

SOUTH GEORGIA ADVOCATE – JANUARY 9 EDITION

SEJ Committee on Episcopacy announces episcopal area recommendations

A letter was issued on Monday, January 8 by the Southeastern Jurisdiction Committee on Episcopacy to the delegations of each Annual Conference. Included in the letter are recommendations for episcopal areas for the next quadrennium (if approved, will be effective September 1, 2024). Rev. Doreen Smalls and Mr. Richard Shinhoster, heads of the South Georgia delegation, would now like to share the letter with the South Georgia Conference. [Click here to read the full letter.](#)

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North Central and South Central Districts collect cleaning supplies for UMCOR

By Kelly Roberson

Through the United Methodist Committee on Relief and our United Methodist Connection, South Georgia United Methodists are able to respond immediately to those affected by disasters - whether through monetary assistance, early response teams, or relief supplies.

This past Fall, the North Central and South Central Districts put together 180 UMCOR cleaning kits – also known as flood buckets – to help their neighbors and enable those affected by floods, hurricanes, and tornadoes to begin the overwhelming job of cleaning up.

“When a storm strikes, we look for immediate ways to support those affected through monetary gifts, boots on the ground, or donated goods,” said Kelly Roberson, director of conference ministries. “As United Methodists, however, we know that the time to prepare for a disaster is a year-round process. Relief supplies are one of the tangible ways we can provide care for those most in need following a disaster or during times of crisis, and the time to prepare them is well before they are needed.”

Dr. Paula Lewis, superintendent of the North Central and South Central Districts, Rev. Mike Bankston, North Central District missions chair, and Rev. Joseph Carter, South Central District missions chair, worked together to plan a service project for each district during the Fall charge conference season.

“The North Central District came together and produced 91 buckets for UMCOR, and we also donated enough supplies to have several partial buckets,” said Rev. Bankston. “This demonstrates how amazing our connection truly is. This mission project demonstrates the strength of our UMC connection.”

The South Central District put together an additional 89 buckets for a total of 180. The generous churches of these districts far exceeded expectations.

“One hundred-eighty flood buckets is around \$23,000 worth of ministry together,” said Dr. Lewis. “While we could have put together flood buckets on our own, not many of our churches could have done \$23,000 dollars in buckets alone. That is the strength of our great connectional system in the United Methodist Church. With the connection there is no limit to what we can do together!”

UMCOR collects relief supplies in the form of cleaning kits, hygiene kits and menstrual hygiene kits that are assembled by United Methodist volunteers – just like those in the North Central and South Central Districts – for distribution in the United States and its territories.

The kits are then donated to the [UMCOR Sager Brown Depot](#) – the hub of relief supply operations – or to an [affiliate warehouse](#), where volunteers assemble, verify and pack the kits.

Luis Morales, conference disaster response coordinator, worked with Rev. Grant Abernathy at Crossroads in Perry, GA, where the supplies are stored, and Dr. Stephen Redmond from North Georgia, who drove to Perry to collect the buckets on December 18. The buckets were then delivered to the North Georgia Conference Disaster Response Warehouse at Impact UMC in East Point.

“I am so thankful for the generosity of our churches,” said Luis Morales, conference disaster response coordinator. “We had already taken some of our stored buckets to the Lowndes County area during our Hurricane Idalia response, so these are helping to replenish our collection and were enough to move some to North Georgia.”

The kits are stored at the warehouse until a request for supplies is received. Once a call for a large number of cleaning kits comes in to one of the warehouses, volunteers and staff pack the cleaning kits and then deliver or ship to the communities in need.

As each kit reaches its distribution point and is then given to those most affected by the storm, there is no doubt these buckets are a welcome sight for storm-weary people. These kits bring hope and love as the hard work of cleaning and recovery begins.

WANT TO ASSEMBLE A KIT? HERE’S HOW!

You can help keep UMCOR’s relief supply kit inventory ready to go by sending completed kits or [giving](#) toward the purchase of needed supplies.

UMCOR encourages the purchase of local materials for kits that are appropriate to the context and support the local economy.

Learn how to assemble and ship each UMCOR relief supply kit below:

- [Menstrual Hygiene Kit \(“Period Pack”\) Instructions](#)
- [Hygiene Kit Instructions](#)
- [Cleaning Kit Instructions](#)

NOTE: SCHOOL KITS ARE NO LONGER NEEDED BY THE RELIEF SUPPLY NETWORK.

As the humanitarian relief and development arm of The United Methodist Church, the United Methodist Committee on Relief – UMCOR – assists United Methodists and churches to become involved globally in direct ministry to persons in need. UMCOR comes alongside those who suffer from natural or human-caused disasters – famine, hurricane, war, flood, fire or other events—to alleviate suffering and serve as a source of help and hope for the vulnerable. UMCOR provides relief, response and long-term recovery grants when events overwhelm a community’s ability to recover on their own. UMCOR also provides technical support and training for partners to address emerging and ongoing issues related to disaster relief, recovery, and long-term health and development.



Coppedge-Henley elected as President and CEO of Georgia UM Foundation

During its December 6, 2023 meeting, the Georgia United Methodist Foundation Board of Trustees unanimously approved the Search Committee’s recommendation to elect Rev. Dr. Elizabeth Coppedge-Henley as the Foundation’s next President and CEO, effective January 9, 2024. Coppedge-Henley succeeds Rev. Keith E. Lawder, who returned to his prior role as President and CEO on an interim basis following the departure of Mathew A. Pinson. She is also the first female to serve in this role in the Foundation’s 45-year history.

“Although we met several highly qualified candidates, the Search Committee agreed that Rev. Dr. Elizabeth Coppedge-Henley’s unique gifts and experiences make her the right leader for the Foundation,” said Ruth A. Knox, Chair of the Foundation’s Board of Trustees and Search Committee. “She is eager to strengthen the Foundation’s and her existing relationships, build new ones with clergy and laity in Georgia, and extend the Foundation’s ministries to those with whom we hold current or historically common bonds and connections.”

A native of Dalton, Georgia, Coppedge-Henley grew up at Dalton First UMC, where her parents are still members. She and Jonathan, her husband of 29 years, have two children: Owen and Lora. Educated at Presbyterian College, then Duke Divinity School, and later at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Coppedge-Henley has led local churches for 23 years. She also served for five years in two different positions at the United Methodist Foundation of Western North Carolina – first as Executive Director of the Reynolds Program in Church Leadership and then for three years as the Foundation’s Chief Operating Officer. Coppedge-Henley understands the local church and feels a deep commitment to the Foundation’s and the United Methodist Church’s missions.

Upon her appointment, Coppedge-Henley said, “I believe the Holy Spirit was at work in my acceptance of this position. As an Elder in the Western North Carolina Conference, I have long been committed to the mission of the local church to make disciples for Jesus Christ.

“The current and future potential to help churches and other entities fulfill their missions inspires me. The Georgia United Methodist Foundation’s purpose statement, ‘Our Purpose is Your Mission,’ reminds me that a Methodist foundation critically supports and enables hundreds of churches and other conference ministries to fulfill their mission. Our Wesleyan tradition of evangelism and social action, combined with Spirit-led creativity, stands to help the Foundation further the mission of Methodists in Georgia. Indeed, it is a new day in the life of the church! I am eager to return to Georgia, (re)meet the people, and visit churches to share the gospel and how the Foundation’s ministry can serve them now and in the future.”

Knox expressed her gratitude for Lawder’s numerous contributions during the December 6 board meeting, stating, “We are all grateful to Keith for answering the call to come out of retirement to lead us again in his calm, confident, competent, and compassionate manner through this interim period.”

The Georgia United Methodist Foundation is one of the largest Methodist foundations in the United States, with \$236 million in assets. The Foundation partners with churches, nonprofits, individuals, and families to support the mission and ministry of the church by offering advanced faith-based financial solutions for the Methodist family of Georgia. The Foundation elevates and advances the mission of the church and church-related nonprofits by providing faith-based financial solutions for investing, lending, training, and planned giving. Learn more online at gumf.org.



Pre- and Post-General Conference Gatherings set for 2024

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

Pre-General Conference clergy lunch gatherings

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

Registration is now open for these gatherings.

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

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

Post-General Conference clergy lunch gatherings

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

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

Post-General Conference Laity Webinar

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

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

Alabama West-Florida Clergy Gatherings

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

Alabama West-Florida Laity Webinar

- May 20 - 6 pm CST

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



Rev. Michael Culbreth attends conference for cross-racial congregations

Rev. Michael Culbreth, senior pastor of ConneXion Church in Savannah, attended the Facing the Future Conference in November sponsored by the General Commission on Religion and Race. He shares his experience below.

