed to fear of embarrassment. I would be ordained in a worn, tattered robe!

I quickly found Gail and asked her to help find any pins possible. We gathered enough to hide the tears and make the robe usable.

While sitting in the same sanctuary last week where I was ordained 45 years earlier, I watched the new ordinands kneel in their robes. It was then I began to thank God for that torn, broken robe. I was a young man, with a painful past and broken heart for my mom who wasn't there. She had recently passed at age 47. I was terrified that I had no sterling reputation of being a good, young man. And, yet, God called me.

That robe reminds me that all of us come to God as we are. We are torn, heartbroken, scarred, and feel unworthy. However, God called me as I was. I had nothing to offer but a broken heart, emotional pain, a rebellious past, and fear I couldn't possibly serve God as I was. I wore the perfect robe.

Just as I pinned and moved fabric around to make the robe useful, God would repair, heal, and make me useful for the rest of my life.

If you feel too broken, or believe you carry too much pain to serve God, stop, take a breath, and think. Beneath all the "disqualifiers" is your beautiful soul of eternal worth. It is a soul not yet complete, but God knows its sacred purpose. Answer God where you are, as you are. God in Christ will clothe you in forgiveness, hope, and purpose for the rest of your life.

Dr. D. Craig Rikard is a retired South Georgia pastor.



Let Us Pray!

JOHN WESLEY MOMENTS
DAVE HANSON

If John Wesley were here today, he would say, "Let us pray!"

He would remind us that God does nothing in this world except in response to sincere, heartfelt prayer. You pray when you repent. You pray to receive salvation. You pray when you surrender to God's will. You pray asking God to sanctify you. You pray for power to witness. Nothing in the spiritual realm is accomplished without prayer.

John Wesley was a man of prayer. He rose early in the morning and prayed. He prayed prayers every hour. His life was steeped in prayer. He preached all over England, and it broke his heart to find many cold, lifeless congregations. People and churches then and now can only be brought to life by prayer.

How much prayer? A lot of prayer!

Someone asked me at my retirement, “Dave, looking back over your ministry, what would you have done differently?” I said, “I would have prayed more.” How about you?

The Rev. Dave Hanson is a retired pastor and John Wesley scholar.

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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.

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

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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.](#)

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June 18 Lesson: God’s Servant King

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

Sunday School Lesson for the week of June 18, 2023
By Jay Harris

Lesson Scripture: Ezekiel 37:21-28

Key Verse:

My dwelling place shall be over them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. (Ezekiel 37:27)

Lesson Aims

- To learn about the illustration of the two sticks and the historical background of the message
- To explore the ways God sought to bring unity to what was divided
- To apply this unifying work in the context of God's reign
- To reflect on the ways we might be tempted to commit apostasy
- To compare the servant king that Ezekiel speaks of with Jesus
- To contemplate how God dwells in us and our life together

Introducing this Lesson's Theme: God's Servant King

The theme for the summer quarter is “the Righteous Reign of God.” For a couple of weeks, we have been studying the reign of the One who not only created the universe, but also continues to rule over it. The God who created is still creating, and the goal is to bring about a new creation. Throughout scripture, God promotes the vision of God's reign as a source of hope for God's people.

We sing about this in the hymn, “This Is My Father's World,” written by Maltbie D. Babcock in 1901. In the last verse, it says: *“This is my Father's world | O let me ne'er forget | That though the wrong seems oft so strong | God is the Ruler yet. | This is my Father's world: | Why should my heart be sad? | The Lord is King: | let the heaven's ring! | God reigns; let the earth be glad!”*

In this first unit of our Summer Quarter study, we have been exploring the way that the prophets have helped God's people get their hearts and minds around the hope of God's reign. The theme for this lesson is “God's Servant King,” and it comes from the prophet Ezekiel. Ezekiel was a prophet whom God called from among those who were taken into the Babylonian captivity in the 6th century B.C. He was called to give hope to his fellow exiles.

We are going to explore how the promise of a coming King would be used by God to advance a shared understanding of God's reign and build hope among God's people. We will begin our exploration by looking at an illustration that God told Ezekiel to use to frame his message.

The Illustration of Two Sticks

¹⁵ The word of the LORD came to me: ¹⁶ Mortal, take a stick and write on it, “For Judah and the Israelites associated with it”; then take another stick and write on it, “For Joseph (the stick of Ephraim) and all the house of Israel associated with it.” (Ezekiel 37:15-16)

The two sticks served as an illustration of the divided kingdom that symbolized the decline of God's people. The high point before the divided kingdom was when Israel was one united kingdom under the reign of King David. His son, Solomon, took it even higher in some respects, but then Solomon committed the sin of apostasy—he allowed his heart to be turned away from worshiping God alone to also worshiping the gods of his many wives (1 Kings 11). Due to Solomon's apostasy, his son's rashness, and old tribal animosities, the kingdom was divided into two kingdoms in the following generation: a northern kingdom (Ephraim/Israel) and a southern kingdom (Judah).

