

## **SOUTH GEORGIA ADVOCATE – DEC. 17 EDITION**

### **Advent candles spark church fire**

**By Kara Witherow, *Editor***

Baxley First United Methodist Church was damaged by fire Sunday afternoon, Dec. 15. No injuries were reported.

Church leaders say the fire was an accident that started in the pulpit area where candles on an advent wreath were left burning unattended.

“We’re brokenhearted, but we know that buildings can be replaced,” said Rev. Steve Meguiar, pastor of Baxley First UMC. “We’re very blessed that it was reported as early as it was.”

A passer-by who saw smoke coming from the church called the mayor and first responders.

The Sunday afternoon fire left Baxley First UMC standing, but much of the interior – including a piano, an organ, and projectors – was damaged. A communion table, a nativity set, lights, and flooring were destroyed.

In the midst of the devastation and loss, there have been several miracles. The church’s pulpit Bible, from 1968, somehow survived without a single singe. The new Chrismon tree was also spared. The community and connection’s rapid and overwhelming response has been another miracle, Rev. Meguiar said.

“We just have a wonderful, wonderful community,” he said. “They’ve really been rallying around us.”

Rev. Paula Lewis, superintendent of the South Central District, was in Baxley at the time of the fire and went to pray with Rev. Meguiar and the congregation.

“Even in the midst of tragedy, God is still with us and Christ is still on the throne,” she said.

Sunday morning, the congregation celebrated the Third Sunday of Advent and lit the candle for joy. During a time of prayer, they gave thanks to God for His blessings. Two people offered thanksgiving for the Baxley First UMC sanctuary and Rev. Meguiar gave thanks for first responders.

“We prayed for them that morning and they ended up coming and helping us that afternoon,” he said. “That’s kind of a cool thing.”

The sanctuary was built in 1929. Worship services will be moved to the church’s family life center while repairs are made to the sanctuary.

During this time of Advent, when many congregations are using candles, Rev. Lewis and Rev. Meguiar urge churches to make sure candles are extinguished before leaving. Rev. Lewis also praised Rev. Meguiar and the Baxley First UMC congregation for quickly jumping into action following the fire.

“It’s important for churches to talk about what to do if something like this were to happen,” she said. “Being prepared and being ready to be the Church when tragedy happens is important. They were really great at that yesterday.”

In the midst of their grief, church members are cleaning up and pressing on.

“There’s always hope,” Rev. Meguiar said. “We have a remarkable group of people and church family. Our hearts are broken, but we never give up.”



## **Former Santa still spreading message of love, joy, hope**

**By Kara Witherow, *Editor***

For 18 Christmas seasons, from 1975 until 1993, Rev. Eric Sizemore donned a red suit, a beard, and a stocking cap.

And while the 160ish-pound, dark-haired, 36-year-old preacher didn’t then look much like the jolly, old elf, he had the same infectious grin and hope-filled spirit.

On Sunday mornings – then and now – Rev. Sizemore preaches a message of love, hope, and goodwill to all. But for those 18 holiday seasons, on Friday evenings, Saturdays, and Sunday afternoons he’d also share a similar message, albeit with a slightly different crowd.

The children, adults, and pets who piled onto his lap to tell him their Christmas wishes didn’t know he was also the pastor of Aldersgate United Methodist Church. But they surely felt the love and joy he radiated as the new Macon Mall’s Santa Claus.

What started out as a way to earn a little extra cash to pay for seminary became a natural extension of his role as pastor, he said.

Back in 1975, Rev. Sizemore was a seminary student struggling to get by. His wife, Carol, worked six days a week at a downtown Macon dress shop while he attended classes at Emory University’s Candler School of Theology and substitute taught in the Bibb County school system.

Needing to supplement his family’s income, he answered an ad in the Macon Telegraph and soon became the Macon Mall’s Santa Claus.

“We were doing everything we could to make ends meet,” he said. “I substitute taught, I solicited for the city directory, and then I saw in the paper an ad for seasonal work. I went and applied for it and they hired me!”

The churches he served always gave the green light for Rev. Sizemore to put on his red Santa suit. While he tried to never promise a child anything, he did try to spread messages of hope and joy.

“To see the thrill of hope in their eyes ... it was really worth it,” he said. “We live in a very jaded world today, and kids don’t seem to have enough fantasy in their lives. I think there’s a need for fantasy and wonder in little children, and I was pleased to be able to contribute to their happiness.”

The sacrifices he and his family made for him to attend seminary and become a pastor were numerous, but many of his fellow classmates had similar stories, said Rev. Sizemore, who retired in 2006 but still serves Rochelle and Pitts United Methodist Churches.

“It was a struggle, but it was worth it,” he said of the early mornings, long drives to Atlanta, late nights, and odd jobs. “When God puts a call on you, you have to respond to it.”

And although he may not wear the red suit anymore, Rev. Sizemore, 80, still has an important Christmas message to share.

“I really want Advent to be a season of hope. There is hope. We have hope in Christ Jesus,” he said. “We need to look beyond the façade and the glitter and glamour of Christmas to know that God has come in the flesh and that’s to whom we should be paying more attention to than the trappings of Christmas.”

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## **Tutoring program helps connect church to community**

**By Kara Witherow, *Editor***

Whether they’re there for the food, the fun computer games, or the free tutoring, the end result is the same: they know [ConneXion Church](#) cares.

Every Wednesday afternoon at 3:45, a dozen children from Savannah’s Juliette Low Elementary School pile into a church van and make the short trek to ConneXion Church. They spend a few minutes in the church’s fellowship hall, chatting, playing, and eating snacks. Then the group heads to the education/children’s wing, divides into groups by grade, and gets to work.

When they head home that evening, their homework will be done, their questions will be answered, and, most importantly, says Rev. Michael Culbreth, they’ll know they’re loved and cared for.

ConneXion Church’s new after school tutoring program, launched last month, is just one of several ways the congregation is reaching out to serve its community. The church also leads Juliette Low Elementary School’s Good News Club, a weekly after-school Bible ministry; serves children at another local elementary school through a Backpack Buddies food program; and hosts a Christmas Day brunch for those in the community who have intellectual disabilities.

“This is an extension of our outreach ministry to the community, particularly focusing on children,” said Rev. Culbreth, pastor of ConneXion Church, a multi-generational and multi-racial church that launched three years ago in Savannah. “We knew there was a need in the community and we are helping undergird what teachers are doing at Juliette Low.”

With seed money from [Congregational Development's Increased Impact leadership development program](#), ConneXion Church was able to purchase several Chromebook laptops and other resources for the after-school tutoring program.

Volunteers run the ministry; two young-adult church members – both teachers – oversee it and students from two local high schools volunteer as tutors.

The tutoring focuses on math and reading. The children, all in third, fourth, or fifth grade, get help with homework and are able to play reading, math, and other educational games on the computers.

The program's goal is to help children learn and grow, Rev. Culbreth said.

“Our hope is to help strengthen the academic background of our students and to serve our community in whatever way we can, and we feel like this is a good way to serve the community.”

Maya Brown, a 16-year-old junior at Savannah's Herschel V. Jenkins High School, enjoys helping children and wants to give back to the community that has given much to her.

“I want to help younger kids have the same opportunity,” she said. “Watching and helping them grow and learn has been amazing.”

Rev. Culbreth and the ministry's leaders work closely with Juliette Low Elementary School to ensure students' academic needs are being met. With just a few weeks under their belt, it's hard to measure success in quantifiable ways, but Rev. Culbreth says they expect to see fruit in a year or so.

Whether being tutored in math or reading, playing a computer game, or being mentored by an older friend, Rev. Culbreth says that, at the end of the day, the ministry wants children to leave knowing that ConneXion Church cares for them and offers ministries that are helpful, academically and spiritually.

“In order for the Church to really make disciples we have to be an outward church,” Rev. Culbreth said. “Being inward focused means you're a dying church, so in order to be vibrant and to make a difference in the communality we have to be outward focused.”

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## **Conference Nominations Committee looking for leaders**

The South Georgia Annual Conference Committee on Nominations has begun a process to identify laity and clergy interested in serving on Conference and District boards, committees, and teams for the 2021-2024 quadrennium.

Between now and January 29, you are invited to indicate your willingness to serve or to encourage possible leaders to complete the [online Interest Form](#).

The Conference Nominations Committee is looking for resourceful and committed leaders who have vision, leadership skills, and a passion for the work of the particular board or committee on which they are interested.

The committee has also identified additional characteristics and qualities that will be needed during the next quadrennium as the Conference and The United Methodist Church face an unknown future.