As a pastor of a cross-racial congregation it was a privilege for me to represent the South Georgia Conference at the 2023 Facing the Future Conference held November 14-16 in Atlanta. The conference followed the theme: “Being, Belonging and Becoming.” More than 290 people representing annual conferences from across the United States attended the conference. Participants worshipped together, listened to powerful speakers, and attended various workshops such as “Clergy and Financial Wellness,” “Empathy & Burnout,” “Navigating Bias,” and others.

The purpose of the conference, sponsored by the General Commission on Religion and Race, was to provide inspiration, support and resources for pastors serving cross-racial and cross-cultural congregations. In a statement about the conference, the conference coordinators noted that we are living in a deeply divided and highly polarized society as communities become more diverse. The church has to increase her capacity to appreciate diversity. Pastors serving in cross-racial and cross-cultural congregations are prophetic agents whose job it is to create the beloved community in the midst of cultural divisions.

On the first day of the conference, we as participants were reminded to remember our baptisms. By remembering our baptism, we focused upon who we are as God’s people and upon how God has called us to serve. We were challenged to love ourselves and avoid being hypocritical. Each of us has to “remove our masks” to reveal who we really are. Each of us is one of God’s chosen and beloved children. God values each of us despite our race, culture, or background.

Further, each of us belongs to God because we have responded to God’s call. Dr. Kendrick D. Weaver, a conference speaker, noted that God initiated our call. God calls us because God considers us to be worthy of the creator’s attention. God speaks to us only when God has our attention. In order for God to speak to us, each of us has to be attentive so that we can hear God’s voice. Weaver identified this attentiveness to God as “hinneni,” which in Hebrew means, “I am here.” Hinneni is being present for God and for others. Weaver challenged us as religious leaders to evaluate how we can be more attentive to God’s presence in our lives.

On the final day of the conference, we were reminded to be strong, courageous, and to trust God who leads us. God is leading us into a “new land.” We are journeying with God, which requires us to work together, rethink how we are addressing racism and facing a changing world while striving to build God’s kingdom on earth. As we strive to build God’s kingdom, we must seek direction from God and strive to destroy racial barriers by continuing to address systemic racism.

Overall, I found the conference to be inspirational, informative, and enlightening. It was great to meet colleagues who are serving cross-racial and cross-cultural congregations across the nation. The pastors who are serving racially and culturally diverse congregations are confronting numerous challenges. As we prepare for the future, we as United Methodist must take destroying systemic racism seriously. Otherwise, nothing will change. We as cross-racial and cross-cultural pastors are committed to destroying racism. As it was stated in the closing session of the conference: “We resist. We refuse to let hatred in. We rise up. We won’t back down. We’re in this until the end.”



Reimagining missions work in the US

By Sara Logeman

At Global Ministries’ U.S. Mission Partners Consultation, held Nov. 28-29 in Atlanta, Ga., nearly 250 United Methodist mission leaders from 53 U.S. annual conferences gathered to discern ways to reimagine, reinvent and reignite mission in the U.S. Included in those attending from South Georgia were Bishop David Graves, South Georgia episcopal leader, Kelly Roberson, director of conference ministries, Rev. Garth Duke-Barton, conference secretary for Global Ministries, and Rev. Abra Lattany-Reed, director of advocacy and justice ministries

The event was the final of several consultations in 2023 hosted by Global Ministries, The United Methodist Church’s mission and development agency, as opportunities to deeply listen to and learn from its mission partners. The [first consultation](#) was held in April in Mozambique with African partners; [a second](#) was held early in August in Atlanta to reexamine practices of missionary sending; and [a third](#) was held later in August in Seoul, South Korea, with the Korean Methodist Church.

Faithful Methodists from many levels of the church attended the consultation, from bishops and directors of connectional ministries to racial ethnic ministry leaders and volunteers in mission coordinators. Participants engaged in sessions designed to not only capture the current realities of mission practice in the U.S. but to facilitate a collaborative process of discerning what partnership in mission should look like moving forward.

In his opening remarks, Global Ministries’ General Secretary Roland Fernandes expressed excitement and hope for the future of mission, “The church is being led to a new focus on mission and meaning, and it is rewarding and exciting to join in God’s mission as the Holy Spirit sweeps us into a new mission age.”

REIMAGINING MISSION: LEARNING FROM THE PAST TO INFORM THE FUTURE

Methodist mission in the U.S. has a vibrant history. Camp meetings, circuit riders, missionary families, and deaconesses and home missionaries all helped to propel the movement of Methodism forward.

And yet, amid the stories of transformation are also stories of harm. Colonialist and racist ideals have influenced the church’s practice of mission...and still do in many places. Consultation participants deeply wrestled with the question of how to better incorporate values of anti-racism and decolonization into mission at both the local and global levels of the church.

“We have much to atone for,” said the Rev. Dee Stickley-Minor, director of Mission Engagement for Global Ministries. “But the past does not hold us captive. It is a catalyst for change.”

One way the church moves past its colonialist history of mission as flowing “from the West to the rest” is by commissioning missionaries from the U.S. to serve in the U.S. – as Church and Community Workers

(CCW's), young adult Global Mission Fellow US-2s (GMFs) and some Mission Volunteers – living and serving in community, helping to identify and alleviate issues of injustice alongside their neighbors.

REINVENTING MISSION: LIVING INTO NEW MODELS

Another major topic of discussion was how to shift from a *transactional* to a *relational* model of mission. How can the church's expression of mission be centered in mutuality and relationship instead of revolving around the exchange of values and goods?

An asset-based approach to communities was discussed as a way forward, a concept that invites the church to see gifts and abundance over need and deficit. In service with others, this demands a posture of humility and acknowledgement of equality as well as a belief that mission is and should be mutually edifying and enriching.

Global Ministries' work in disaster response, migration, agriculture and global health, among other areas, relies heavily on the gifts, expertise and knowledge of its partners. On the continent of Africa, for example, understanding regional contexts and strengthening global connections are key to the success of mission. UMCOR's disaster management office in Mozambique, overseen by local leaders, is the first line of response to a disaster in that region. And in the area of health care, UMC health boards are staffed by locally trained professionals who are also leaders in caring for their own communities.

As Global Ministries redefines its mission footprint in the U.S., it is focused on models of ministry that begin with mutuality and a greater understanding of local contexts, as well as moving from siloed mission programming to a more strategic and coordinated approach.

REIGNITING MISSION: A COLLECTIVE CALL

Woven into the gathering's services of worship was an emphasis on baptism. It served as a reminder that all Methodists are called to participate in God's mission.

"Offer the fullness of who you are in ongoing life-giving service to the God who has given you life through Jesus Christ," urged Bishop Gregory Palmer, resident bishop of the West Ohio Episcopal Area, in closing worship.

This truth was confirmed in feedback from small group sessions. Conference leaders shared a desire to be better equipped to guide lay and clergy in being missionaries in their own contexts. And to cultivate the calling and leadership development of people of all ages, especially young adults, who can uniquely usher in fresh and innovative expressions of mission within the church.

Areas of growth noted by participants included better means of communication and transparent sharing of information, increased awareness of mission activity across U.S. conferences and in global regions, and closer collaboration to avoid duplication of efforts.

At the end of his sermon, Bishop Palmer closed the gathering and sent participants forth with a challenge and an opportunity: "Our entire future relies on our willingness and ability to work together, interdependently."

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January 14 Lesson: Faith and Trust

Winter Quarter 2023-2024: Faith That Pleases God Unit 2: Learning About Faith

Sunday School Lesson for the week of January 14, 2024 By Jay Harris

Lesson Scripture: Proverbs 3:1-8

Key Verse: *Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight.* (Proverbs 3:5)

Lesson Aims

- To introduce the link between faith and trust and what we can learn from it
- To set our scripture passage in the context of the Book of Proverbs
- To imagine the relationship between you and God as a Teacher-student bond
- To consider the bond that is created by cultivating the virtues of loyalty and faithfulness
- To contrast trusting in the Lord with all your heart with relying on your own insight
- To ponder how acknowledging the Lord more in your life can make your paths straight
- To reflect on the idea of fearing the Lord and seeing this as a positive experience in the end
- To assess the benefits of finding our safety and healing in the bond of trust we have in God

Faith and Trust

We are continuing our Winter Quarter Theme, which is “Faith That Pleases God.” In the first unit, we featured various “profiles in faith.” The focus for the second unit is “Learning About Faith.” Each week in this unit, we are pairing the subject of faith with another interrelated subject. Last week, we learned about the way faith and righteousness are interrelated. This lesson pairs faith with trust.