In the centuries that followed, all the kings of the northern kingdom did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, following after other gods. When the Assyrian war machine swept over the region in the 8th century B.C., the northern kingdom fell, and the people were scattered over a wide region (2 Kings 17). Although a few kings of Judah followed in the ways of their ancestor David and did what was right in the sight of the Lord, most of the kings of Judah did what was evil. Less than two centuries after the northern kingdom fell to the Assyrians, the southern kingdom, Judah, fell to the Babylonians, and its people were taken into captivity in Babylon. Ezekiel's audience would understand the illustration of the two sticks all too well.

In the next two verses, God tells Ezekiel to take the two sticks and hold them together so that the two sticks appear to be one. Then God told Ezekiel what to say.

21 Then say to them, “Thus says the Lord GOD: I will take the people of Israel from the nations among which they have gone and will gather them from every quarter and bring them to their own land.

God was going to gather his people who had been displaced by war and oppression. Notice that the scripture says that God will gather them “from the *nations* [plural] among which they have gone... from *every quarter*.” Although Ezekiel was addressing his fellow exiles in Babylon, the scope of the message was much deeper and wider. God was not only going to gather the exiles in Babylon and take them to their homeland, God was also going to gather the descendants of the tribes of the northern kingdom Israel who had been taken from their homeland and scattered among many nations by the Assyrians more than a century earlier.

God was gathering all the Jews in Diaspora. The term “Jews in Diaspora” refers to those who share the same Hebrew ancestry but have been scattered by war and oppression. The term is still used today to refer to Jews who live all over the world, some by ancient wars and persecutions, some by persecutions and attempted racial extermination as late as the 20th century, and some who migrated around the world by choice. Any ethnic group may refer to their members living in diaspora. The word “diaspora” means scattered like the spores of a plant.

Ezekiel's announcement that God was gathering his people came at a time when God's people had been scattered for a long time and over a wide region. This was a very big announcement with far reaching implications. The Jews in Babylon would be gathered with relatives from all over whom they had never met. Ezekiel was announcing a family reunion like no other. Imagine the effect on the Babylonian exiles of such an announcement. It would have been difficult to believe. Believe it or not, this is exactly what came to be when the Persian ruler, Cyrus, conquered the Babylonians and let all the displaced peoples in his empire return to their homeland.

Think of what this would do, for someone in this situation, to their sense of identity and their sense of belonging. To know they would be reunited with relatives from all over, separated for over a century, would remind them how big their spiritual family was, and also how important they were. They were, and are, no less than the covenant people of God. Don't you think that God wanted them to be reminded of their shared identity? Ultimately, their story is a part of our story as Christians. We are a part of one big family with God steering a divine destiny.

God had more in mind than just gathering exiles and reuniting God's family. God was righting the wrongs that had occurred in the history of God's people.

22 I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel, and one king shall be king over them all. Never again shall they be two nations, and never again shall they be divided into two kingdoms.

When the kingdom was divided into north and south, we are informed that it was a delayed punishment for Solomon's apostasy, that it was a reaction against the rashness of Solomon's son, Rehoboam, and that it also represented the resumption of old tribal hostilities and rivalries. To sum it up, the divided kingdom was the result of sinful behavior.

So, when God took the initiative to do a new thing, what did God do? God set out to unite what was divided. God was offering forgiveness and redemption and intended to roll back the consequences of sin and division. God wanted God's people to imagine a time when they would be reunited under one king, become one nation again on the mountains of Israel, and remain united forever. The people whom God was gathering were all sons and daughters of Abraham and of Jacob. They were all the descendants of the Exodus generation which was delivered from bondage in Egypt, and they were all descendants of the Deuteronomy generation which entered the Promised Land. God was rewriting the story of all these scattered people so that it would revert to the way it once was and always should have been.

What does the history of division in the history of God's people teach you about division in general? What do you think God desires to gather in our time? What divisions does God want to heal? How do you think this applies to the ongoing work of God through his rule and reign?

Tackling the Problem of Apostasy

Gathering what was scattered and reuniting what was divided would have been wonderful news, but this alone would not address the source of the original problem. God's hopeful vision tackles this head-on.

²³ They shall never again defile themselves with their idols and their detestable things or with any of their transgressions. I will save them from all the apostasies into which they have fallen and will cleanse them. Then they shall be my people, and I will be their God.

We have already used the word apostasy to describe when Solomon followed after the gods of his many wives. The root of the word *apostasy* means *defection*. To commit apostasy is to abandon one's faith. When First and Second Kings describes the evil that the kings of Judah and Israel did, it includes a reference to the apostasy they committed.