“Words like calm, heart of peace, diversity, openness to change, respectful, and hopeful began emerging as we talked about those who would lead our conference over the next four years,” said Dr. Nita Crump, Conference Secretary and chair of the nominations committee. “The committee wants individuals who are willing to hear all sides, will abide by the [HEART principles](#) and will honor the integrity of all voices.”

The annual conference will elect the leadership team for the 2021-2024 Quadrennium at the June 2020 annual conference session. The newly elected conference leaders will begin July 1, 2020.

Pastors, district superintendents, district nominating committees, and laity can help with the process by recruiting and identifying persons in local churches who should submit an interest form.

“This process will help the Conference and District nominations committees match people and their interests, gifts, and graces with the various opportunities to serve on the district and conference level,” said Dr. Crump.

Steps in the leadership selection process are:

- IDENTIFICATION — Indicate your interest(s) by completing and submitting the [online Interest Form](#). Note that this is the sole means available to indicate interest in serving. Jan. 29, 2020, is the deadline for submitting Interest Forms.
- NOMINATION — The District Committee on Nominations and the District Leadership Team will receive and evaluate Interest Forms and coordinate the nominations process with the Conference Committee on Nominations. The Conference Committee on Nominations will submit a slate of nominees (committee and board chairs and members) to the 2020 Annual Conference. If you are already serving on a committee or board and wish to be removed, please email your desire to the Conference Secretary, Dr. Nita Crump ([nitac@sgaumc.com](mailto:nitac@sgaumc.com)).
- ELECTION — The annual conference will elect the leadership team for the 2021-2024 Quadrennium at the annual conference in June 2020.
- SERVING — The newly elected conference leaders will begin July 1, 2020.

Questions or in need of help? Contact Dr. Nita Crump, Conference Secretary, at [nitac@sgaumc.com](mailto:nitac@sgaumc.com).

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## Mary's faith

### OUR CONNECTION MATTERS

NITA CRUMP

*<sup>26</sup> In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, <sup>27</sup> to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup> The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you...." <sup>38</sup> "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her. (Luke 1:26-28, 38, NIV)*

Mary is thought to have been a young teenager when she became engaged to Joseph. She lived at home in a protected environment, cared for by parents who brought her up according to faith and tradition. A part of that faith and tradition included the way a young woman was to behave prior to marriage. Another part of that faith and tradition was the expectation that God was going to do a new thing and would send a Messiah. Every young woman wanted to be the mother of the Messiah. Every young woman expected that to happen neatly, within the bounds of what faith and tradition taught were proper regarding marriage and the birth of children. No one expected God to do a new thing in a way that was outside the human-created boundaries of both faith-filled expectations and tradition.

But that's what Mary heard was about to happen. She was highly favored by God and would become the mother of the Messiah! Can't you just imagine how her heart jumped at that news? She! Mary! She was the one chosen by God to give birth to the one who would save her people! Amazing! But there was a catch. It would happen in a manner she didn't expect. Can't you just imagine her heart sinking when she realized that part of the news the angel was sharing? Me? A mother? And I'm not married yet? What will people say? What will my mother and father say? What will Joseph say?

Young women who were found to be with child outside of marriage faced a gamut of possibilities that included a lifetime of shame, never marrying, being thrown out of her home and into the streets to survive however possible, or being dragged to the town square and stoned to death. Mary knew this. Life was about to get harder than it had ever been. Mary faced a choice. Say no and life would return to the normal that she knew and expected. Say yes and life could become very difficult without any expectation of normal.

We have Mary's answer recorded by Luke. "May your word to me be fulfilled." (NIV) "...let it be to me according to your word." (RSV) "...be it unto me according to thy word." (KJV) Mary answered with faith. She believed that the stranger was an angel from God. She believed the words of the angel that with God, all things are possible. She believed in the God of her ancestors who sent the angel. She believed that that God – the great I Am – held the future and

that she could walk into that future sure of his eternal provision. Would the future be easy? I doubt thoughts of easy ever crossed Mary's mind. But faith did.

Faith filled Mary's heart and mind. The words of the angel – that with God all things were possible – echoed in her ears. And she said yes. Yes to God. Yes to a lifetime that she couldn't begin to imagine. Yes to all of the generations of humanity to follow.

I want Mary's faith. I want faith that not only says that I believe, but lives that belief every day. I want faith that acts on the belief that with God, all things are possible even when the path lies outside of my expectations. Dear Lord, give me the courage of a young woman willing to say yes when everything around her might have told her she was wrong. Give me faith like Mary's to answer your call even when I don't understand and can't see the outcome. Amen.

*Dr. Nita Crump serves as Director of Connectional Ministries. Contact her at [nitac@sgaumc.com](mailto:nitac@sgaumc.com).*

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## **Connectional Ministries' Leadership Tour 2020 to kick off Jan. 5 in Statesboro**

The Office of Connectional Ministries will kick off its [2020 Leadership Tour](#) Sunday, Jan. 5 in Statesboro. The leadership tour, which has four stops, is aimed at equipping and empowering local church leaders.

The 2020 Leadership Tour, which will travel to Statesboro, Warner Robins, Camilla, and Hinesville, will offer practical teaching and resources to inspire and help local church leaders lead with confidence. Similar to the Pathways training event, participants will choose two paths, or classes, to take to enrich their ministry. This free event is sponsored by the Office of Connectional Ministries. [Click here for more information.](#)

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## **Students to tour colleges, campus ministries during 2020 Campus Crawl**

[Campus Crawl](#), set for Feb. 27-29, 2020, is a bus tour designed to introduce 9th-12th grade students to United Methodist colleges and campus ministries around the state. In one weekend, high school students will meet representatives from our United Methodist colleges and universities in Georgia as well as meet several Wesley Foundations on public university campuses.

This year we're visiting the following campuses and ministries: KSU, Young Harris, Reinhardt, Georgia Tech, Clark Atlanta, LaGrange, West Georgia, and Emory.

Want to go? Sign up while the price is LOW (until Jan 1)! [Click here for more information and to register](#)

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## Mary's Praise

### Winter Quarter: Honoring God

Sunday school lesson for the week of December 22, 2019

By Dr. D. Craig Rikard

**Lesson Scripture: Luke 1: 39-56**

**Key Verse: Luke 1:46-47**

*"My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my savior."*

#### **Aim and Goal of the Lesson**

To study the events leading to the beautiful, inspired Magnificat. To recognize the contrasts and comparisons in this narrative that help us grasp the full wonder and meaning of her praise.

#### **Historical, Geographical, Theological and Experiential background of Luke 1:39-56**

In last week's lesson we learned that though David deeply desired to construct a permanent structure for the Ark of the Covenant and a house for God, God had chosen another for the task. David's son Solomon would construct the majestic first temple that would provide Israel with a permanent symbolic place to worship their Lord. However, David would become the central character in the creation of another structure, a *spiritual* structure that transcended wood and stone. Through David's lineage a spiritual house would be built using David's descendants as its spiritual foundation. From David would arise a kingdom, a government in which God would reign over all. It would exist forever and no temporal or celestial power could destroy it. A descendent of David would occupy that throne, and the major descendent would be the Messiah. As Isaiah proclaimed in chapter 9, "Of the increase of his government there shall be no end."

In our lesson's narrative the time has arrived for this messianic descendent of David to enter our world, join humanity, and redeem the entire world. Luke employs the literary techniques of comparison and contrast to reveal the wonder of the unfolding events that welcomed the Christ-child into the world. The narrative will open with Mary's visit to her relative Elizabeth who was with child six months prior to Mary. Elizabeth has been barren, thus her carrying a male child in her womb was, for Elizabeth and Zechariah, quite miraculous. It implied that God had a plan for Elizabeth's and Zechariah's child. In the tradition of other biblical accounts in which barren women found themselves with child, the gift of the child usually preceded an act of God's redemptive work in Israel's history. For example, Sarah gave birth to Isaac and Hannah gave birth to Samuel. Isaac was the child of the covenant, and Samuel became one of the first mighty judges of Israel. Therefore, we can conclude that the birth of John to Elizabeth and Zechariah held great significance for God's movement in human history. John became the Nazrite calling Israel to repentance and baptism and was among the first to recognize Jesus as the "Lamb of God that taketh away the sins of the world." Furthermore, he is closely associated in spirit with the

prophet Elijah who was believed to arrive prior to the arrival of God's Messiah. As we study the text, these contrasts and comparisons will compliment powerfully the Advent story and the important role of each important character.