How does talking about trust shed light on our understanding of faith? Think about the fact that faith is a noun and not a verb. Some nouns can also be verbs, but faith is not such a word. We do not say, “I faith in God.” What verb can we use in talking about faith?

The word we come to most naturally is the word “believe.” We say, “I believe in God.” Belief is most certainly involved in faith. Believing in relation to faith can be understood too narrowly though. The believing that happens in relation to faith is not merely giving mental assent to a certain set of beliefs. We can argue that “believing beliefs” is an important part of faith, and we would be right.

Is there more to faith than believing beliefs? The answer to this question is a resounding “yes.” The best word we can use together with “believe” when talking about faith is the word “trust.” In fact, the word “believe” can also carry the meaning of “trust.” To say, “I believe in my spouse,” for instance, means more than saying that I believe she exists. It means that I put a lot of trust in her. We got married because she believed in me enough, and I believed in her enough. Believing in one another created a bond of trust that translated into marriage and a family.

The same is true in our relationship with God. When we say, “I believe in God,” we are saying more than the fact that we believe God exists. We are saying that we trust in God enough to give our lives over to God. Somewhere along the way, our belief in God created a bond of trust with God. In this lesson, we are going to

explore what trusting in God looks like and how our bond with God is created. When we have done this, we will have added an important dimension to our understanding of what faith is.

For you, what is the link between believing beliefs and the believing that has to do with trust? How have you experienced faith as a bond between yourself and God?

The Bond Between Student and Teacher

The scripture passage for our lesson comes from the Book of Proverbs. The Book of Proverbs is a book of wisdom teachings. Most of the proverbs in the book are attributed to King Solomon, who was known in biblical times for being the wisest person in the known world. People would travel great distances to hear his wisdom. He was thought to have composed three thousand proverbs according to 1 Kings 4.

Generally, a proverb is a short saying that delivers a teaching of wisdom on a particular facet of life. From the tenth chapter until the last chapter of Proverbs, we find many specific examples of these wise sayings that end up covering an amazing variety of life situations. What we find in the first section of Proverbs, the first nine chapters, is an introductory teaching that makes the case for wisdom, the nature of wisdom, and its value. Our scripture passage for this lesson, found in the 3rd chapter of Proverbs, is a part of this first section on the value and nature of wisdom.

**¹ My child, do not forget my teaching,
but let your heart keep my commandments,**

Notice that the reader is addressed as a child. The wisdom being given is a fatherly wisdom. The author refers to the student as “my child.” The language is highly relational. Are we to read this as coming from Solomon? I imagine Solomon feeling very fatherly as he delivers his teaching. Perhaps the father is Solomon, but often in Proverbs, wisdom itself is personified, as if wisdom is the father.

I also find myself reading this as if God is the father. In verse 5, however, the “Lord” will be referred to in the third person. I can hear the verses of this scripture coming from a fatherly human voice, but it is clear that both teacher and student look to God as the ultimate Teacher and Father of us all. The teacher is passing on what has been learned from the ultimate Teacher. The teacher is passing this wisdom onto a student who is a child in the faith.

When I read this scripture, I see myself as a child, but not necessarily as a juvenile. I am 59 years old, but my Dad recently turned 80. No matter how old I get, I remain my Dad’s child—an adult child, but my Dad’s child nevertheless. I, also, will always be God’s child. I gain something precious when I acknowledge the highly relational tone of the scripture.

As we hear the fatherly voice in this scripture, the role of Teacher is very prominent. Therefore, I see myself as not only a child, but also a student. I am hearing the admonition not to forget the instructor’s teaching. How do we avoid forgetting someone’s teaching? We keep the teaching continually before us.

There is another element, however. I must allow my heart to keep the teaching as if the teachings are commandments. Are the “commandments” (to which this scripture is referring) to be understood as the Mosaic law (commandments of Moses)? Or, are the commandments the wisdom sayings of Solomon? I think it is safe to say, “both.” Thinking of these teachings as commandments gives them a force that might not otherwise be there.

The best way not to forget these teachings is to let my heart keep them. What does it mean for my heart to keep them? It means to cherish them. It means to hold them close. It means that they become a part of me. It means that they are seen as commandments rather than suggestions. It means that they are getting translated into action, whether consciously or unconsciously. They are becoming a part of my spiritual “muscle memory.”

What forms between Teacher and student is perhaps best described as a bond. This bond between Teacher and student is what we mean by faith.

**² for length of days and years of life
and abundant welfare they will give you.**

The words of verse 2 come right out of Solomon’s own personal experience. According to 1 Kings 3, when a young King Solomon took the throne, God urged Solomon to ask God for anything. Solomon thought about it, and asked God for wisdom. God commended Solomon for his choice. God noted that others in his place might have asked for a long life, or riches, or power over his enemies. It is easy to see a ruler asking for those things.

Solomon asked God for the wisdom to govern God’s people. God gladly granted Solomon’s request for wisdom, and also granted him the long life, resources, and the long peace-time reign that Solomon did not request. The idea is that wisdom gets you those things. They are the intrinsic blessings that come from divine wisdom. As Proverbs 3:2 affirms, keeping the commandments gives you “length of days and years of life and abundant welfare.”

In your experience, in what ways has being a student of scripture contributed to the feeling that God is your Teacher in a personal way? In what ways has this experience created a bond for you between yourself and God? How might God’s commandments contribute to a longer life or a better quality of life?

The Bond Formed by Cultivating Loyalty and Faithfulness

The bond that faith creates extends beyond the Teacher-student relationship. There is a virtue (and the pursuit of that virtue), that also contributes to this bond.

**³ Do not let loyalty and faithfulness forsake you;
bind them around your neck;
write them on the tablet of your heart.**

Loyalty is a virtue that is strongly associated with creating bonds. I am drawn, because of my personality, to the concept of loyalty. One of the ways I am learning to understand my personality is through the Enneagram, which is based on nine personality types. When people go around saying that they are a number between 1 and 9, they are referring to the Enneagram. Please know that I am not an expert in the Enneagram, but only a beginner.

As I am understanding it, I have a “5 wing 6” personality. As a “5,” I am an “Investigator.” I love to learn, to be curious, to investigate things, and to put what I learn into systems of thought. Your personality can be limited to one number, or you can have a strong wing (a secondary personality type next to your primary personality type). The “wing 6” part of my personality is that I am also a “Loyalist.” My loyalties run deep. As I learn about the Enneagram, I am understanding that the drive within me to be loyal is a part of my

personality. In my context, I am loyal to my intimate circle of friends and relatives, to the team I work with, and even to institutions, such as my denomination. A “5 wing 6” is nicknamed the “Guardian.”

So, when I hear the phrase, “Do not let loyalty and faithfulness forsake you,” it both speaks to me and challenges me. The “loyalist” part of me recognizes what loyalty feels like. I am challenged when I ask myself, “Am I as loyal to God as I am to my tribe?” Because I am a loyalist, I know that I can naturally “talk the talk.” The question is whether I can also “walk the walk.”

In our relationship with God, loyalty should always be paired with faithfulness. Loyalty is the feeling we have and the drive that compels us. Faithfulness is the virtue that must be coupled with loyalty if loyalty is to be real. Faithfulness is walking the walk. It is walking with God and walking in God’s way. “Faithfulness” is a covenant word. We understand that we are in a covenant with God. A covenant is a relationship bound by promises.

Covenant is first and foremost a relationship, but there are obligations to fulfill in order to make the covenant real. This is when the “walk” matches the “talk.” What about when we fail to fulfill our obligations? This is the really important question, because it is most certain that we will fail, and fail often. Covenant faithfulness requires that we are always examining ourselves, our behavior, our motives, our commitment, our conscience, and our consciousness of God. When we fail, we are examining, confessing, expressing our deep remorse, caring about the rupture we caused in our relationship with God, repenting, resolving to make amends, and resuming the path of faithfulness and desiring to please God in a life of faith. This is what it means to live in covenant faithfulness.

Ponder the imagery in our scripture: binding loyalty and faithfulness around your neck and writing them on the tablet of your heart. This is not one, but the combination of two metaphors. Loyalty and faithfulness should be thought of as a yoke that we accept with the commitment that it will always be worn. Wearing this harness, we are submitting to be guided by God. Having loyalty and faithfulness written on the tablet of your heart means that we are defining something about our core.

If we live this way, there are bound to be results.

**⁴ Then you will find favor and high regard
in the sight of God and of people.**

A life lived in covenant loyalty and faithfulness will be rewarded. We will find favor with God and with people. Both our vertical relationship with God and our horizontal relationships with our fellow human beings will be all well. We will be held in high regard. When our relationships are running well, it is well with our soul. The longer we live, the more we understand that nothing could be better than when it is well with our soul.