How did the kings and the people get to the point where they committed apostasy? Did they knowingly abandon their faith? Perhaps they did, or perhaps they did not. Perhaps they did not knowingly set out to abandon their faith. It is very plausible that most people who abandon their faith do not do so knowingly *at first*. I find it hard to believe that Solomon woke up one morning and thought to himself, "I am going to abandon my faith." I am sure that Solomon abandoned his faith, at least in his own mind, *by degrees*.

Not only did Solomon most likely abandon his faith by degrees, he did it by thinking he could hold two mutually exclusive allegiances together. Why not love the Lord, the God of his people, whom he was taught to love, AND follow after the gods of his many foreign wives? A word we use for this is the word syncretism. Syncretism is the amalgamation of different religions.

The first two commandments that God gave to his people through Moses address this. The first is "you shall have no other gods before me," and the second is, "you shall make no graven images." We either worship God exclusively or we do not worship God at all. God accepts no rivals in our affections.

The second commandment, the prohibition against graven or carved images, is closely related to the first commandment. Not only is worshipping idols the same as worshipping other gods, but the practice of making an idol, a material representation of God, reduces God. The practice of making idols to a god and worshipping the idol is the same as attempting to manipulate the god. Whether this is the intention of the worshiper does not matter, because the result is the same. The worship that God demands of God's people is imageless worship so that God remains sovereign in our hearts and minds—free from our attempts to reduce God, manipulate God, or make God a projection of our wants and desires.

It was too easy in the idol worship that the people practiced to make worship a projection of either their sensuality, their wish fulfillment, or protection from all that they feared. The prophets were good at pointing out the fallacy of idol worship. They talked about how, with the same piece of wood, they would use part of it to make an idol and another part to build a fire. You couldn't help but bring God down in this way. They talked about how the idol was made according to the imagination and craftsmanship of the maker, thereby proving that the idol could be no more than the maker. The person makes the god that in turn makes the person. The prophets talked about how ridiculous it was to make a god they could carry.

Why were the people of Israel and Judah so susceptible in those days to the idol worship of their neighbors? They saw their neighbors praying for fertility, sensual fulfillment, wish fulfillment, abundant crops, victory in war, and such things, and they wanted to improve their odds at life—fear of missing out. They saw the intensity of their neighbors' devotion. The problem was that they were denying themselves the spiritual formation that God intended for them. They denied themselves the privilege of being formed by the one true God who is known through God's Word and special relationship with God's people.

We are more than the sum total of our basest fears and desires. God has a special story to write through our lives.

The good thing about the Exile is that the experience taught God's people about the error of their ways. They also learned about the cultures that the worship of others gods and idols produced. They suffered under their oppression and suffered from their sinful behavior. Their eyes were opened.

God was giving God's people a fresh start where they had the opportunity never again to "defile themselves with their idols and their detestable things or with any of their transgressions." They could be saved from all the apostasies into which they had fallen. God could cleanse them from their unfaithful past. They could again be God's special possession as a people. God desired to be their God. God had never stopped desiring this.

When we explore the idea of apostasy in our time, we must avoid looking at the apostasy of others, and think how we ourselves suffer from our own divided loyalties. What temptations exist for you? What are the metaphorical "idols" you might be tempted to serve?

God's Servant King

In verse 22, God announced through his prophet Ezekiel that there would be one king over all his people. The characteristics of this king are revealed in verse 24.

²⁴ "My servant David shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd. They shall follow my ordinances and be careful to observe my statutes. ²⁵ They shall live in the land that I gave to my servant Jacob, in which your ancestors lived; they and their children and their children's children shall live there forever, and my servant David shall be their prince forever.

When Ezekiel made this announcement, King David had ruled and passed into the annals of history several centuries earlier. Moreover, the last kings of Judah had been deposed by the Babylonians and taken into captivity. The reign of kings had come to an end along with Judah's independence. Soon, the Persian government would defeat the Babylonians, and the way would be made for the exiles to return home. The descendants of the former nations of Israel and Judah would no longer exist as an independent, sovereign nation until the middle of the 20th century, and even then, as we know, it would not be ruled by kings.

The descendants of Israel and Judah would, however, be a people with a precious heritage and a distinct spiritual identity. They would have some limited self-rule as a vassal state under the rule of the Persian empire, then later the Greek empire, then, still later, the Roman empire. They would be allowed to have leaders handpicked from among them by the empire and installed as provincial governors.

One of these governors, Zerubbabel, would come from the line of David. It does not seem plausible that Zerubbabel would be the one intended by God to fulfill the role of the one referred to as God's servant David who shall be king and shepherd over God's people forever.

So, what are we to make of this announcement of the return of King David? It is in part a metaphor, but it is used to describe a real hope. We go back to 2 Samuel 7 to the promise God made to King David and to the people, which said that God would preserve David's dynasty forever. Of course, God's people did not keep up their end of what was a conditional promise. The condition was that the people would remain faithful, and they were not.