### **Historical, theological and experiential reflection upon the narrative of Luke: 1:39-56:**

#### **Luke 1: 39-40**

As Mary discovers she is with child, she hurriedly prepared to visit Elizabeth. Having already heard from the angel Gabriel that Elizabeth was with child, Mary undoubtedly was able to understand that the two births would share a special spiritual connection. Many scholars assume Elizabeth is from the town of Hebron. Mary's journey from Nazareth to Hebron is approximately 70 miles. This would mark the first long journey of two during Mary's pregnancy. Seventy miles was a long distance over tough terrain. Hebron was an important biblical city. It is the city in which the patriarchs and matriarchs were buried, such as Abraham and Sarah. David was first anointed king at Hebron. Thus, in this sacred city of the tombs of the patriarchs, Mary journeyed to visit Elizabeth who would bring life into the world. She carried the child who would proclaim Jesus to be the Messiah. I don't think we should assume it to be coincidental that Mary travels to Hebron. After all, the patriarchs looked for that day when God's messiah would come. The Messiah is the fulfillment of the covenant made with Abraham, entombed at Hebron. Messiah is to be from the lineage of David who himself was anointed king in Hebron. At the place of David's anointed arrived a visit from Mary who carried within her womb the king of kings. Places are significant in the Bible and this was a significant place for Mary and Elizabeth to visit.

In terms of biblical tradition, usually males were the spokesmen in the biblical era. Women were not even allowed to testify in a court of law as an eye witness, considering her perception to be unreliable for no other reason that she was a woman. Yet, God's redemptive activity ignored this patriarchal way of looking at the world and used women for his redemptive plan. Remember, it was a woman who first experienced and proclaimed the resurrection of Jesus! Zechariah was a priest, an important man in Hebron. However, he is mute because of his unbelief. Therefore, it is the peasant girl Mary and her relative Elizabeth who are blessed to address and speak of the great thing God is about to do. They do not understand the full implication of what God is going to do through their children, yet still they believe what Gabriel has spoken and are willing to share it. Since Elizabeth is the older, it is customary and respectful for Mary to greet Elizabeth as she arrives.

*Can you name other biblical places of great importance because they were tied to Israel's past walk with God? Examples given: Mt. Moriah, Sinai, Gethsemane? Can you name other women in the Bible who played major roles in God's redemption of the world and in the history of Israel? What important women can you name from the New Testament and their role in the development and growth of the faith and church?*

### **Luke 1: 41-42**

When Elizabeth hears Mary's voice, the child in her womb, John, leaps with joy! It would prove unfair and rash if we attempt to claim the leaping of Elizabeth's child was little more than a normal movement of her child during pregnancy. Luke wants us to understand there is a *recognition!* As John baptizes the repentant later, and Jesus approaches, it is John who first recognizes who Jesus is. This is not a recognition he has gained from spending time with Jesus. The text implies that John intuitively and spiritually knew that Jesus of Nazareth was God's Messiah. Therefore, Luke seems to be saying to us that his recognition has existed from the beginning of their lives in the womb. If God can allow barren Elizabeth to have a child and move upon a poor peasant girl like Mary that she might be with child as well, then we cannot say that John could not recognize Jesus in the womb. Such are the wonders of God. We accept it as a matter of faith and because we accept the inspired biblical account recorded carefully by Luke.

What Elizabeth says next is through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear." Luke's Gospel is often called the Gospel of Compassion and the Gospel of the Holy Spirit. Luke's Gospel mentions the presence of the Holy Spirit and the activity of the Spirit more than the other gospels. Luke could have written that in a state of ecstasy Elizabeth proclaimed Mary and her child as special. However, Luke, again the writer who investigated his sources and treated them with care, writes plainly that Elizabeth speaks as she is inspired by the Holy Spirit. Not only is God moving in their midst, God is also speaking!

*What do you believe is Luke's intent that we understand the special, unique connection between John and Jesus in the Advent narrative? What are the spiritual connections they will share in the coming years? Why do you believe it was important for Luke to remind us that it was the Holy Spirit speaking through Elizabeth?*

### **Luke 1: 43-45**

In the previous verse notice that Elizabeth speaks of herself in a subordinate position to Mary. Mary is the one Elizabeth lifts up in exultation. From the beginning, Luke's Gospel informs us that John is not Messiah, but a messenger who prepares the way for the Lord. John himself will repeat his subordinate claim later at the Jordan. Even Elizabeth recognizes her child will make a path for the Lord to proclaim his redemption. There is not a single hint of jealousy or covetousness on the part of Elizabeth. Her humble faith is accepting of God's ministry for her and her child, and thankful for it. It is Mary who struggles to understand why God has chosen her, a lowly maiden, for such a holy calling. At least Elizabeth is married to a priest. Mary is betrothed to a carpenter! She is truly overwhelmed and cannot fully comprehend what is transpiring within and through her, and most importantly, why? Her most revealing response to the wonder of Gabriel's message is, "How will this be?" Furthermore, she adds her words of resignation and faith, "May your word to me be fulfilled." In other words, she is admitting though she does not understand, she accepts what God has proclaimed. Again, Zachariah is mute with disbelief; Mary is full of expressions of wonder.

*Can you recall a moment, or moments, when you struggled to understand what God was doing in your life? Was it easier to question the Lord, or submit as Mary saying, "Let it be?" Was there a time later when you recognized God had birthed something great in your life through that difficult time?*

### **Luke 1:46-50 (the Magnificat)**

This beautiful, honest song of praise has become a part of the church's liturgy for hundreds of years. Every Advent season of my Christian life I have listened to the Magnificat recited, read, or sung. It always blesses me. We must remember this song of praise arises from the heart of a very young woman, overcome with fear regarding what her culture and future husband might think of her or do with her. Furthermore, she is without a rational answer as to why she is with child.

A song of glorification to God implies that there is nothing we can ascribe to ourselves. We have done nothing to merit the circumstance or event that is bringing us eternal joy. No, only God deserves the respect and thanksgiving; to God we ascribe all goodness, for the Lord alone deserves it. Mary sings, "My soul glorifies *in the Lord*." Mary's praise is among the highest expressions of praise anyone can give unto God. She isn't just thanking God for what he had done in her. She offers praise for *who God is*. What God has done is an expression of who he is!

In verse 47, Mary rejoices in God her savior. Her rejoicing has everything to do with her inability to comprehend what God has done in her and why he chose her. There is mystery in her rejoicing. What God has done makes no logical sense; it cuts against the grain of the culture, it violates the cultural norms regarding marriage, and yet it must be a righteous act, for it is God who has performed it!

We have mentioned the Retribution Principle and its relation to Old and New Testament Jewish theology. Simply stated, righteous people are blessed. Those who obey the law live in health and their family enjoys a lifestyle of greater wealth. The inverse is true for those who violate the law of God. There is no reason at all, as related to Jewish theology, that Mary should receive any benefit from God. She is poor and comes from a peasant family because her culture believes the family is out of favor with God. She cannot be blessed by God for she is with child while only betrothed to Joseph. The Jewish understanding of righteousness would claim there is no reason for Mary to be blessed or rejoice over anything, possessing a family background like her own. However, the great contrast, if not an absolute contradiction, is that *she is blessed!* She is filled with joy! And Mary's statement adds to the ultimate contradiction, "All generations will rise up and call her blessed!" The unworthy in Judaism were believed to be forgotten. There would be no accomplishment by which the family could be remembered. Their name would mean nothing. And Mary has indeed accomplished nothing according to her Jewish culture. However, the advent story proclaims that God has done something so special and redemptive in her the world will never forget what God has done, and never forget her.

As Mary closes this section of the Magnificat, she poetically states a beautiful expression of humility. Mary's humility is still evident as she refuses to simply draw all attention to herself and what God has done for her. His mercy is given for all fear him, from generation to generation. God will bless others beyond Mary in the years to come. There will be the lame, the blind, the poor and brokenhearted. There will be the centurion who recognizes at the cross that Jesus must be the Son of God. There will be Mary Magdalene who discovers the empty tomb. An endless line of those who will receive God's mercy continues beyond Mary and includes each of us. The redemption of the world is not yet complete, but is ongoing through Mary's child.

*What do you think of Mary's humility? Is humility easy to identify today? What does God's choice of Mary say to us about who God can choose for great acts of love and redemption?*

### **Luke 1: 51-53**

As the Magnificat draws to a close, Mary is inspired to once again note the great contrast between the meek and powerful. Mary is an uneducated young woman from a poor home. Yet, she towers above the arrogant prideful rulers of the world. With a single movement of God's metaphorical arm, he can sweep all arrogant accomplishment and boasting aside. What is left standing? The peasant girl from Nazareth whom God has chosen for reasons the proud will never fully understand. Those who seek "bread that does not satisfy" will remain hungry. Those who seek the bread, who have no money, God calls, "Come, buy and eat!" (Isaiah 55:1-3)

*From this final verse from the Magnificat how would we define real power versus transient power? What will God's power always accomplish, and what will prideful, self-serving power accomplish? Make a list of Jesus's expressions of power and ask, "What is different about them from other expressions of power, and what do they accomplish that others cannot?"*

### **Luke 1:54-36**

The song of Mary closes with that one great thread that unites the Old and New Testament. It is the one thread that is woven through all its books and unites them in one grand redemptive theme: God is true to the covenant he made with his people. God instituted this holy covenant in Gen. 12 and has never violated it, in spite of Israel's sin. Now this covenant has found its fullest expression in the gift of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the New Covenant written on the hearts of all by faith, a covenant that guides and empowers by unconditional love.