How have you thought of loyalty and faithfulness as spiritual virtues? Can you relate the bond between you and God to times when your loyalty and faithfulness have been strong and when they have not been as strong? How do you see loyalty affecting the regard people have for you and the favor you are shown by God? How are loyalty and faithfulness the same and how are they different? How do loyalty and faithfulness complement each other?

The Bond of Wholehearted Reliance on the Lord

Are you sensing the power of faith to create a bond with God? Are you beginning to put together in your mind the ingredients that contribute to this bond? There is more.

**⁵ Trust in the LORD with all your heart,
and do not rely on your own insight.**

The 5th verse gets to the “heart” of the matter in more ways than one. Only wholehearted trust in the Lord will do. Think of a trust fall. A trust fall is an activity in which a person deliberately falls, trusting the members of a group to catch them. You often hear of it being used as a popular team-building exercise in corporate training events.

The notable thing about this activity is that there are consequences depending upon whether or not the group catches you. You are absolutely committing your fate to the ones you are trusting. You are trusting yourself into their hands quite literally.

When you trust in the Lord with all your heart, it is not unlike a trust fall. You are depending upon the Lord to support you in life. You are trusting in the consequences of such a relationship. The hymn, “Leaning on the Everlasting Arms,” celebrates “what a fellowship, what a joy divine” it is when we lean on the everlasting arms of God. The hymn also describes the “blessedness” and the “peace” that is ours when we trust in God to support us in life.

Verse 5 goes on to say that we should not rely on our own insight. You might ask why anyone would not want to trust their own insight. The idea is that our own insight is not as trustworthy as trusting in the Lord for direction. What might lead our own insight astray? We might choose immediate gratification over the long-term consequences of an action. We might take the path of least resistance rather than the path that requires more discipline but leads to personal transformation.

We also must come to terms with the degree to which our insight is affected by our bent toward self-interest, self-centeredness, self-promotion, and self-indulgence. We all must admit that our insight is limited because we sin and often fall short of the glory of God.

Remember when the Apostle Paul talked about the inability to trust his own actions. He said, *“I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now if I do what I do not want... it is no longer I who do it but sin that dwells within me. For I know that the good does not dwell within me, that is, in my flesh. For the desire to do the good lies close at hand, but not the ability. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do. Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I who do it but sin that dwells within me.”* (Romans 7:15-20)

What Paul had going for him was that he had grown mightily in the self-awareness of his limitations. I think Paul would agree that his insight was not entirely trustworthy. He knew that his insight suffered from the mixed signals being sent to it from his sinful nature.

Learning to trust wholeheartedly in the Lord and in his ways gives us the insight we need. The more we learn about the Lord and his ways, and trust in them, the more our own insight is informed and replaced by the insight that our faith gives us. What remains is no longer just our own insight. Wholehearted trust is based on wholehearted reliance on the Lord. Wholehearted reliance on the Lord is like living a daily kind of “trust fall.” We fully rely on God.

**⁶ In all your ways acknowledge him,
and he will make straight your paths.**

Our “ways” are the patterns of our behavior. They include the motivations that drive what we do. The more we acknowledge the Lord in our ways, the more our ways are informed by the Lord and his ways. To

acknowledge the Lord means to keep him before us, to learn his ways, to become accustomed to his voice, and to always be walking toward him and not away from him.

When we trust in the Lord in this way, we are trusting God for the consequences. We believe with all our heart that we will make straight our paths. God is absolutely trustworthy. When we fail, it is not because God did not uphold his side of the covenant. When we fail, it is because we took our eyes off God. We failed to acknowledge him.

How does the negative view of relying upon your own insight challenge your thinking and perhaps how you have lived your life at times? How would you convince another person about the limitations of relying on his or her own insight? What does trusting the Lord with all your heart look like in everyday life? How would you set out to acknowledge God more in your life? How can you see this making your paths straight?

The Bond of Finding Our Safety and Healing in God

The next verse continues the current thought but adds another dimension. It is into this other dimension that we want to lean.

**⁷ Do not be wise in your own eyes;
fear the LORD and turn away from evil.**

Being wise in our own eyes is the same as relying upon our own insight. Being wise in our own eyes is doing what we think is best apart from any direction from the Lord. For all the reasons that we just mentioned, we don't want to be wise merely in our own eyes.

The other dimension that the scripture introduces into our thinking is the idea of fearing the Lord. This may be a hard concept to get one's mind around. Should we not love the Lord instead of fearing him? Should we not be drawn into the love of the Lord? The answer is yes, but at the same time, we should fear displeasing him.

The scriptures often speak of the wrath of God. "Wrath" is a really strong word, and as many times as I have heard it, I still want to clarify the meaning according to the context. For those in scripture, who used this word *wrath*, what they had in mind were the consequences of being disobedient. This is not unlike the wrath of a parent toward a disobedient child.

The consequences of living a way that is opposed to the ways of God are real. When people are living the consequences of their actions it feels like punishment even though the punishment was self-inflicted. Why do we associate the self-inflicted consequences of our own actions with God's wrath? We do this because we believe God is a relational God. We think that we are relational beings? Multiply that! God is a relational God who wants a relationship with us. When we live in a way that does not acknowledge him, God does not remain aloof in the matter. God is hurt. God's love has been rebuffed.

I fear the consequences of my stupid actions, and when I stop fearing that, God help me! There is more going on here than suffering the consequences of my actions. Just as we talk about pleasing the Lord, we should also talk about *displeasing* the Lord. I fear displeasing him, and when I stop fearing that, God help me! Although God's love is relentless, and although God will never give up on me, I fear the prospect that I could fall out of love with God by ceasing to acknowledge him.

Yes, I want to “fear the Lord and turn away from evil.” By doing this, I am choosing safety. I am choosing safety in the Lord. I am choosing security in the Lord. I am choosing for my satisfaction and contentment to come from the Lord. I am choosing for my peace to come through the Lord.

**⁸ It will be a healing for your flesh
and a refreshment for your body.**

After having said all that I have said, the truth is that I still walk into evil. I still choose to walk outside the will of God and the ways of God. I completely identify with Paul when he said that he could not understand his own actions. I still displease God.

I am well acquainted with the spiritual practice of beginning again. I have had to begin again many times. That means remembering the poor insight that got me into disobedience and its consequences. It means repenting of my actions, and declaring again my trust in the Lord, acknowledging him again, relying upon God wholeheartedly again, and living in this way.

When I do this, then I find the words of verse 8 to be so true: it is a healing for my flesh and a refreshment for my body. It is not only healing for my soul, it is healing for my body which is the container for the soul. When we sin and get into conflict with ourselves, other people, and God, our body remembers. The turmoil, into which we get ourselves, registers in our body. To be restored in my relationship with God brings healing and refreshment to body, mind, and spirit.

This whole scripture passage has been helping us to understand how the bond of trust is developed that is at the heart of faith. It is the bond between Teacher and Student, heavenly Parent and Child. It is the bond cultivated through the virtues of loyalty and faithfulness. It is the bond created through whole-hearted reliance upon the Lord and the Lord’s ways. It is the bond of trust created by finding our safety and healing in God.

Has the idea of fearing the Lord ever turned you off? How are you perhaps thinking more positively about the benefits of fearing the Lord? How do you, personally, experience safety and healing by trusting in the Lord and walking in his ways?

Prayer

Gracious and loving Lord, Your wisdom comes to us through Your Word and through Your voice in our prayers. Help us to trust in you with our whole heart and not rely on our own understanding, so that our paths will be made straight and so that it will be well with our soul, through Christ our Lord, who reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever, Amen.

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January 21 Lesson: Faith and Encouragement

**Winter Quarter 2023-2024: Faith That Pleases God
Unit 2: Learning About Faith**

Sunday School Lesson for the week of January 21, 2024

By Jay Harris

Lesson Scripture: 2 Chronicles 20.13-20

Key Verse: “*Believe in the LORD your God and you will be established; believe his prophets and you will succeed.*” (2 Chronicles 20:20b)

Lesson Aims

- To introduce our theme which pairs faith with encouragement
- To gain an understanding of King Jehoshaphat and his reign
- To learn the lessons Jehoshaphat learned from his mistakes and how he set out to improve
- To debrief the present crisis that our scripture addresses
- To show how Jehoshaphat led his people in a time of prayer and fasting in response to the crisis
- To get our mind around a battle that belongs to God so that God’s people do not have to fear
- To learn what our role is when God says to us, “I’ve got this!”
- To ponder how celebration encourages us and our faith
- To reflect on the message God’s people were to take away from this experience
- To marvel at the spectacular way that God won the battle

Faith and Encouragement

The lessons in the January unit of our Winter Quarter study have been pairing faith with another subject each week. We first looked at faith and righteousness together. Then, we looked at faith and trust together. Today’s lesson pairs faith with encouragement. We will set out to learn about faith through the lens of encouragement. How do faith and encouragement interrelate?