Because God is God, however, the unfaithfulness of God's people does not limit God if God wants to preserve his promise to David and God's people. It is because of pronouncements like the one in our scripture, that the hope of a return of a King, like David but even greater, was kept alive.

I am reminded of *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy by J.R.R. Tolkien. In that story, there is a Ranger named Strider who helps protect the shire and is the confidant of Gandalf the wizard. He becomes a member of the Fellowship of the Ring. As the story unfolds, we begin to learn of his true identity. He is Aragorn, the son and true heir to the throne of Isildur. Before his identity was revealed, it had been widely believed there was no longer a living heir to the throne. His true identity had been hidden until he was ready to assume his role as king of Gondor and the lost realm of Arnor. The third book of the trilogy is entitled *The Return of the King* because of the pivotal role he was destined to fulfill in the triumph of good in the battle between good and evil.

The promise of David resuming his throne is the Bible's very own "Return of the King" story. The promised king is not literally about King David himself returning from the grave. The promised king is the promised Messiah of God's people, also called the Son of David. The idea is that this Son of David is waiting in the wings for the day he is to be revealed on the world's stage. Later in the New Testament, people like the blind beggar, Bartimaeus, recognized who Jesus was and called out to him, "Jesus, Thou Son of David, have mercy on me." He and others were heralding the Return of the King in their midst.

Through the message of Ezekiel, God refers to David as God's *servant* David. God weaves together the image of David as a king with the image of David as a shepherd, which is a specific kind of a servant. It's no mere coincidence that Jesus referred to himself as the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep. In this way, Jesus contrasted the way he related to people to the way the religious leaders related to people.

Before Jesus spoke in this tender way in John 10, God had spoken to God's people just as tenderly through Ezekiel in the 34th chapter. In the 34th chapter, God speaks of false shepherds, who care more about feeding themselves than feeding the sheep under their care, who did not protect the sheep from predators, who allowed the sheep to get lost. God promises then to intervene:

“For thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will search for my sheep and will sort them out. As shepherds sort out their flocks when they are among scattered sheep, so I will sort out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness... I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD... I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them; he shall feed them and be their shepherd.” (Ezekiel 34:11-12, 15, 23)

Notice that sometimes God says that he himself will fulfill the role of shepherd, and other times, God talks about sending a shepherd, a King in the mold of King David. (Remember that David was a shepherd when he was young.) Think about this for a moment. If the goal is for believers to envision God as their Ruler and to envision God’s reign, why talk about any King other than God himself?

We can gain insight into this by going back to when God’s people first proposed the idea of God giving them a king. We go back to the prophet Samuel who had been raised up by God to be the people’s leader in the time when they were called judges. After Samuel had been leading God’s people well for a generation, the people came to him one day and said to him, “You are old, and your sons do not follow in your ways; appoint for us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations.” (1 Samuel 8:5) Samuel indeed was old and his sons were corrupt. The people sensed the coming leadership vacuum.

Samuel took an immediate dislike to the idea and took the matter to God. God understood why Samuel was reacting the way he did. God explained to Samuel, *“Listen to the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. Just as they have done to me from the day I brought them up out of Egypt to this day, forsaking me and serving other gods, so also they are doing to you. Now then, listen to their voice; only, you shall solemnly warn them and show them the ways of the king who shall reign over them.”* (1 Samuel 8:7-9)

Both God and Samuel questioned the people’s motives in requesting a king to govern them, because their request represented an implied rejection of a more direct relationship with God as their Ruler and King. So, why did God tell Samuel to listen to the people and allow them to have a king if they insisted? God told Samuel to remind the people of the ways of kings and their tendency to oppress their subjects, which Samuel did, but the people still insisted. Why did God allow this? The reason is that God meets his people where they are. Even though a more direct relationship with God as their king was God’s ideal, the people had proven they were not capable. So, God set out to make the best of the situation.

The first king, Saul, had all the outward characteristics of an ideal king, but inside he was tortured by his own ambition and insecurities. God told Samuel to begin the search for his replacement, and told him not to look for the outward characteristics, for God looks at the heart. That’s when David was found. History would show that David was not perfect, but he had a deep personal relationship with God that made David the standard bearer in that respect. God built up this incredible story around David. As we have been learning, the story is ongoing.

What did God know, that the people, and even Samuel, did not know? Although God desires the most direct relationship with us, God knows that our brains and our hearts need an experience of God that is mediated—something between us and God. If the reign of an ideal King, even a promised King, makes the reign of God more accessible to us, then God uses it. The ideal of a David-like King shares characteristics with us, like being a dutiful servant and a tender, caring shepherd, but this King also points us to God himself as our King. The promised reign of the coming King does not replace God’s reign, it extends and mediates God’s reign and brings the whole notion of serving God to our level.