In the closing verse we can hear Luke the historian remaining true to the facts he has gathered. He informs us that Mary remained with Elizabeth for three months before returning home. She might have stayed until John was born, but the text doesn't reveal this.

### **Summary**

From the beginning, God has overwhelmed and sometimes confused those who define power from a secular perspective. The Advent narrative and Christmas story would read far differently if God used only the powerful and not the meek. Yet, its greatest beauty lies in the Lord's use of the meek and lowly. We are blessed with a story of a peasant girl, betrothed to a mason, who

gives birth in a manger, and whose first visitors are lowly shepherds. The wonder of Christmas lies in its beautiful ability to confound, baffle, and drive us to our knees in wonder. My favorite song of Christmas is “O Holy Night.” The one verse that always leaves me with a tear in the eye is:

*Truly He taught us to love one another; His law is love and His gospel is peace. Chains shall He break, for the slave is our brother, and in His name all oppression shall cease, sweet hymns of joy in grateful chorus raise we; let all within us praise His holy name! Christ is the Lord, then ever, ever praise we! His power and glory, evermore proclaim! His power and glory, evermore proclaim!*

### **Prayer**

(personally adapted from Mary’s Magnificat) Our soul doth magnify the Lord. And our spirits rejoice in God our savior. For the Lord hath regarded the humility and humanity of his servants. Behold and henceforth, as the Lord chose Mary, let all generations be chosen to bless others in Christ. May all be blessed through his faithful servants, male and female, of every stage, age and station, until God’s kingdom comes on earth is as it is in heaven. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

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## **David’s Prayer**

### **Winter Quarter: Honoring God**

**Sunday school lesson for the week of December 29, 2019**

**By Dr. D. Craig Rikard**

**Lesson Scripture: I Chronicles 17: 16-27**

**Supplementary text: II Samuel 7: 17-25**

**Key Verse: I Chronicles 17:20**

*“There is no one like you, Lord, and there is no God but you, and we have heard with our own ears.”*

### **Aim and Goal of the Lesson**

To comprehend the beauty and humanity of David’s prayer. To recognize the power of acceptance in David’s prayer as he embraces God’s history with Israel. To learn those dynamics of his prayer that enrich our own prayer life, such as stillness and quiet.

### **Historical, Geographical, Theological and Experiential background of I Chronicles 17:16-27**

Prayer is the lifeline for all spiritual life. God’s invitation to pray allows us to address him, the King of Creation! Knowing that the Lord listens to our prayers is a gift all too often taken for

granted. There is no human dignitary with great authority to whom we can speak that is as dear and privileged as praying to God. David understood this privilege well when he prayed, “There is no one like you, Lord, and there is no God but you!”

This unique narrative actually allows us to “listen in” as David speaks to God. We are not the people praying in this text, David is. We have been given access to listen to the great king of Israel pray to the King of Kings and Lord of Lords! This beautiful session of prayer is also unique in that David is asking for nothing. He is not engaged in repentance or pouring out his heart in need. There are occasions when we find comfort in conversation itself, especially with one we love and respect. Prior to my father’s death, my favorite visits with him involved conversations just for the sake of talking together, as two friends, and as two who deeply loved one another. David is discovering comfort and calm as he sits in stillness before the Lord.

There is a lesson to be learned in this unique prayer of David before God. We must admit that most often our prayers involve our need to confess our sin and ask that God clean up the messes we have created with our sin. And, we most likely pray even more so that God grant us something we need in life, or that we “think” we need in life. If we could attach a title to this prayer of David we might call it a “prayer in which a spiritual son talks in serenity with his father.” Prior to this text David desired to build the Lord a house, a house better and more majestic than the house in which he personally dwelled. However, Nathan the prophet informed David the act of building such a holy dwelling would belong to another: David’s son, Solomon. David could have entered this time of prayer in utter disappointment at being passed over. After all, it was his idea and dream. However, David is calm and accepting. He is accepting the wisdom of God and accepting the greater will of the Lord who knows far more than David regarding the building of the house. David is actually thanking God in his prayer for God’s higher wisdom and humbly accepting his role in the divine will.

*When is the last time we have enjoyed calmly sitting before the Lord in gratitude? When have we last thanked the Lord for choosing another path than the one we assumed was best? When have we last thanked God for using another person to accomplish a dream that was birthed in our heart? Would we have been as calm as David? As gracious? Should this be an example of a unique prayer, or an example of the kinds of prayers we should pray with greater frequency?*

## **Historical, Geographical, Theological and Experiential reflection on I Chronicles 17: 16-27**

### **I Chronicles 17:16**

Who cannot be touched by David’s opening words, for most of us have asked them. “Whom am I, Lord God, and what is my family, that you have brought me this far?” Pride is the “sin of sins.” Pride allows all other sins “to stick.” That is, the prideful person sees no need for repentance and thus remains in a state of sin. Humility is that great state of the soul that recognizes our “smallness.” Notice, we did not say our “worthlessness.” We are worth everything to God, even the gift of the Christ. Feeling small is the recognition that we are not the

center of the universe, and that life does not revolve around us. We are one very special person in God's creation who owns a very special place in the Lord's will. To feel small is actually to feel special, minus the pride. If a lily of the field possessed a sense of consciousness I can almost assure you it does not feel like the most important lily, or that the beauty of the field depends upon its existence alone. The lily would understand its place, and what a beautiful place it is. The field would prove beautiful without it, but not as full nor as beautiful as it does with it. So it is with us. David knows there is no logical or even spiritual reason for God to say, "Among all people I know you, and I know your family!" He is but one man among many, from one family among thousands. The fact that God knows him and uses him is an overwhelming act of grace. Repeatedly in the Psalms we are reminded that God knows us better than we know ourselves. He knows the number of hairs upon our head (Mat. 10:30) and when we rise and when we lie down. (Psalm 139) David is very aware that to sit in the presence of God and to be known and heard is an unfathomable act of grace. Notice, when David asks, "Who am I?" God doesn't answer. He doesn't need to. God loves and knows each of us for reasons we could never fully understand. Therefore, simply embrace the beauty and wonder of the eternal truth that God knows us intimately and loves us as deeply.

I have always been a lover of all genres of music, from pop to country. One of my favorite photographs with my dad is us standing together on the stage of the old Ryman Auditorium in Nashville, Tenn., home of the original Grand Ole Opry. In my teen years, Kris Kristofferson penned a song that soared up the charts. Honestly, as much as I like music, I struggled to recognize the attraction our culture possessed for this simple song entitled, "Why Me Lord?" Later however, I realized that the simple song asks one of the more profound and unfathomable questions with which we all struggle. "Why me Lord?" "What have I ever done, to receive even one, of the blessings I've known?" Who can honestly say they haven't asked that question on some occasion? Years before Kristofferson, David was already asking that question.

*Can you remember occasions when you thought, "God, who am I to you?" Or, "What qualifies me to serve you in any manner?" "What gives me the right or privilege of speaking to you and especially to be heard?" "Why do you think God knows you, loves you, cares for you and uses you?" "If we cannot arrive at an answer, then what should be our response to the One who knows us so well even when we just don't understand it?"*

### **I Chronicles 17:17**

It is evident that David in no manner feels passed over since Solomon will build the temple. David understands that he spiritually is and will always remain "connected" to the house that will be built. Of course, David is honored that his son will construct such a holy place. Yet, David's connection seems deeper than mere kinship. David is learning that he is but one part in a lineage of service. He is one part in a process that expresses and constructs expressions of God's holiness in life. He is the dreamer, Solomon will see that the temple is built, but craftsman and craftsmen with every gift and grace will do the fine, meticulous work. When the temple is complete it will be the product of many prayers, many ideas, the work of many artists and many

who will diligently engage in difficult manual labor. The temple will not stand as a monument to David or Solomon. It will stand as a holy structure *unto the Lord*, constructed by the Lord's people. David is utterly humbled that God has chosen him to be just a part of the holy endeavor. Paul understood the spiritual construction of Jesus' church in the same manner. It wasn't Paul's church, nor would it be the product of any individual. God's spirit would use men and women for centuries to place in our hands the needs that create the holy gift of the church. (I Cor. 3:5-11) Though no single person is responsible for the gift of the church in the world, each of us stands in that long lineage of faithful servants who gave of our time, talent, gifts, and offerings. Like David, let us be utterly amazed that we too were and are a vital part of one of the holiest undertakings in life.