Sometimes our faith needs encouragement. Other times our encouragement needs our faith. Wouldn’t you agree? Our lesson is about a time in the life of God’s people, Judah, when they needed both faith and encouragement.

We want to set the stage for this lesson by understanding what has led up to the moment in which God’s people found themselves. We also want to understand the particular king of Judah who was being called to lead his people in this particular moment. That leader was King Jehoshaphat.

He will be the one in the story who both needs encouragement for himself and needs to give encouragement to others. Often, before we can encourage others, we ourselves need to be encouraged. The Chronicler gives us a good bit of background to help us understand Jehoshaphat.

How have you seen faith and encouragement working together in your life?

An Introduction to King Jehoshaphat and his Early Reign

Jehoshaphat was the king of the southern kingdom of Judah. The Chronicler first introduces Jehoshaphat by saying that he followed the *earlier* ways of his father, Asa. Jehoshaphat’s father started out acting faithfully, but in the latter part of his father’s reign his father acted unfaithfully.

This is also what we see Jehoshaphat do. In the beginning of Jehoshaphat's reign, he did well by choosing not to follow the Baals and actively sought to remove the high places, which allowed the influence of Baal worship. Jehoshaphat also deployed Levites throughout the kingdom to teach the book of the law of the Lord among the people.

After this good beginning, however, Jehoshaphat chose to enter into a marriage alliance with the family of Ahab and Jezebel in the northern kingdom of Israel. A little later, Ahab asked Jehoshaphat to join him in a war against the Arameans in Ramoth-Gilead. Jehoshaphat said he would be willing to join Ahab in war, but he said that they should really inquire of the Lord if this was the right course.

When all of Ahab's prophets too quickly said "yes," it was Jehoshaphat who was uneasy with the fact that there was not even one dissenting opinion. When this was questioned, Ahab admitted that there was one other prophet, Micaiah, but Ahab hated him because Micaiah always gave a dissenting opinion. Jehoshaphat wanted to hear from Micaiah.

The thing is, Micaiah did not enjoy being a dissenter, so he first told King Ahab what he wanted to hear, but Ahab knew Micaiah was holding back. So, Micaiah told Ahab and Jehoshaphat that their two armies were going to meet certain disaster, which was not what the king wanted to hear. The other prophets naturally defended their own opinion, and to this end they discredited Micaiah even to the point of being physically abusive toward him.

Ahab then accused Micaiah of treason, which landed Micaiah in prison with reduced rations. In this way, Ahab silenced the one dissenting opinion and lost the ability to look critically at the situation before him. Did Ahab not know that the other prophets were more likely to say "yes" to the king to serve their own self-interest? Did Ahab not know, furthermore, that they would vote together to find safety in numbers?

The ability of Micaiah to stand alone and say "no" to the king was very courageous. Neither Ahab nor Jehoshaphat chose to recognize Micaiah's courage or take it into account as they measured the opinions being given to them. Their combined armies were defeated, and Jehoshaphat was just as much as responsible for the defeat as Ahab was. Fortunately for Jehoshaphat, he lived to see another day, while Ahab was killed on the battlefield. This was Jehoshaphat's low point.

What evaluations would you give King Ahab, then Micaiah the prophet, and then Jehoshaphat, King of Judah, in the disaster that just unfolded in the lesson?

Jehoshaphat's Opportunity to Get on the Right Path

After his humiliating defeat, Jehoshaphat received a visit from Jehu who happened to be the son of the seer, Hanani, who had served Jehoshaphat's father, Asa. Jehu went over with Jehoshaphat what he had done wrong in allying himself with Ahab. Despite his failings, Jehu encouraged Jehoshaphat by saying that there was still good to be found in him.

Jehoshaphat went out again among the people, and appointed Levites as judges to instill in the people the values in God's laws. He told them to deal with the people courageously and for the good. This was a good thing, because it just so happens that the next challenge came to Jehoshaphat.

Three armies of Judah's enemies were gathering to go to war against Judah. The scripture says that "Jehoshaphat was afraid." That was a natural response. It is what Jehoshaphat did next that deserves attention. The scripture says that Jehoshaphat "set himself to seek the LORD and proclaimed a fast throughout all Judah." (2 Chronicles 20:3-12) Jehoshaphat was afraid, to be sure, but he did not let his fear paralyze him

into complete inaction. He took action by doing the really good thing he knew he could do. He started a movement of prayer and fasting.

The scripture says that “Judah assembled to seek help from the LORD; from all the towns of Judah they came to seek the LORD.” Jehoshaphat stood in this great gathering and led them in prayer: “O LORD, God of our ancestors, are you not God in heaven? Do you not rule over all the kingdoms of the nations? In your hand are power and might, so that no one is able to withstand you.” Jehoshaphat went on in his prayer to talk about all that God had brought God’s people through in the past.

Then Jehoshaphat brought up the present crisis they were facing. He prayed, “We are powerless against this great multitude that is coming against us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you.” (2 Chronicles 20:12) Think about the three things being said in the last part of this prayer: 1) we are powerless, 2) we do not know what to do, and 3) our eyes are on you. After saying “we are powerless” and “we do not know what to do,” many would have concluded “we are doomed.” They were not giving up though. They just knew that their survival depended on God. They were therefore looking to the Lord for what the Lord could do in this situation.

What signs would you point to that would confirm the good path that King Jehoshaphat seems to be on? How was he prepared to meet the crisis that came up? How was he preparing the people to meet the crisis at hand? Was King Jehoshaphat’s prayer better for having admitted that they were powerless and did not know what to do? What is good about praying a prayer like this?

The Word of Encouragement that was the Answer to their Prayer

Wouldn’t you agree that it was important to look at the back story to our scripture passage? We have gained insight into how Jehoshaphat has evolved as a leader of God’s people. We can even understand his state of mind better when the events in our scripture begin to unfold. We can also understand better the situation of God’s people.

¹³ Meanwhile, all Judah stood before the LORD, with their little ones, their wives, and their children.

We know that all Judah was gathered because they had been called to prayer. They were also gathered because they shared a common experience of being in peril together. Did they all feel that sense of being powerless against the great multitude that was coming against them? Were they all united in that feeling of not knowing what to do? Were their eyes on God? Were they all looking to God as their only hope? We are even told that all Judah stood before the Lord. The scripture goes so far as getting us to picture the wives, the children, and the little ones who were present. What a powerful and poignant reminder of all that was at stake! What was God going to do? What could God possibly do?

¹⁴ Then the spirit of the LORD came upon Jahaziel son of Zechariah, son of Benaiah, son of Jeiel, son of Mattaniah, a Levite of the sons of Asaph, in the middle of the assembly.

So, it was upon Jahaziel that the spirit of the Lord came. We’re told about his pedigree which locates him spiritually in the life of God’s people as a “Levite of the sons of Asaph,” which was one of the lines of Levi that had been organized long before these people were born to help connect people to God in worship. God had already organized something for just such a time as this. Jahaziel was in a position of some authority when the spirit of the Lord came upon him in the middle of this gathering of men, women, and children. What would God say through Jahaziel?

¹⁵ He said, “Listen, all Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem and King Jehoshaphat: Thus says the LORD to you: Do not fear or be dismayed at this great multitude, for the battle is not yours but God’s.

This was an astounding word that God had given for Jahaziel to say. If the battle was not theirs, but God’s battle instead, God was saying, “I’ve got this!” That’s the phraseology we would use today. Furthermore, God was telling them that they did not need to fear or be dismayed since the battle belonged to God.

How would you paraphrase the news that the battle would belong to the Lord and not them? Can you think of a time when God might have said that to you? What was going on that allowed that message to come through? Do you find it easy to let go and let God fight the battle, or is there something in you that resists letting go? Why might we have a hard time letting go?

God’s Got This—Unpacking the Meaning

If you were there, do you think that you would have had questions? Jahaziel, are you sure this is what you heard? To what degree are we to let God win the battle? If God is going to win the battle, what are we to do, if anything? What is this going to look like?

¹⁶ Tomorrow go down against them; they will come up by the ascent of Ziz; you will find them at the end of the valley, before the wilderness of Jeruel. ¹⁷ This battle is not for you to fight; take your position, stand still, and see the victory of the LORD on your behalf, O Judah and Jerusalem. Do not fear or be dismayed; tomorrow go out against them, and the LORD will be with you.”