This way of presenting the reign of God is incarnational. “Incarnation” means “with flesh.” This is why Christians have identified the promise of a Servant King and Shepherd with the coming of Jesus. Jesus is the Word made flesh, full of grace and truth, sent to dwell with us on earth. His gracious life and ministry, his death and resurrection, and his ascension into heaven to be seated at the right hand of the Father, all show us how he came to dwell with us and how he reigns beside the Father through the Holy Spirit. Jesus is the One who is always serving the Father and serving us. No wonder that one of his titles is Son of David.

How have you thought about the connection between Jesus and the reign of God? How do you think the Holy Spirit works in this?

Renewing the Covenant Promise of God to Dwell Among His People

The stated mission of Jesus, the Word made flesh, and the mission of the Holy Spirit is the indwelling of God in the midst of the world. The prophecy in our scripture lesson paints this picture.

²⁶ I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them, and I will bless them and multiply them and will set my sanctuary among them forevermore. ²⁷ My dwelling place shall be over them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ²⁸ Then the nations shall know that I the LORD sanctify Israel, when my sanctuary is among them forevermore.”

The arc of the Covenant Story between God and God’s people is about God blessing, sanctifying, loving, possessing, and dwelling in the midst of a people. It is vitally important that we remember this and that we live in light of this. It is also important to remember that this is not just for us. One purpose is that the nations know and see the ways that the Lord blesses God’s people, individually and in their life together. When God talks about a sanctuary, God is not talking about a physical structure. Those on the outside looking in should see our life together as a sanctuary where God dwells. They should see unity, not division. They should see a gathering of diverse people who share the Lord in common. They should see a servant spirit lived out in us. They should see abundant evidence that we are striving to be faithful subjects in the reign of God.

How do you think God dwells in us? How well do people see God dwelling in us? Do people experience the reign of God in our life together? How could we work more closely with the reign of God?

Prayer

God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, you anointed your servant David to give us a perpetual reminder of the supreme value of a personal relationship with you. Give us constant reminders of your reign and what living under your reign looks like, that we might be blessed as you would have us be blessed and that we might demonstrate to others what blessings that could be experiencing, through Christ our Lord, who reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forevermore, Amen.

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June 25 Lesson: Renewed in God’s Love

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

Sunday School Lesson for the week of June 25, 2023

By Jay Harris

Lesson Scripture: Zephaniah 3:14-20

Key Verse:

The LORD, your God, is in your midst, a warrior who gives victory; he will rejoice over you with gladness; he will renew you in his love; he will exult over you with loud singing. (Zephaniah 3:17)

Lesson Aims

- To introduce the theme of renewal in God's loving reign
- To acquaint ourselves with the Prophet Zephaniah and his times
- To explore how seasons of judgment often must precede seasons of renewal
- To learn about the biblical idea of a remnant and what God can do with a remnant
- To reflect on the ways we are renewed in God's love and experience God as a warrior
- To imagine our place alongside God as a warrior on the side of the oppressed
- To give thanks for ways God has brought us home

How God's People Are Renewed in God's Loving Reign

As we continue to study the Reign of God this quarter, we look at this theme through the eyes of Zephaniah, one of the so-called minor prophets. We should not consider the minor prophets to be minor in terms of their importance. The only reason they are referred to in this way is because they wrote fewer words. One of the benefits of studying a prophet like Zephaniah is that we can take in the whole message since it is only three chapters. We can therefore set the particular passage we are studying in context. In this case, the passage comes at the end of the message. Therefore, everything in the message builds up to the declarations in our scripture.

The theme of today's lesson is "Renewed in God's Love." The phrase comes from the key verse which proclaims that the Lord God is in the midst of his people, a warrior who brings victory, who rejoices over his people with gladness, and renews them with his love. It is all that leads up to this declaration that teaches us so much about the reign of God.

An Introduction to the Prophet Zephaniah and His Times

To start at the beginning, we should first look at what is said about Zephaniah in the first verse. We learn three things in this verse. First, it says that the word of the Lord came to Zephaniah. This is a prophet's call from God. Then, there is a genealogy, which is somewhat brief, but longer than most prophets. Zephaniah is identified as the great-great grandson of King Hezekiah. Zephaniah had some royal blood. The first verse also tells us that Zephaniah was active during the reign of King Josiah who reigned from 640 B.C. to 609 B.C. Because of the death of Josiah's father in a palace coup, Josiah's reign began when he was eight years old.