*Do you understand your place in God's gift of the church? Do we think of the church in terms of individual contributors, or in terms of a long line representing a spiritual lineage? How would you interpret Paul's words in I Cor. 3 in the existence and continued development of your own local church? Do you feel you know your special place? Have you realized how special your place is? Have we realized how precious every person in our church truly is in the construction of the physical and spiritual church?*

### **I Chronicles 17:18**

Have you ever exhausted your vocabulary when talking with God? Often in crisis Christians will struggle to find the words that express their deep longing for God's help. In Romans 8 Paul recognized this limited vocabulary. In Romans 8:26 Paul admits we often do not know how to pray. Therefore, the Spirit has to intercede for us. Likewise, we can exhaust our prayer vocabulary of praise or gratitude. David is asking, "What more can I say to you for all that you have done for your servant?" We must never forget that some of our most beautiful and meaningful prayers are unspoken. The human spirit, along with the intercession of the Holy Spirit, expresses to God our deepest thoughts, words and affections. We often call for a time of silent prayer in worship. However, we are actually asking that people simply speak quietly in their hearts. True silent prayer isn't looking for words for it recognizes there are none. We sit quietly and allow the quiet heart itself to become the prayer. Often I will pray in church in quiet, and say, "God, I have no words to express myself; hear the unspoken words of my heart."

Then, David offers a tender, heartfelt expression of his humble humanity. "For you know your servant." Could David not be saying, "Lord, though I am exhausted of word, you know me so well you know all I think and feel?" As cited above, we should be filled with wonder and awe that God, who made the heavens and the earth, who holds the cosmos together by his great power, knows the number of hairs on our heads, the joys and pains of our hearts, and our deepest loves.

### **I Chronicles 17:19-27**

It takes a measure of comfort and courage to sit before the Lord and honestly pour out one's heart in word or silence. However, David is confident in God's promises. The promise of

building the temple through his son is made by the God of Israel's history. In the next series of verses David recalls the manner in which God has worked in the history of his chosen nation. God has fulfilled every promise made to his people, especially in relation to the covenant with Abraham and Sarah. God initiated in Gen. 12 a covenant relationship with Abraham, Sarah and their offspring for all eternity. The Lord's faithfulness to his covenant was demonstrated and fulfilled in the Exodus, in the giving of Law at Sinai, in protecting them in their 40 years of wandering, their entrance into Canaan, and now as the holy city on Mt. Zion is established as the site for God's love and justice to flow through the earth like a healing stream (Amos 5:24). David knows the God of his yesterdays is the God of his present and future. Therefore, he can speak confidently, though reverently, with the Lord of Israel. Yes, as David was previously cited, "God, you know your servant;" now, David is saying, "God, I know you."

*Does God's loving actions in your past grant you comfort and hope in your present? Is our hope and faith in God which is founded upon the Lord's faithfulness in past years filling us today with a holy confidence that God will not fail us? Can you name specific promises God has fulfilled in your life that fill you with greater courage and faith in facing the future?*

*When is the last time you contemplated just how deeply the Lord knows you? And can you say in confidence, "God, I know you in Christ?"*

### **Summary**

Christmastide has arrived! God has joined humanity in Jesus Christ that we might know the depth of his love and just how far that love will walk to reveal how precious we are to the Savior. Through Luke's Gospel and Matthew's, we are allowed to "sit above it all" and watch the divine, redemptive drama unfold. We can listen in to the conversations of Mary, Joseph, the innkeeper, shepherds and angels. The entire world has been invited to watch the greatest story in the world in its infancy. God's promise of redemption to his beloved people is present in all that unfolds, and will come to fruition in the days ahead through Jesus' life, death and resurrection. Let us join David this Christmas in sitting quietly before our loving God, allowing our hearts to express what our thoughts cannot think, nor our words say. Let us sit before the Lord, knowing that "he knows us better than we know our own selves." And, let us pray that we might continue our spiritual journey in learning to say, "And, we know you Lord." Our journey with Christ is anchored in the Lord's historical drama dating back to the covenant and before, and will continue until the new creation in Rev. 21 springs forth in magnificent splendor and unimaginable life! We know the Lord, what He has done, what He is doing even now in Christ, and what God will accomplish when the Kingdom arrives in all its glory!

### **Prayer**

Almighty God, Advent and Christmas is such a profound story of love and hope. At best we can sit silently in worship, allowing the wonder of what you have accomplished through Christ to fill us with a holy hush. Teach us to quieten our hearts until we can spiritually hear the angelic chorus in the shepherd's field, until we can hear Joseph's plea for a place for his dear bride to lay

her head, until we can hear the moving sound of birth fill a crude manger. Allow us to sit with you, our Lord, until we realize you have invited us to experience a drama of truth and redemption the world could never replicate or diminish. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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## **Solomon Summons the Ark**

### **Winter Quarter: Honoring God**

**Sunday school lesson for the week of January 5, 2020**

**By Dr. D. Craig Rikard**

**Lesson Scripture: I Kings 8: 1-13**

**Supplementary text: 2 Chronicles 5: 1-14**

**Key Verse: I Kings 8:13**

*"I have indeed built a magnificent temple for you, a place for you to dwell forever."*

### **Aim and Goal of the Lesson**

To gain an understanding of the significance and context of moving the Ark of the Covenant into the newly constructed temple. To appreciate the importance of the centrality of God in all worship and our special role in that worship.

### **Historical, Geographical, Theological and Experiential background of I Kings 8:1-13, and 2 Chronicles 5:1-14**

How tempting it is to assume God should deal with us according to the rule of human fairness. In our narrative, it doesn't seem fair to us that David has done so much preparatory work for a holy project, a project for which he felt great passion, only to die and have his son Solomon make the dream a reality. Skilled laborers and artisans had worked seven long years to bring David's vision of the temple to fruition. The temple was completed in the 11<sup>th</sup> year and eighth month of Solomon's reign. The temple is now completed, and for the ensuing generations it will most likely be known as the "temple Solomon built." Is the fame attributed to Solomon fair? From a human perspective, no. However, God has repeatedly reminded us that he does not judge by what we might see or in a manner pleasing to humankind. A higher will is always ongoing and there is a high noble purpose to David's dreaming and Solomon's building. How might David have behaved if he had built the temple? Would David have become the humble man we know from the beautiful, tender psalms? Or, would he have become so consumed with building the temple that other important needs of the new capital would have gone untended? If Solomon had not built the temple would he have become the wise king we know from Proverbs? Would he have devoted himself to warfare and military expansion to a higher degree than needed as he neglected learning wisdom? The answer is, of course, we don't know. We can't possibly imagine

how the kingdom would have unfolded and the roles of David and Solomon might have unfolded. We also have no way of knowing if David and Solomon would have been the kind of men God desired and the kind of kings that expressed the power and love of Yahweh throughout the near eastern world. We do get a possible clue as to why God chose Solomon over David. In I Chron. 22:8, the text reads, **“But the word of the Lord came to me (David), saying, ‘You have shed much blood and have waged great wars. You shall not build a house to my name, because you have shed so much blood before me on the earth.’ God must have desired a man of peace build his holy temple. Whatever his reasons, God chose David to dream and plan, and Solomon to build.**

*Do you believe most of us determine fairness based on faith in God’s larger will? When life doesn’t appear fair, what is our usual response toward those we believe undeserving? What is our response toward God? Is it not a position of arrogance to assume God has not acted fairly? In what way? In the biblical story of King Saul consulting the Witch of Endor, how did his arrogance cause great pain and calamity for Israel? (I Sam. 28)*

Remember, the author of Chronicles is addressing many of the important issues omitted by I and II Samuel and the Kings. The title in the Septuagint for Chronicles refers to “things overlooked,” in the earlier historical documents. Most believe Ezra the scribe began to write the Chronicles and they were later completed by other scribes. Ezra brought much needed reform back to those exiles who were settling Canaan anew after the Babylonian empire had destroyed so many of their sacred symbols, and the Mosaic Law they once cherished was falling into neglect through the years in exile. We should not be amazed that Ezra and the scribes wanted to restore the temple, razed to the ground by Babylon, and other precious symbols. These symbols reminded the people that the God of Solomon’s temple was the God of the returning exiles. The Lord’s holiness, love, and covenant mercy were as unchangeable as ever!