God, through Jahaziel, gave the people something to visualize. The three groups of enemies were going to come up a certain ascent and eventually position themselves at the end of a valley bordered by the wilderness. These details would let the people know that God anticipated the enemy’s movements. Surely, they would be given further instructions.

They were not given much to go on, however, beyond the enemy’s movements. They were told that the battle was not for them to fight. They were to take their position, as if they were going to fight. When they took their position, however, they were told to simply stand still and watch the victory that was to unfold before them on their behalf. They were told again that they were not to fear or be dismayed. When they went out the next day to go against the enemy, the Lord would be with them. Based on all that they were being told and not being told, the Lord would definitely need to be with them. They were being assured of a victory that was to be entirely of the Lord’s doing. The only thing they were to do was watch.

I have heard people say that God told them not to worry about the thing they were worrying about because God’s got this.” How did they come to this realization? Perhaps it’s because they found themselves to be in the same situation that King Jehoshaphat described when he said that he and his people were powerless, and they did not know what to do. In the midst of a situation like that, God somehow gives a peace.

Sometimes it is about what God takes away. Has God ever taken away your expectation that you needed to be in control? When “worry” too often becomes our “go-to” response, it may be that worry has become our way of making us feel that we are in control. What did Jesus say about worry? Jesus told us not to worry about tomorrow. He asked “Which of you by worrying can add a single hour to your span of life? (Matthew 6:27) The answer, of course, is that none of us can add a single hour to our span of life. Have you ever known people who put a lot of time, effort, and intensity in their worrying? It’s almost as if they decided that if they tried harder in the act of worrying, it might produce results.

When God takes away this inclination to worry, it is often accompanied by God somehow speaking into our spirits and saying that God's got this. The difference between worrying with such intensity and letting go of that worry can represent a profound blessing. Not only are letting go of the worry and its effects, we also feel as if our relationship with God has advanced a long way in a short time.

Sometimes, the word from God tells us that we are to stand and watch how God is going to act in our situation, and sometimes, the word from God says that God is going to work with us, and we are going to work with God to address our situation. In other words, we are often to do more than watch what God is going to do. God is saying in effect, "You and I *together* got this."

What accounts for the difference when God says this battle is not for you to fight and when God desires our participation in fighting the battle *with* God? In what circumstances is it more fitting for us to be involved? What are the effects in each instance upon our relationship with God?

Watching and Celebrating

Even when God involves us in the solution to our problems, we should not overlook the call to *watch* what God does. Our ability to notice what God is doing should always take front and center stage. I believe that our ability to notice what God does *can* grow over time, and in fact, *should* grow! It is the growth in our ability to notice God's action in our lives that is one of the main points in all this.

Two actions that go together are noticing and naming. It is important when we notice God's actions that we also name them and call attention to them. I have heard this referred to as "glory sightings." Glory sightings deserve to be celebrated. Celebration leads to worship.

¹⁸ Then Jehoshaphat bowed down with his face to the ground, and all Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem fell down before the LORD, worshiping the LORD. ¹⁹ And the Levites of the Kohathites and the Korahites stood up to praise the LORD, the God of Israel, with a very loud voice.

Imagine the king bowing down with his face to the ground. Imagine the chain reaction as all of the inhabitants of Judah who had gathered following suit. Imagine God looking down and seeing this outpouring of worship.

Let's note the fact that although God at this point has promised to act, God has not acted yet. The enemy was still approaching. It is the *day before* God is to act. Yet, God's people offered their worship in anticipation of God acting in their situation. Their worship in this instance is focused not on continuing to ask God for help. They had already received the word that God was indeed going to act. Their worship was focused on praising God in thankful response to God's *promise* of future action.

The branch of Levites referenced in our scripture had been given a special role in the worship life of God's people. They were the singers. That was their job, and we get to see the prominence given to this role. They led God's people with a very loud voice. Imagine the singing as God's people joined their voices with these singers.

Celebrating what God was going to do the next day expressed collectively their *faith and trust* in what God had promised in his word of encouragement to them. Celebration elevates the spirits of people like nothing else. Celebration releases tremendous amounts of positive energy. Imagine fear, despair, and dread melting in this bold and enthusiastic expression of faith.

How do you think this corporate act of worship would affect their ability for God's people to watch and notice what God would do? How would their celebration affect their sensitivity and ability to notice God's activity? How would celebrating help them enter the emotions of a "glory sighting" before and after the sighting happened?

Believing God the Next Morning

Sometimes, we say about a decision or a feeling that we want "to sleep on it." At the same token, sleeping on it may allow enthusiasm to dissipate or grow cold. If it was just about the emotion of the moment, sleeping on it would be a bad thing. This was not however about the emotion of the moment. The people had prayed and fasted. They had received an encouraging word from the Lord that the Lord had this! They were to watch the Lord fight the battle for them. They had expressed their faith collectively through worship, celebration, and singing. So, sleeping on it was not a detriment for them. They were able to awake refreshed and hopeful.

²⁰ They rose early in the morning and went out into the wilderness of Tekoa, and as they went out Jehoshaphat stood and said, "Listen to me, O Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem! Believe in the LORD your God and you will be established; believe his prophets and you will succeed."

Jehoshaphat encouraged the people to believe. This is more than believing in belief. This is more than having faith in faith. Have you ever heard the phrase, "It doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you believe it strongly"? Hogwash! Jehoshaphat encouraged people to "believe in the Lord your God."

Believe in the Lord and you will be established. What does it mean to be established? It means to have a strong footing. It means to stand on a strong foundation, not standing on shaky ground or shifting sand. When you are established it means that your faith rests on unshakable truth, eternal wisdom, the sure plans of the Lord, and the steadfast love of the Lord.

Jehoshaphat said, "Believe his prophets and you will succeed." Let's not forget the prayer and fasting that preceded all this. Remember back to the earlier phase of Jehoshaphat's reign when he went into an ill-advised war at the side of King Ahab. Jehoshaphat knew it was not a good idea, because Ahab had already made the decision. He knew that Ahab's so-called prophets were merely "yes" men who told Ahab only what he wanted to hear. Jehoshaphat knew the difference between false prophets and the real thing. When Jehoshaphat and the people prayed and fasted, they were truly relying upon the Lord, because they knew they were powerless without God and they did not know what to do. Unlike Ahab, just before Ahab met his demise, Jehoshaphat was not on an ego trip.

Success was God's people receiving encouragement from the Lord, having faith in what God promised, and relishing the opportunity to give witness to their faith. Furthermore, this was an instance in which the battle belonged totally to God. This meant God would get all the credit! Their faith was in God and not in themselves. God's people were thrilled with this arrangement.

So, what happened? The people of Judah stood where God told them to stand and watch his handiwork. They witnessed the armies of the three nations, which were aligned against them, enter the battlefield. In an amazing turn of events, the three armies got thrown into confusion. They began fighting each other. One army destroyed another, and then the little that was left of that army fought the third army until all the combatants destroyed each other. All Judah had to do was go in among the corpses and collect the booty. The valley where Judah's enemies fought with one another and defeated one another was then called the Valley of Beracah, or Valley of Blessing.

The fear of God came upon Judah’s neighbors because they had heard that the Lord had fought against the enemies of God’s people. Sometimes God is waiting for us to act and then joins in our action, and other times, God wants us simply to wait and watch God take action on our behalf. The Lord wants us to hear, “I’ve got this!”

How does believing in the Lord establish you and your faith? How do you test the word of a prophet? How often do you picture what succeeding in a certain situation looks like? If your church became more vision-driven than memory-driven, what would have to happen? What do you think the consequences would be? How hopeful would the members of your church feel? How would that energize your community of faith?

Prayer

Lord God | You used Your servant Jehoshaphat to call Your people to fasting and prayer and then told them to wait | Call us to prayer and help us to know when to act and when to wait for You to act | That we may avoid harm by acting rashly, and that we may encounter You more by waiting on You | Through Christ our Lord, Amen.

Dr. Jay Harris serves as the Superintendent of Clergy and District 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.

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7 trends affecting church leaders in 2024

Ann Michel, Doug Powe, and Jessica Anschutz of the Lewis Center for Church Leadership staff identify seven trends church leaders should keep in mind as they develop creative ministries to reach new people in 2024. Many of these trends are daunting, reflecting the long-term decline in worship attendance and the increasing percentage of Americans who claim no religious affiliation. But there are also glimmers of hope in giving trends, in the emergence of new, more nimble, often smaller, models of ministry, and in the expanding opportunities for laypersons to minister in meaningful ways.