The genealogy shows that Zephaniah and Josiah were distant relatives. Attention was also being drawn to the connection between Josiah and Hezekiah, because both were considered to be reformers. In their respective reigns, both Hezekiah and Josiah removed the pagan influences from the temple and from the practice of

worship. Essentially, Josiah, became like another Hezekiah. Josiah “walked in the way of his father David” and “did not turn aside to the right or the left.” (2 Kings 22:2)

Second Kings describes the remarkable event that led to the spiritual reforms that King Josiah brought to Judah. Around 621. B.C., Josiah told the high priest to conduct a search for money in the temple that could be used to refurbish the temple. During the high priest’s search, he found the lost Book of the Law. For a long time, scholars have suspected that this lost book was none other than the book of Deuteronomy. When Josiah heard all the specific warnings contained in this book, he tore his clothes as an act of contrition and repentance. Judah’s long pattern of ignoring this book of the law led to its discontinued use. It is easy to imagine the dust collecting on this book until it eventually became unrecognizable. When Josiah read in the book all the warnings that Judah had been ignoring, it was not hard to imagine the wrath of the Lord over Judah.

After Josiah heard the warnings and judgments of the lost book of the law, Josiah led in religious reforms much like the ones Hezekiah led. Josiah also commanded the people to observe the Passover, which had not been observed since the days of the judges. Since Josiah was still only in his mid-20s, when his work as reformer began, it is not difficult to imagine the work of Zephaniah, the prophet, and Josiah, the king, reinforcing one another, although we are not told how closely they actually worked together.

Unfortunately, Josiah’s reforms were short-lived, as were the reforms of Hezekiah before him. Josiah’s reforms were dealt a serious set-back when Josiah was killed in battle before age forty. Zephaniah’s amazing message, however, is still with us today, and God still speaks through Zephaniah’s words about the renewal that is possible through God’s loving reign. The placement of Zephaniah’s prophetic career during the reign of Josiah also makes Zephaniah the first prophetic voice to emerge after the time of Isaiah—a gap of about 70 years.

The Judgment that Precedes and Leads to Renewal

The first chapter of Zephaniah’s message tells of the coming judgment for Judah’s sins. An important backdrop is the gathering Babylonian threat over the region including Judah. Zephaniah imagined a judgment so total that it would have the effect of wiping away everything. It would take this level of destruction to remove the influences that had polluted the worship of God:

“I will stretch out my hand against Judah and against all the inhabitants of Jerusalem, and I will cut off from this place every remnant of Baal and the name of the idolatrous priests, those who bow down on the roofs to the host of the heavens, those who bow down and swear to the LORD but also swear by Milcom, those who have turned back from following the LORD, who have not sought the LORD or inquired of him.” (Zephaniah 1:4-6)

From the corrupt officials and the faithless prophets to the complacent masses, all were warned of the coming judgment. One might wonder how well it served God’s people to be shown such a graphic and dire picture of their future. First of all, destruction would indeed come. When everything around you seems to be coming to an end, you don’t want to hear a word that says in effect, “this is isn’t so bad.” You also don’t want to wonder if God knows what is going on or cares. Secondly, you want to know if there will be a purpose to the destruction. God was making the case that there will be a purpose. A word that is used multiple times is the word “sweep.” Sweeping away all that a people has known creates the conditions for starting over.

The second chapter contains a “judgment of nations,” which is a characteristic feature of the messages of the prophets. Zephaniah addresses a number of the neighboring nations whose sinful actions the people of Judah

would have known. This chapter ends with an emphasis on the judgment against Nineveh, the capital city of the Assyrians whose army destroyed the northern kingdom, Israel. Nineveh would fall to the Babylonians soon after Zephaniah's prophecy in 612 B.C.

We should note that before Zephaniah launched into the judgment of the nations, he addressed his own nation with a word of hope: *"Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land, who do his commands; seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you may be hidden on the day of the LORD's wrath."* (Zeph. 2:3) This was a call to faithfulness to those who will remain after the day of the Lord's judgment comes.

How have you experienced seasons of judgment? Have you ever been tested by a trial in your life that made you realize that your faith was not equal to the task at first? Have you ever been forced in a way by your circumstances to grow in your faith? How were you humbled by the experience?

What God Can Do with a Remnant

The third and final chapter begins with the judgment of Jerusalem. Verse 8 serves as a pivotal verse: *"Therefore wait for me, says the LORD, for the day when I arise as a witness. For my decision is to gather nations, to assemble kingdoms, to pour out upon them my indignation, all the heat of my anger, for in the fire of my passion all the earth shall be consumed."* If Zephaniah's message had ended with these words, it would be one thing, but notice that the Lord tells his people, "Therefore wait for me..." The Lord intended for his people to lean into what God was to do next.

This is when we see that the goal of God's judgment was not annihilation, but to make the way for a fresh start: *"At that time, I will change the speech of the peoples to a pure speech, that all of them may call on the name of the LORD and serve him with one accord."* (Zeph. 3:9) When God says, "at that time," God is referring to the time when the fire of God's righteous anger has burned up all except for that which is pure and enduring. Notice that all the nations that were previously mentioned in the judgment are included in this transformation of the speech of the various peoples. Imagine the removal of deceit, hostile speech, and acrimony to honesty, truth, authenticity, integrity, grace, peace, and calling on the Lord's name together.