Symbols have no intrinsic power of their own. They point to an important transcendent truth that is ageless. Of course, God did not dwell in a house made of hands. However, that house, which we also call the temple, represented the transcendent presence of God in the midst of his people. This transcendent presence is the presence of holiness, love, covenant, compassion and the refusal to give up on his covenant people. In later years when under Ezra and Nehemiah the second temple rose from the ashes, the people were reminded anew that the destruction of the first temple could in no way destroy God’s relationship with his people.

Returning to the construction of the first temple by Solomon, we can ask, “Why was it necessary to go through the labor and expense to build a structure when the tabernacle had served them fairly well during the 40 years of wandering?” It too was beautiful, with ornate curtains and holy structures to transport it from place to place. It contained a holy place where the Ark of Covenant stood, and only the high priests of Israel could enter the holy of holies. The site was so holy that should an undefiled high priest enter, he would die. The congregation knew of his death through attaching bells to his garment. If the bells stopped ringing, he had died. Then, the congregation

faced another problem, “Who was clean enough to go into the holy place and retrieve the body?” A rope was tied about the high priest’s waist. When he died, the other priest could pull him from the holy place without having to enter and risk their own lives. Such was the nature of the holiness that covered the holy place and was represented by the tabernacle. Ezra and the other chroniclers wanted to remind the people of what they once had, and what they lost due to their apathetic neglect. As he retells the story of David and Solomon’s first role in constructing the sacred temple, he wants the exiles to know that though it was the house of God, it could, and would be lost. It could be lost not because of God’s lack of power and might, or his failure to keep covenant. It could be lost when God’s people take their beautiful transcendent symbols for granted and assume that God’s patient love will tolerate even apathy. Yes, God’s love is faithful, eternal and compassionate, but it is holy! The congregation or its priests cannot treat God’s love as though they can handle it with unholy, apathetic hands that take such love for granted. God never removed his love from Israel; Israel simply displaced their affection for the hedonistic pleasures of their day, or the lazy ignoring of the holy in their midst.

Symbols remain an important facet of our spiritual life and development to this day. I love driving through a town and recognizing the high spire with the beautiful cross atop. It says to the community, “This is a Christian church, and the cross is high and lifted up here.” I love to enter and see the cross in the center of the altar table, reminding me that central to our faith is the reality that Jesus died to redeem the world. I love the sacred Eucharist on the Lord’s Table, blessed and brought down from the holy altar where I kneel. I remember, God’s love in Jesus has come into my sinful world with forgiving grace and new beginnings. I love that the Holy Communion reminds me that Jesus is alive in the world and indwells his people. Churches are filled with sacred symbols. They possess no power of their own (excluding the Eucharist, through which we believe we receive grace when partaking), but they point to the truth that is ageless and unchangeable for all who come by faith into the holy sanctuary.

Ezra and the chroniclers wanted to remind the exiles of just how precious their symbols were, that they might never lose their significance again. Every Sunday, churches across the world offer many of those same symbols, or those that represent the same grace, that we might always remember the holy exists in the world and must never be forgotten.

### **Historical, Geographical, Theological and Experiential reflection on I Kings 8:1-5, and 2 Chronicles 5:1-14**

#### **I Kings 8:1-5**

When the time arrived for Solomon to gather the sacred vessels and offerings that David his father had prepared for this holiest of moments, everyone was dressed in their finest, the instruments were being played in utter joy, and so many sheep and goats were sacrificed they possessed no count. It could be that Solomon would rather offer God more than expected than too little. Nothing should take away from the day when the temple now replaced the tabernacle, and the Ark of the Covenant would assume its permanent place in the permanent structure

known as “God’s house.” Here the Ark of the Covenant would remain until Babylon destroyed the city and Jeremiah escaped with the sacred vessel. We can only image how painful it was for the Chronicler to look backward and remember the glorious day when the ark was placed on its holy site. He would have known what it was like to lose the sacred in Israel’s life because it was taken for granted. So now, we return to his recorded memory.

The Ark was a chest, overlaid with gold, and the top was known as the “mercy seat.” Over the mercy seat the high priest would pour the collected lamb’s blood, without blemish or stain, and pour it over the mercy seat. The people’s sins would then be forgiven for one year on the Day of Atonement. The chest was set between two magnificent pieces of holy art representing the cherubim. The tips of the cherubim reached over the mercy seat and almost touched. As the blood was poured over the mercy seat, the holy light of God, the Shekinah, would pierce the area between the cherubim wings and strike the seat of the ark. The light of almighty God then received their offering. Each year, on the Day of Atonement, this holy ritual and symbolic act would be repeated to cover the people’s sins for another year. This holy act was repeated on the seventh month, the month of the Jewish New Year.

The leaders of Israel, formal and informal, were gathered to witness and celebrate the movement of the Ark from the temporary tent David had constructed into the permanent dwelling in the temple, the holiest site in all Israel.

In our Christian faith, there was coming one lamb, without spot or blemish, who would be “pure light of pure light.” His own sacrifice would cover the spiritual mercy seat once and for all, for all time. All who would place their faith in this holy Lamb of God could find forgiveness for all sin for all time. Each year in confession we pour out our sins before God in utter sincerity and they are forgiven. “If we confess our sins, he faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” (Read I John 1:9) It is a holy gathering when the church unites around the holy presence of Jesus, remembering and experiencing his life, death, and resurrection and the forgiveness of sin offered to all. Few moments in the life of the church capture this sacred act of redemption more than the Eucharist. We are invited into the holy place of God’s heart, we confess our sins as God listens, and we are forgiven and walk away with new life, filled with grace.

*In the worship of your local church, do you recognize the kinship between the redemptive acts around the Ark on the Day of Atonement and the sacred participation in Holy Communion? What do you think can be done to enrich your experience of partaking of the Eucharist?*

### **I Kings 8:3-9**

In this section I repeat some of the material cited above related to the beautiful symbolism, and Solomon sacrificing probably more lambs than necessary. But again, this was a holy day, for which they had patiently waited. It is important, however, to note again the great care utilized in transferring the Ark from its previous site to its permanent site in the temple. One easily

recognizes this was not just an ordinary day or an ordinary endeavor. This day involved an act so holy it would stand forever in the life and memory of Israel. Only the redemption in Jesus for Christians would one day supersede its importance for us. Today, the Ark of the Covenant has, according to many, been hidden. However, you can sense the ageless holiness of what the temple meant to the Jewish people when you visit the Wailing Wall and hear their fervent prayers. The articles themselves might no longer be visible to us, but their sacred meaning continue through the years, just as the sacred meaning of the cross and empty tomb continue to fill the world with the presence of the sacred through the presence of the resurrected Jesus.

### **I Kings 8:10-13**

The holy cloud filled the entire temple. I have always loved this section of the narrative. Imagine, God's presence so real, palatable, and present you could not move or stir without being in contact with the Almighty! When Isaiah saw the Lord high and lifted up, with his train filling the temple in Isa. 6, his first words were, "Woe is me." Ordinary men and women were not allowed to perceive the holy without invitation. But, in his holy temple on this day, all who ministered before the Lord were so enveloped in the glory of the Lord all they could do was be still and acknowledge God was present. Many clergy and ministers of music can attest to a Sunday on rare occasion when you sense God is doing something for which we did not prepare. On some occasions a unique sense of holiness seems to fill the sanctuary, or the music is so moving spiritually and emotionally you wonder if you need to preach at all.

My first church stood in the foothills of Appalachia, and we had scheduled the Eucharist that morning. We had one member who refused to partake, for he was ordered to take life as a soldier in Viet Nam and could not seem to find forgiveness. We had talked on many occasions. On this Sunday he walked forward for the first time and received the sacrament with tears coursing down his cheeks. Believe me, that morning the temple was "filled with the cloud." Again, these moments are rare and those involved in worship should always be prepared to be used every Sunday. Still, those moments when "the cloud fills the temple" are wonderful and memorable.

*Can you recall a day of worship when you felt overcome by the unexpected presence of God? How did it occur and what did the experience accomplish in you? Should we be cautious when some claim to hear or see something from God that makes us intuitively feel cautious? How should we respond in a loving manner? Have there been moments when sacred music seems to have swept you away into a special communion with God? Why must we be careful when some of our unique moments of experiencing God seem to be founded solely upon emotion? Again, how can we discern those unique moments in God's presence that are genuine and redemptive? Just because they are emotional, does it mean they are not real?*

The narrative reads that Solomon reminded the people that the Lord had appeared in a "dark cloud." This description is significant for two reasons. First, this reminds the people that this was the same manifestation of God who appeared to Moses on Sinai during the giving of the Law. God the Law-giver is the same God who communes in holy worship with his people in his

temple. It also implies that there remains a mystery about the presence of God. We can see, but not clearly. We are only allowed to see the divine presence in a manner of God's choosing and timing. These human eyes are not yet capable of seeing the full glory of God.