The pandemic has released its grip on our day-to-day activities. And yet, for many churches, “back to normal” hasn’t been quite what we hoped. This is true in large part because worship attendance and levels of church participation were on a trajectory of decline long before the onset of the pandemic. And this reality continues to strain our long-standing ministry models and institutional structures.

These seven trends indicate that at the dawn of 2024 we are still in a liminal space in which many of our institutional structures and standard paradigms of ministry are showing themselves to be inadequate to the challenges of the day. Yet, the winds of change that buffet the church also bring the opportunity to embrace new, more innovative and relational ways of connecting with people, and the opportunity to equip new types of leaders.

1. Mainline malaise

Although U.S. churches across the denominational and theological spectrum are now impacted by declining attendance, symptoms of decline are most acute in mainline denominations where the onset of decline came much earlier for a variety of reasons, including underlying demographic differences impacting the relative strength of different segments of the Church in the U.S. While many mainline congregations and

denominations are still buoyed by their assets and other institutional resources, their “brand” holds considerably less sway among religious seekers and in the public square. The typical mainline congregation is facing the need to adjust its expectations and ministry models. And mainline denominations face a need to realign their institutional infrastructure, including everything from judicatories and church agencies to theological education and parachurch organizations, to conform to current realities.

2. Stable finances

Churches face many challenges in the current environment, yet a mounting body of evidence suggests the financial condition of most congregations remains surprisingly strong. For example, [recent research assessing the impact of the pandemic on congregations and faith communities](#) found that the median income of churches has increased 42% (25% when adjusted for inflation) since 2020. The same study found that the more a church’s giving came through online and electronic gifts, the higher their income, suggesting the pandemic-inspired shift to electronic giving methods, even among churches and churchgoers previously resistant to this approach, is having positive long-term effects.

Another explanation for the relative strong financial health of congregations is that most church giving comes from a small percentage of highly committed, generous individuals, many of whom are older. Their giving can keep a congregation afloat financially even in the face of other measures of decline. But not forever. Now is the time to encourage lifetime or estate gifts from this generous older generation while looking to develop new sources of revenue and giving.

3. Small is beautiful

Large churches are still home to most U.S. churchgoers. And yet, small, nimble, highly personalized expressions of church seem to increasingly be the “green-growing edge” of growth and development. Fresh Expressions, micro churches, house churches, and small online communities have an undeniable appeal in this time when so many are distrustful of institutions. In some cases, these newer expressions of church do not meet in traditional church buildings, placing an emphasis on the people and not a structure. Many traditional churches focus the energy of their participants on sustaining the church’s institutional structures. But smaller communities can place more attention on nurturing relationships and individual spiritual growth. And the same can be true in small traditional congregations, many of which have proven themselves to be resilient, vital, and stable, as they share the gifts of supportive relationships, community connections, and intergenerational fellowship. All this suggests that larger and mid-size churches might take a lesson from the intimacy and authenticity of smaller faith communities.

4. Expanding roles for lay leaders

Laities have always played an instrumental role in carrying forth the ministry of the church. This is truer today than ever, especially in churches that can no longer support a full-time, fully credentialed clergy person. Many of the laypersons taking up the slack are volunteers. But churches also continue to spend more on lay staffing. See [Churches Continue to Increase Lay Staff](#). In some sectors of the church, there are more laypersons serving as pastors. In 2019, for example, 12 percent of United Methodist churches were served by a lay pastor who is neither enrolled in nor a graduate of an accredited seminary in a degree or non-degree bearing program.

5. The rise of a dechurched generation

Perhaps the most notable change in the religious landscape over the past several decades has been the rise of the “Nones.” Today, about 30 percent of adult American say they have no religious affiliation. The majority of Nones are millennials and Gen Zers, many of whom grew up attending church but slipped away as adults.

Yet, many remain open to the idea of religious practice partly because they are still shaped by a religious memory. And data suggest that some percentage of them do return to church. But what of their children? It is often said that the Christian faith is always just one generation away from extinction. The children of today's Nones, unlike their parents, are being raised with little to no connection to church. Reaching this growing cohort of dechurched young people, a generation removed from the practice of the faith with few religious memories, will require an entirely new evangelistic playbook.

6. Challenges to the Sunday school model of Christian education

The Sunday school movement was born in late eighteenth-century England, and it has been the centerpiece of Christian education for as long as any of us can remember. But this classroom-based model of faith formation seems to have run its course. In our internet age, both children and adults are accustomed to more interactive and engaging ways of learning. Many churches no longer have the critical mass of young families required to support a range of grade- or age-level classrooms. And more sporadic attendance patterns have upset the once standard rhythm of weekly Sunday school lessons for children, youth, and adults. In the face of these challenges, Sunday school superintendents and directors of Christian education are scrambling to figure out how to engage families, experimenting with classes that are held less frequently or at alternate times, developing more intergenerational and service-related activities, and equipping and motivating parents for faith education at home.

7. The need for new models of faith formation

Another pillar of the traditional model of faith formation is the assumption that those in the pews on Sunday will be formed in faith through the elements of worship, particularly preaching. This “faith formation by osmosis” approach has probably always been hit or miss. But its limitations are even more glaring in this time when church attendance is more sporadic, and many churches report that even their most faithful attendees are often in church only one or two Sundays a month.

The established church finds itself in a liminal space in which time-tested approaches to faith formation are inadequate to the challenges of the post-pandemic, post-attractional reality, yet many leaders are unsure about what will take their place. In light of the other trends discussed above, it may be that emerging models of faith formation will be less “place based,” more reliant on relational mentoring and experiential learning, intergenerational, and holistically connected to mission and service-learning opportunities. One emerging model of formation is the Messy Church movement that started in England but is increasingly being implemented in U.S. churches because of its intergenerational emphasis. It is likely that more models like this will emerge in the future.

Related Resources

- Who are The Nones? featuring Ryan Burge — [Leading Ideas Talks podcast episode](#) | [Podcast video](#) | [In-depth interview](#)
- [Churches Continue to Increase Lay Staff](#) by Lovett H. Weems Jr.
- [5 Trends Impacting Church Leadership for 2023](#) by Jessica L. Anschutz, Ann A. Michel and Doug Powe



10 resolutions that will strengthen your faith

By Laura Buchanan

Whether beginning a new calendar year, a new year after a birthday or starting fresh after a challenging season, setting a goal can be a helpful tool for self-accountability as you move forward. Many of us resolve to find a stronger connection with God in these moments.

Here are ten resolutions that will help you grow your faith:

Deepen discipleship

1. Commit to reading your Bible. The reassurance found in Scripture can only be discovered by [setting aside time to study and better understand God's word](#). As you read, pay close attention to what God is teaching you, and consider what calling God has for your life.
2. Pray more often. If you pray rarely, start by praying at least once each day. If your prayer life needs enlivened, explore [new prayer practices](#), such as breath prayers. Finding ways to incorporate prayer into your daily routines will help it become a central point of your faith.
3. Attend church services regularly. If you need a church home, search for nearby United Methodist congregations on [Find-A-Church](#). If you are a member at a church but haven't been attending consistently, go! Connecting with others and participating in worship are vital parts of a growing faith, whether in-person or online.
4. Join a [small group](#). This might be a Sunday School class, a community group organized by your church or a Bible study fellowship. Investing in others and building friendships can strengthen your mental and spiritual health. Additionally, you'll be able to share thoughts, beliefs and questions with other Christians who are also on a journey of faith.

Get creative

5. Write in a journal. Capture thoughts about life and God. Putting pen to paper helps us unload whatever mental weight we are carrying and often brings a new perspective. This can be diary-style writing, but you can also write down prayers, poems or a fictional short story that helps you express your emotions and spiritual outlook.
6. Create something beautiful. This could be anything from a pencil sketch in the margin of a piece of paper, to a scrapbook page, to a knitted scarf. Using your creativity unlocks your right-brain thinking and helps us tap into new ideas, find calm and let go of anxiety.
7. Make a joyful noise. Listen to uplifting, worshipful music that stirs your soul and sing along. It doesn't matter if you are the best or the worst singer – lifting your voice in praise to God is an important part of soul-care. Join in congregational singing with a bit more gusto, or simply sing to the heavens while you are stuck in traffic.

Be present

8. Volunteer in the community. No matter where you live, churches and nonprofit organizations are always in need of helping hands. Find a cause that excites you and consider how you can get involved. This could be a food bank, an animal shelter or an afterschool program, or you can simply ask a neighbor in need how you can help them.
9. Reach out to those you love. Life can be short and is full of the unexpected. Make a promise to yourself and those you hold dear that you will be present, engaged and devoted to your relationships. Attend activities that are meaningful to your friends and family members. Mend past brokenness. Make an effort to call, text and email people you haven't heard from in a while.
10. Invite someone to church. There are many people who are seeking deeper meaning in life but are unsure about visiting a church. Think of coworkers, neighbors, friends and family members that are yearning for a loving community in which to grow and find support. Invite them to join you for a worship service or a church event where they can meet members of the congregation.