The description of this type of divine action is echoed in the New Testament, in the Letter to the Hebrews. Beginning in Hebrews 12:26, we are reminded that once more at the end of time, God will shake not only the earth but also the heaven: *"This phrase, 'Yet once more,' indicates the removal of what is shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain. Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe, for indeed our God is a consuming fire."* (Hebrews 12:27-29)

There are multiple illustrations in scripture that describe the same thing. In some place, the image is wheat that has been threshed on the threshing floor, then sifted so that the good grain remains in the sieve, but the chaff falls through and is swept up and burned. In other places, it is the unfruitful parts of the tree that are pruned so that the tree bears more fruit and the pruned branches are burned. In other places, it is the impurities in the ore that are burned away while retaining the pure silver. It is all about what remains after God does his purging and purifying work—what God calls "the fire of my passion." (Zephaniah 3:8)

It is the remnant which is preserved. Zephaniah describes the faithful remnant: *"For, I will leave in the midst of you a people humble and lowly. They shall seek refuge in the name of the LORD—the remnant of Israel; they shall do no wrong and utter no lies, nor shall a deceitful tongue be found in their mouths. Then they will pasture and lie down, and no one shall make them afraid."* (Zeph. 3:12-13)

You could say that this marks the turning of Zephaniah's message. After all the purging has gone on, what can remain is a totally transformed people with whole-hearted devotion, unified in their service to the Lord, humble, authentic, and resting in God's grace and protection. This was God's goal all along in allowing events to unfold which try and test God's people.

It is important to note that a faithful remnant is not produced by a process of elimination. It's not that the faithful remnant consists of people who were perfectly good all along. No, the faithful remnant are those who have themselves endured trials and testing. They had to come to a place where they relied on the Lord like they never before had relied on him. They built spiritual muscles that they did not know existed before they were tested. To build these muscles, they used spiritual disciplines that were new to them at first. They were driven to their knees—in a good way. They had to learn what was important in life. Whenever we go through trials we learn the difference between wants and needs. We come out knowing that all we really want is what we need. When we truly have what we need, we realize that is what we want more than anything.

The faithful remnant does not consist of those who were merely spared, but it consists of those who have gone through a process of refinement. In the Book of Revelation, the faithful remnant consists of two groups of people. One group consist of those who remain on earth after catastrophic devastation who turn to the Lord and grow in their faith. Another group of the holy remnant consists of those who are in heaven—perfected through persecution, death, and resurrection. We're given a picture of this holy remnant in heaven, dressed in white robes as a sign of victory over the evil one: because *“they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they did not cling to life even in the face of death.”* (Revelation 12:11)

Have you ever felt like God has done a purging or pruning or sweeping away in your life to make the way for something new? Have you ever felt like you were a part of a group that was called to be a remnant? How was God calling you to remain with something in order to stick by and start something new?

What Being Renewed in God's Love Looks Like

In the Book of Zephaniah, when the remnant is finally revealed on earth, the tone of the message totally changes. The tone is one of singing and rejoicing:

**¹⁴ Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;
shout, O Israel!
Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter Jerusalem!**

Do you see why we had to explore the message of Zephaniah from the beginning to this point? This call to sing, shout, rejoice, and exult is all the more remarkable when we consider the long road that it took to get daughter Zion to this celebration. There is a place for recalling the stages the remnant has journeyed through to get to the celebration stage in their life together. There is also a place, however, for turning the page and living into the moment and season of celebration with spirits uplifted and claiming the confidence and boldness that is afforded to God's people by God's grace.

**¹⁵ The LORD has taken away the judgments against you;
he has turned away your enemies.
The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst;
you shall fear disaster no more.**

¹⁶ On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:

**“Do not fear, O Zion;
do not let your hands grow weak.**

What a grace-filled declaration that the Lord has taken away the judgments against his people! The feeling reminds me of the opening verse of the 8th chapter of Romans: “There is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” The “therefore” recalls all that it took to get to this declaration. It took the atoning death of Jesus Christ. No two words signal better the believer’s feeling of a new start and turning of the page than the words, “No Condemnation.” The Lord has taken away the judgments against you.

God allowed the tests and trials that God’s people endured for a time, but at the right time God turned away the enemies of God’s people. For a long time, God’s people had lived in fear of a menacing threat to the north. First, it was the Assyrians, then the Assyrians would be replaced by the Babylonian menace to the north, and then they would live through the time when threat became reality. There is a time, however, when God says, “Enough.” God brings God’s influence to bear, and an army, the Persian army, which was more powerful than the Babylonians, would defeat the enemy of God’s people. The fear, under which God’s people had lived, would be removed under the Persian King, Cyrus.