Yet, we cannot capture the meaning and gift of God looking upon us through the face of Jesus. There is no dark cloud on Golgotha. Jesus hangs as the Son of God, and Son of Man. He has joined humanity in our suffering and through those pained eyes gazes upon the world God so loves.

In the Old Testament, God had given Israel a symbolic place to recognize his everlasting presence in their life. In the New Testament, God has given the world a savior, in the world forever.

### **Summary**

Most of us worship the Lord using a myriad of symbols. Most of these symbols are ancient and represent the ancient facet of our faith. These symbols always point to God, who is higher and transcendent. The symbol says something about God, but is not God. God uses different individuals with varied gifts and graces to accomplish the divine will. There will be moments when we feel passed over. We are never passed over, just used in a different manner. We are indeed one body, working together as the Body of Christ. There is no place for jealousy in the work of the Kingdom. The Old Testament is filled with images and shadows of that which was to come in the New Testament. We can hear the prophetic word of the coming Messiah, and we can see the ministry of the Messiah in temple worship. The pictures and images of the Old Testament clarify and bring to life the powerful images in Christ Jesus. Thus, the Old and New Testaments should be studied together, with one part lending great value to the next. Though this narrative is about the moving of the Ark from a temporary place to its permanent place in the temple, we can still see truth related to Jesus in the story. In the Old, we learn the importance and power of the sacred in life. In the New, we learn the sacred has come and lives among us in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit.

### **Prayer**

Almighty God, we thank you for all the symbols that have informed our faith through the years. We pray for eyes to see them in places other than just churches. Let us also see the symbolic beauty in the flower, the majestic symbolic beauty in the clouds, and the touching symbolic beauty in the face of brothers and sisters. Teach us our unique calling in the world, and fill us with the utter joy of working side by side with those who also are called to fill the world with the sacred visions of Christ. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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**Wrapped in such an ordinary package**

## **PATHWAY TO HIS PRESENCE**

**B.J. FUNK**

Because God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit always have had complete reign above the earth in a land called heaven, then it is reasonable to assume that the kingdom of heaven was and is where the Trinity lived and reigned. Wherever the Triune God was, then that's where the Kingdom of heaven was and is. That lasted all throughout time from Genesis through Malachi, and then through 400 years of silence before the New Testament.

In that land called heaven, the Son, Jesus, stood up one day, gave the Father and the Spirit a temporary hug goodbye, opened His hand to receive the tiny seed His Father placed in it, and made a bold, gigantic decision, all in obedience to the Father. The Son stepped off of the glittering soft streets, outside of the abundance of rainbow colors that dripped wonderful smells of beauty, became small inside the womb of a young woman, and moved into the sin, dirt, and humanity of earth. Upon first opening his eyes, he saw darkness. He took his first breath and smelled stench. He opened his ears and heard animals oinking and braying and screeching. This was His temporary new home. He already knew the length would be 33 years.

And so, on an ordinary night in an ordinary town in an ordinary and rough cave used for a stable, surrounded by ordinary animals and two very ordinary parents, God became man and this world of ours would never be the same again.

Before the shepherds were given this celestial message by the angels, they stood on a hillside, dressed in quite ordinary clothes and would now be sent to find a baby that was anything but ordinary. These shepherds reeked with strong, offensive odors, carrying always on their person the smells of their job. When Jesus began His public ministry, He selected as His disciples several who carried on their person the smells of raw fish. It's a trademark of God, accepting those others feel are unacceptable. He does the same for us. Aren't we glad you and I don't have to clean up before He invites us into kingdom?

Jesus rarely comes where we expect Him; He appears where we least expect Him, and always in the most illogical situations. On this very ordinary day in this ordinary world, God has a message for ordinary people like you and like me. His message is, "I love you. No matter what your sins or transgressions in 2019 or before, I love you and I forgive you. I reach out especially to the poor, the hurting, the lonely, the unsuccessful, and I say, 'Come unto me all ye who are burdened and heavy laden. I have come to bring you peace.'"

Today, because of God's extraordinary reach to ordinary people, you and I are caught up in the wonder of seeing royalty wrapped in ordinary humanity, lying in a manger and saying to you tonight, "I came for the ordinary. I died for the ordinary. Never let anyone make you feel that you are not worthy of my love."

Thanks be to God. Because of Jesus, ordinary people like us will forever be wrapped in royalty.

*The Rev. B.J. Funk is associate pastor of Central UMC in Fitzgerald. Email Rev. Funk at [bjfunk@bellsouth.net](mailto:bjfunk@bellsouth.net).*

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## **Retired Clergy Birthdays – December 2019**

12/01 – Virginia Connelly: 11130 Springfield Pike, Apt. B 131; Cincinnati, OH 45246  
12/06 – Charles Adams: 301 Island St.; Lake Park, GA 31636  
12/06 – Eugene Cariker: 102 Ingham St.; Simons Island, GA 31522  
12/09 – Mollie Danner: 1415 Sunrise Ave.; Moultrie, GA 31768  
12/09 – Clifford Wallace: 136 Pineworth Pointe Dr.; Macon, GA 31216  
12/09 – Don Warren: 450 Cove Dr.; Marietta, GA 30067  
12/10 – Charles Cox: 100 Spring Harbor Dr., Apt. 244; Columbus, GA 31904  
12/10 – Britt Priddy: 109 Churchview Dr.; Leesburg, GA 31763  
12/10 – Joe Stevens: 892 Dublin Hwy.; Eastman, GA 31023  
12/10 – Cephas Williamson: 4815 Tirol Pass; Ft. Wayne, IN 46835  
12/12 – Alan Miller: 2099 Corsica Way SW; Marietta, GA 30008  
12/15 – Paula Lytle: PO Box 2905; Statesboro, GA 30459  
12/16 – Pat Holbert: PO Box 1004; Louisville, GA 30434  
12/19 – Morgan Johnson: 5000 Fairbanks Ave. #148; Alexandria, VA 22311-1227  
12/22 – Larry Giles: 214 Jasmine St.; Sandersville, GA 31082  
12/22 – Lenton Powell: PO Box 42986; Atlanta, GA 30311  
12/22 – Joy Wilson: 59 Amanda Lane; Ellaville, GA 31806  
12/26 – Wayne Mitchell: 431 Oak Ridge Dr.; Nashville, GA 31639  
12/26 – Diane Shedd: 1718 Azalea Dr.; Valdosta, GA 31602  
12/28 – William Blalock: PO Box 187; Vidalia, GA 30475  
12/31 – John Carroll, Jr.: 4663 Wesleyan Woods Dr.; Macon, GA 31210  
12/31 – William A. Smith: 102 Pierce Rd.; Reynolds, GA 31076

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## **OBITUARIES**

### **Mrs. Shirley Pike (Turner) Darden**

Shirley Pike (Turner) Darden died peacefully at her home on November 21, 2019, having two days earlier celebrated her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. Shirley was born in LaGrange, Ga. to Andrew Howard and Lillie Mae Pike. She married John Kenneth Turner in 1959 and they had two children, Elizabeth Hope, Savannah, Ga.; and Jonathan Scott Turner, Savannah, Ga. She was a loving wife and mother and shared the ministry of The United Methodist Church with her former husband before his death in 1993. She was blessed with four grandchildren: Elizabeth Stone Douglass (Timothy), Atlanta, Ga.; Jonathan Turner, Savannah, Ga.; Adeline Turner, Cochran, Ga.; and

Callaway Turner, Savannah, Ga. She was great-grandmother to Gracie, Ella, Rosalie and Leo. Shirley was known affectionately by many, family and otherwise, as Nana.

Shirley graduated from LaGrange High School in 1958. She received her undergraduate degree in Education from Georgia Southwestern College. She went on to receive a Master's degree from Mercer University during a time few women were pursuing higher education. Later in her career as an educator, she was certified as a Reading Recovery specialist and took great pride in teaching thousands of children the gift of reading. She moved extensively throughout the state of Georgia and taught in multiple school districts.

As an accomplished seamstress, Shirley often made elegant clothing for herself and less elegant, but quite adorable, clothing for her young grandchildren and great grandchildren. In 2001, she was named Ms. Senior Savannah, a title she wore proudly along with her lovely tiara. As a 50+ year survivor of breast cancer, she felt that every day was a gift. She became a regular at the Susan G. Komen Race for the Cure, where her long survivorship gained her rock star status.