Laura Buchanan works for UMC.org at United Methodist Communications. Contact her by [email](#).

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Confirmation Retreat set for March 1-3

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

Designed for students in the fifth grade and above, the “Join the Journey” Confirmation Retreat will provide churches of ALL sizes an opportunity to connect with others through worship, study, and fellowship. Bishop Graves will be joining us for the entire event!

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

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Conference Updates & Happenings

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

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

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

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

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

Small Church Focus: Revisioning and Remissioning for Small Churches – Feb. 8 & Feb. 9: "The way we've always done things" isn't working anymore, yet it is still the way many churches continue to do things. What is needed to reach people in this day and time and move from a mindset of survive to thrive is a

fresh wind of vision and mission. While this is necessary for churches of all sizes, small churches present some unique challenges and advantages when it comes to revisioning and remissioning. Join Anne Bosarge and Jeremy Alexander for a conversation about how to leverage the uniqueness of small churches and begin the journey of reimagining what missional impact will look like for your congregation. Two days/times are being offered to give you flexibility and with the hope one will meet your schedule: Thursday, February 8, 6:30pm-8pm or Friday, February 9, noon-1:30pm. If you have questions or need more information, please contact Anne Bosarge at abosarge@sgaumc.com.

Confirmation Retreat – March 1-3: The 23rd annual South Georgia Conference Confirmation Retreat will take place March 1-3 at Epworth By The Sea on St. Simons Island. Designed for students in the fifth grade and above, the “Join the Journey” Confirmation Retreat will provide churches of ALL sizes an opportunity to connect with others through worship, study, and fellowship. Bishop Graves will be joining us for the entire event! For more information and to register your group, [click here](#).

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

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

Summer Camp 2024: Registration is now open for Camp Connect! There is 1 week of senior high camp, 2 weeks of junior high camp, and 2 weeks of elementary camp. [Find out more information and sign up today!](#)

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

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

[View Full Conference Calendar](#)

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Resource Roundup – January 2024

Human Relations Day is January 15

On Human Relations Day, we come together to recognize efforts to become the beloved community. Find resources for worship, promotion, age-level material and more in the pastor and leader kit. Core resources are available in multiple languages. [Find resources to promote](#)

2023: The year in photos

In a world filled with uncertainty, United Methodists found creative ways to live out their faith and serve

their communities in 2023. UM News photographers documented a year in the life of United Methodism worldwide. [See photos](#)

GBHEM Scholarship Program now open

Each year GBHEM awards over \$5.5 million in scholarships to students from across the world. The GBHEM scholarship application portal opened Dec. 15. Students can submit one general application which will be screened for all possible eligible programs. Applicant must be an active, full member of The United Methodist Church for at least one year and pursuing a degree program at an accredited institution within the U.S. [Learn more](#)

New preaching resources available

Resources, videos and workshops are coming to help pastors improve their preaching. Discipleship Ministries is launching the new service in 2024. The Rev. Derek C. Weber, director of preaching ministries at Discipleship Ministries, is heading the Hey Preacher project, financed through a grant from the Lilly Endowment. [Read press release](#) | [Register](#)

Seasonal explainer videos for congregations

The church calendar is full of special days and seasons United Methodists observe every year. United Methodist Communications has videos available to help congregations better understand these annual occasions and their significance. [Learn more](#)

Agency unveils 'Journey of a Dollar' video

The General Council on Finance and Administration, the denomination's finance agency, has released its latest video, "UMC: Journey of a Dollar." The video, part of the ongoing Data-Driven Discernment: Charting Hope at General Conference campaign, seeks to shed light on the path a dollar takes once it enters the offering plate and how it supports individual congregations and The United Methodist Church's global reach. [Read press release](#) | [Watch video](#)



Retired Clergy Birthdays - January 2024

- 1/01 – Cindy H. Autry: 2958 Roswell Lane; Columbus, GA 31906
- 1/01 – James Hancock: 4360 Manor Millwood Rd. S; Manor, GA 31550
- 1/01 – Larry Roberts: 12 Foxfire Estates Circle; Waynesville, NC 28785
- 1/01 – Dan Robinson: Cypress Pond Retirement; 15 Kent Rd.; Tifton, GA 31794
- 1/02 – Sharon Loyley: 1544 Harris Ridge Rd.; Young Harris, GA 30582
- 1/03 – John Haney: 165 Beaver Creek Drive; Gray, GA 31032
- 1/03 – Marcus Tripp: 3791 Overlook Dr.; Macon, GA 31204
- 1/06 – Joyce Harris: 111 Ingham St.; St. Simons Island, GA 31522
- 1/07 – Tommy Martin, III: 606 Chastain Place; Macon, GA 31210
- 1/08 – Annette Brooks: 114 Sunset Dr.; Fitzgerald, GA 31750
- 1/08 – Ernie Rogers: 1803 Pineknoll Lane; Albany, GA 31707
- 1/08 – Gary Starrett: PO Box 113; Bolingbroke, GA 31004
- 1/21 – Billy Wicker, Jr.: 400 Ridgecrest Rd.; E. Dublin, GA 31021
- 1/22 – Tom Davis, Jr.: 155 Twin Creek Ct.; Athens, GA 30605
- 1/24 – Joe Dunagan: 130 Commercial Ave.; East Palatka, FL 32131
- 1/24 – Debbie Wallace: 1321 Happy Trail; Macon, GA 31220
- 1/27 – Bill Jones: 106 Hilldale Circle; Vidalia, GA 30474
- 1/30 – Harold Feightner: 107 Harvest Point; Warner Robins, GA 31088

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Obituary: Rev. John Allen Mitchell, Jr.

John Allen Mitchell, beloved husband, father, and grandfather, passed away on December 20, 2023, after a long battle with Parkinson’s. He fought the disease for close to a decade and just recently celebrated his 80th birthday.

A Celebration of Life will be held at 11:00 AM on Tuesday, January 2, 2024, at Martha Bowman United Methodist Church in Macon, GA. Reverend Mark Magoni and Dr. Matthew Stewart will officiate the service. The family will greet friends for an hour of visitation in the Damascus Hall prior to the service.

John was born on November 12, 1943, in Fitzgerald, GA, to the late John Allen Mitchell, Sr. and Alma May Hall Mitchell. He received his bachelor’s degree from Oklahoma State University. He began his career as a CPA in Augusta where he met his devoted wife Lynne, with whom he shared 51 years of loving marriage. They relocated to Macon and built a life filled with love, joy and countless memories. He received a Masters of Business from Georgia College University while maintaining his accounting practice. They have three beautiful children: Melissa Rivers of Sydney, Australia (married to Eric), Jennifer Mitchell Boggs of Macon and Sean Mitchell of Atlanta. He is also survived by five grandchildren: Oliver Rivers, Elliot Rivers, Alec Rivers, Abigail Boggs and Joshua Boggs. His family was a huge source of happiness and inspiration.

John had his own CPA firm for over 20 years when he answered the call from the Lord and decided to pursue a new path as a Methodist minister. He earned his Masters of Divinity from the Candler School of Theology at Emory University while serving as an associate pastor at Martha Bowman United Methodist Church. His first appointment as a Senior Minister was at Jekyll Island UMC, followed by Midland UMC, St. Mary’s UMC and Wilmington Island UMC. After retirement he still faithfully served part-time at Sunshine and Haddock UMC. He was a man of Christ and lived this in the many congregations he served.

Beyond his professional endeavors, John had a diverse range of interests. He was a jack of all trades, mastering many skills, including a love of cooking, travel, painting, photography, wood-working and reading, to name a few.

John touched the lives of many through his kindness, grace, and unwavering love. His memory will forever live on in the hearts of those who knew and loved him.

A private spreading of his ashes will take place in the Martha Bowman Prayer Garden to honor John’s wishes. In lieu of flowers, please donate to Martha Bowman United Methodist Church or to the Parkinson’s Foundation in honor of Revered John A. Mitchell, Jr.

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Scripture Readings – January 9 edition

January 14

Second Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B

- [1 Samuel 3:1-10 \(11-20\)](#)
- [Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18](#)

- [1 Corinthians 6:12-20](#)
- [John 1:43-51](#)

January 21

Third Sunday after the Epiphany, Year B

- [Jonah 3:1-5, 10](#)
- [Psalm 62:5-12](#)
- [1 Corinthians 7:29-31](#)
- [Mark 1:14-20](#)