Can you name enemies that God has turned away in your life? Perhaps those enemies took the form of people in your life who stood unjustly against you. Perhaps the enemies took the form of circumstances that beat you down. Perhaps the enemies took the forms of habits, hurts, or hang-ups that held you back.

Zephaniah not only speaks of enemies that have been turned away, he also speaks about the presence of the King of Israel, the Lord, being in their midst. This is the theme we continue to lean into this summer—the righteous reign of God and its presence in our lives. With the presence of our King, fear of disaster is removed. In the space where so much fear once existed, there can be a sense of relief, lightness of being, confidence, and boldness.

With this new boldness and confidence, hands that had grown weak and atrophied are able to be strengthened again to do God’s work. This is what happens when we understand the presence of God being on our side. We are able to make a contribution with our gifts to work that matters.

**¹⁷ The LORD, your God, is in your midst,
a warrior who gives victory;
he will rejoice over you with gladness;
he will renew you in his love;
he will exult over you with loud singing
¹⁸ as on a day of festival.”**

**I will remove disaster from you,
so that you will not bear reproach for it.**

The title of this lesson has been “Renewed in God’s Love.” In our study, we are being shown all the ways this renewal happens. The judgment stage allowed God’s people to acknowledge their shortcomings, failures, and growing edges. In this space, expressions of remorse and sorrow over one’s actions naturally follow. Asking God for forgiveness begins to overcome the distance felt between the remnant and God. God’s complete forgiveness and restoration enters and makes the distance completely disappear. We understand that the warrior who has fought for us all along is in our midst and has been seeking to renew us in his love all along.

Likewise, the remnant, because of all they had experienced, could hear the declaration that the Lord, *their* God, was *in their midst*. They could understand it, and feel it. The chasm was crossed and the gap between God and his people was eliminated in the consciousness of God's people.

They experienced God as a warrior who gives victory. God was not a warrior who fought against them, but a warrior who fought for them. In all they had experienced, God was fighting *for* them. God fought for them not only in the way God dealt with the Babylonians, but mainly in the ways God fought for the hearts of God's people. God prevails in winning over hearts and minds. God gets what God wants—a warrior who gives victory, who removes disaster, and all the reproach associated with it, who holds a festival celebration, and in all this renews God's people in God's love.

Have you ever thought of God as loving warrior? Have you ever felt God to be present as a warrior in your life, fighting for you or with you? What do you think God was doing in your life at the time?

**¹⁹ I will deal with all your oppressors
at that time.**

**And I will save the lame
and gather the outcast,
and I will change their shame into praise
and renown in all the earth.**

Throughout scripture, God impresses upon us how much God is against oppression in all its forms, and how God is for the oppressed. God is a warrior who is known for dealing with oppressors and saving the oppressed, the lame, and the outcast. God is about removing the stigma associated with being oppressed. God is about removing the blame often directed toward victims for somehow being at fault. God is about removing the shame projected upon those who have been shunned by the sinful actions of a society that oppresses.

The very fact that Christian preaching does not address oppression as much as scripture, as a whole, does should say something to us. Imagine our loving warrior, acting on behalf of the oppressed. We should consider on whose side we are.

How much are we working with God to save the oppressed, the lame, and the outcast? What joys can we point to as we witnessed people's shame been turned into praise? Can we stand with those whose shame has been turned into praise, because we were part of God's work? Can we link arms with those who have become the renowned in all the earth through the efforts of God, the loving warrior?

**²⁰ At that time I will bring you home,
at the time when I gather you;
for I will make you renowned and praised
among all the peoples of the earth,
when I restore your fortunes
before your eyes, says the LORD.**

When we experience the reign of God in all its fulness, we are renewed in God's love with all the intensity of a warrior who has stood with us throughout our life's journey. Just as God's people were able to return home after their time of exile and captivity, one of the overwhelming feelings we have after being tested and tried is that of coming home, of being gathered along with all who are esteemed by God, and are renowned and

praised among all the peoples of the earth. Whatever we may lose during the times of our trials is restored to us even if it is in a different form. Our fortunes are restored before our eyes.

Have you ever experienced loss that you felt was accompanied by a corresponding gain? Have you ever felt something was restored to you? Was it restored in a different form? Have you ever felt a homecoming in your life, like you were coming home? What was home for you? How did you follow through?

Prayer

God of visions | In times of tribulation, You invite the faithful remnant into a better story | Strengthen our faith when we feel under attack, under pressure, or under a cloud of despair | That we may endure, see our faith tested and proven, and lean into hopeful visions you have for us in life | Through Christ, our Vision, 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.



Conference Happenings

2023 Lay Servant Ministries & Certified Lay Ministry

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

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 – Nancylee 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

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Scripture Readings – June 13 edition

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](#)

July 2

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A

- [Genesis 22:1-14](#)
- [Psalm 13](#)
- [Romans 6:12-23](#)
- [Matthew 10:40-42](#)