Shirley began a new chapter in her life in 2007 when she reconnected with her high school sweetheart and first love, Frank Ellis Darden, at their 50<sup>th</sup> class reunion. They never missed a day together after that event. They married July 30, 2008. They traveled the world and life together always at each other's side. She had never been happier and more content than during the years she spent with Frank.

She will be missed by her children, grandchildren and great grandchildren and her beloved dog, Susie but most of all, the love of her life, Frank. She was a woman of faith, integrity and strength. She cared passionately for those around her and served as an example of a strong, graceful, Southern woman to all who had the good fortune of knowing her.

Services were held November 24 at Grace United Methodist Church and her ashes were interred in LaGrange on November 30. Though she loved red roses, in lieu of flowers, the family asks that charitable donations in her memory be made to the charity of your choice.



## **Scripture Readings – Dec. 17**

### **Dec. 22**

#### ***Fourth Sunday of Advent***

Isaiah 7:10-16

Psalms 80:1-7, 17-19 (UMH 861)

Romans 1:1-7

Matthew 1:18-25

### **Dec. 24**

#### ***Christmas Eve***

Isaiah 9:2-7

Psalms 96 (UMH 815)

Titus 2:11-14  
Luke 2:1-20

**Dec. 25**

***Christmas Day***

Isaiah 52:7-10  
Psalm 98 (UMH 818)  
Hebrews 1:1-4 (5-12)  
John 1:1-14

**Dec. 29**

***First Sunday after Christmas Day***

Isaiah 63:7-9  
Psalm 148 (UMH 861)  
Hebrews 2:10-18  
Matthew 2:13-23

**Dec. 31**

***New Year's Eve / Watch Night***

Ecclesiastes 3:1-13  
Psalm 8 (UMH 743)  
Revelation 21:1-6a  
Matthew 25:31-46

**Jan. 5**

***Epiphany Sunday***

Isaiah 60:1-6  
Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14 (UMH 795)  
Ephesians 3:1-12  
Matthew 2:1-12

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**Events in the South Georgia Conference – 12/17/2019 edition**

**Leadership Tour, Statesboro FUMC – Jan. 5, 2020**

Leaders all across the South Georgia Conference have answered the call to serve in their local church setting. As a faithful member of your congregation, we know you want to serve and serve well! To help equip and empower you in your ministry role, the 2020 Leadership Tour will offer practical teaching and resources to both inspire you and help you lead with confidence. This free event is sponsored by the Office of Connectional Ministries. [www.sgaumc.org/leadershiptour](http://www.sgaumc.org/leadershiptour)

**Leadership Tour, Warner Robins FUMC – Jan. 12, 2020**

Leaders all across the South Georgia Conference have answered the call to serve in their local church setting. As a faithful member of your congregation, we know you want to serve and serve

well! To help equip and empower you in your ministry role, the 2020 Leadership Tour will offer practical teaching and resources to both inspire you and help you lead with confidence. This free event is sponsored by the Office of Connectional Ministries. [www.sgaumc.org/leadershiptour](http://www.sgaumc.org/leadershiptour)

### **Basic Lay Speaking Class, Pelham – Jan. 17-18, 2020**

A lay speaker is a professing member of a local church who is ready and desirous to serve the Church, and who is well informed on and committed to the Scriptures and the doctrine, heritage, organization, and life of The United Methodist Church. A lay speaker has completed the required training courses in lay speaking and has been approved by a district or annual conference committee on lay speaking. *Lay speakers serve the local church by witnessing to the Christian faith through spoken communication, church and community leadership, and caregiving ministries.* When certified, the lay speaker may conduct services of worship, preach, and lead study sessions as requested by the pastor or the district superintendent. Registration fee for the class is \$25. This fee covers all materials and lunch on Saturday. This class will be held Friday, Jan. 17 from 6:30 until 9 p.m. and Saturday, Jan. 18 from 9 a.m. until 4 p.m. at Hand Memorial UMC. Registration: [www.sgaumc.org/layspeakertraining](http://www.sgaumc.org/layspeakertraining).

### **ERT Basic Certification Training & Chainsaw Training, Nashville – Jan. 18, 2020**

Be prepared to respond to the next disaster. Early response training covers the basics of early disaster response, including roof tarping, cleaning out damaged homes, spiritual and emotional care, team protocols, and more. The purpose of the training is to prepare our United Methodist volunteers to do good and do no harm. Cost is \$25 for ERT only, \$31 for both ERT and Chainsaw, or \$12 for just chainsaw. At the training, participants will receive an ERT training manual and, upon completing the course, will receive an UMCOR ID Badge and a conference ERT t-shirt. Lunch is provided. An UMCOR background check is required before receiving a badge. Information for submitting background checks will be sent to participants. This class, scheduled for Saturday, Jan. 18, 2020, will be hosted by Nashville UMC in the Family Life Center (304 South Berrien Street; Nashville, GA 31639). The class begins at 9 a.m. (participants must be present by 8:30 a.m.). Chainsaw Operators Training will begin at 1:30 p.m. at the conclusion of the ERT class. [Register here](#)

### **Leadership Tour, Camilla UMC – Jan. 19, 2020**

Leaders all across the South Georgia Conference have answered the call to serve in their local church setting. As a faithful member of your congregation, we know you want to serve and serve well! To help equip and empower you in your ministry role, the 2020 Leadership Tour will offer practical teaching and resources to both inspire you and help you lead with confidence. This free event is sponsored by the Office of Connectional Ministries. [www.sgaumc.org/leadershiptour](http://www.sgaumc.org/leadershiptour)

### **Human Relations Day – Jan. 19, 2020**

Sunday, Jan. 19 is Human Relations Day, one of six churchwide Special Sundays with offerings for The United Methodist Church. Human Relations Day strengthens United Methodist outreach

to communities in the United States and Puerto Rico, encouraging social justice and work with at-risk youths.

### **ERT Basic Training, Pooler – Jan. 25, 2020**

Be prepared to respond to the next disaster. Early response training covers the basics of early disaster response, including roof tarping, cleaning out damaged homes, spiritual and emotional care, team protocols, and more. The purpose of the training is to prepare our United Methodist volunteers to do good and do no harm. Cost is \$25. At the training, participants will receive an ERT training manual and, upon completing the course, will receive an UMCOR ID Badge and a conference ERT t-shirt. Lunch is provided. An UMCOR background check is required before receiving a badge. Information for submitting background checks will be sent to participants. This class, scheduled for Saturday, January 25, 2020, will be hosted by Trinity UMC (320 Benton Dr.; Pooler GA 31322). The class runs from 9 a.m. until 4 p.m. [Register here](#)

### **Leadership Tour, Hinesville FUMC – Jan. 26, 2020**

Leaders all across the South Georgia Conference have answered the call to serve in their local church setting. As a faithful member of your congregation, we know you want to serve and serve well! To help equip and empower you in your ministry role, the 2020 Leadership Tour will offer practical teaching and resources to both inspire you and help you lead with confidence. This free event is sponsored by the Office of Connectional Ministries. [www.sgaumc.org/leadershiptour](http://www.sgaumc.org/leadershiptour)

### **Winter Conference – Jan. 26-29, 2020**

Len Wilson, Creative Director at St. Andrew UMC, a large church in Plano, Texas, will be our keynote speaker. He is a storyteller and expert strategist in communications and creativity in church life. After GC 2019, each church will need a clear, concise, creative, and compelling message and brand to effectively communicate who they are and where they stand. Len will lead us through a comprehensive process to develop and implement your own strategy while improving all phases of communication and creativity in your ministry. He will also share his insights on church growth as the compiler of the list of the Top 25 Fastest Growing United Methodist Large Churches. Len is author of the book “Think Like A Five Year Old.” [More information](#)

### **Basic Lay Speaking Class, Perry – Jan. 31-Feb. 1, 2020**

A lay speaker is a professing member of a local church who is ready and desirous to serve the Church, and who is well informed on and committed to the Scriptures and the doctrine, heritage, organization, and life of The United Methodist Church. A lay speaker has completed the required training courses in lay speaking and has been approved by a district or annual conference committee on lay speaking. *Lay speakers serve the local church by witnessing to the Christian faith through spoken communication, church and community leadership, and caregiving ministries.* When certified, the lay speaker may conduct services of worship, preach, and lead study sessions as requested by the pastor or the district superintendent. Registration fee for the class is \$25. This fee covers all materials and lunch on Saturday. This class will be held Friday,

Jan. 17 from 6:30 until 9 p.m. and Saturday, Jan. 18 from 9 a.m. until 4 p.m. at Crossroads UMC.  
Registration: [www.sgaumc.org/layspeakertraining](http://www.sgaumc.org/layspeakertraining).