Q & A with Rev. Craig Hutto, North Central District Superintendent

ADVOCATE: Tell us a little about yourself. Where did you grow up? Have you always lived in South Georgia?

REV. HUTTO: I grew up in Lithonia, a small suburb of Atlanta. I have always thought it was the best place to grow up: I enjoyed the simplicity of small-town life, but was 20 minutes away from the excitement of the big city! My father was a school teacher and my mother worked in a doctor’s office. I am the oldest, with a younger brother and younger sister.

ADVOCATE: What’s your faith journey?

REV. HUTTO: I grew up in a Southern Baptist home; my parents were very involved in church as Sunday school teachers and serving on various committees. There was never a moment in my life growing up that I did not hear someone say to me, “You are loved by God.” In that I consider myself very fortunate. As a good Baptist, I “walked the aisle” at 10 years old and was baptized by immersion a few weeks later. Looking back, I can see God’s call on my life even in my teenage years, but was reluctant to hear or answer that call. However, in college, God grabbed ahold of my life in a way that I couldn’t ignore any longer. Because I was headstrong, I still wanted control and side-tracked into music ministry for a few years. But, serving under the wise counsel of Rev. John Bagwell, I finally relented and accepted God’s call into pastoral ministry, taking a four-point charge. God confirmed His call during those first, formative years of my ministry.

ADVOCATE: What’s your favorite Bible verse and how does it help shape your ministry philosophy and your guiding principles?

REV. HUTTO: This verse has been framed on the wall of my office(s) for more than 33 years: “But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary, and they shall walk and not faint” (Isaiah 40:31). This verse has been an encouragement during difficult times; it has been a challenge in doing the work of the Kingdom. This verse has often reminded me that I offer to others GOD’S STRENGTH and not my own. It has also often reminded me that I run alongside a host of God’s people, and, occasionally, we get to “fly” together!

ADVOCATE: You’ve served as a local church pastor for 33 years. How do you anticipate serving as a District Superintendent will differ, and what similarities are there?

REV. HUTTO: It will be impossible to get the “pastor” out of this pastor. That is a calling that cannot be cast aside. I hope to continue being a pastor to the clergy families in this district. But I also know that being in a supervisory role will be quite different. I like the way that other superintendents have talked about the role: a balance of grace and responsibility. I will continue to use the skills of a pastor that I have honed over the past 33 years, but I will also seek ways to encourage fellow clergy to be responsible for their actions and activities, and do so in a graceful manner.
ADVOCATE: What are your visions, goals, and hopes for the district?

REV. HUTTO: Our Bishop has given us a grand vision: Alive Together in Christ. With the challenges ahead of us, I see us living out this vision through community. This community may change and evolve dramatically over the next few years. My hopes for the North Central District (and the other districts as well) are to strengthen our relationships and our sense of community. Only then can we truly live out being “Alive Together in Christ.”

ADVOCATE: What are the things that most excite you about the North Central district and/or the South Georgia Conference?

REV. HUTTO: We have the opportunity to reshape our districts and our conference in ways not conceived in our 200+ years of history. While we might feel some anxiety about the future, God is working in ways we cannot yet see or understand. I am excited about joining with other leaders of our conference to discern God’s path for us. God’s Word will not return to us void (Isaiah 55:11).

ADVOCATE: What are some of the biggest challenges you see facing the Conference or district?

REV. HUTTO: We will have to change some of our perceptions and methods. We Methodists like our methods! We will hold onto our biblical understanding of Church as the Body of Christ, but what will the Body of Christ look like in a decade? In five decades? God has given us a chance to “catch our breath” before General Conference next year. How can we creatively realign our conference for the next century if we are no longer an arm of The United Methodist Church? How can we hold onto what is “essential,” give freedom to the “non-essentials,” and do so with charity?

ADVOCATE: What do you like best about serving in the South Georgia Conference?

REV. HUTTO: Although I did not grow up in the South Georgia Conference (or The UMC), it is my CHOSEN family. I am grateful to have been adopted by the South Georgia Conference and have enjoyed being a part of this family. Like a regular family, we have loving parents, a brother that’s hard to deal with, a quirky uncle, a doting grandmother . . . but we are family!

ADVOCATE: This has certainly been an out-of-the-ordinary year with lots of challenges. What’s it been like to serve in the midst of a global pandemic?

REV. HUTTO: Nothing is routine! I expected a lot of differences in the D.S. role, but the added pandemic, financial stress, and racial injustices has created quite a roller coaster. First, I am grateful for so many pastors who have carefully and compassionately considered how to care for their congregations during this pandemic. It has increased the volume of communication between the D.S. and these pastors, but that has been good for me; I have gotten to know more of the pastors much more quickly. Secondly, I have had more opportunities to lead in these first weeks of ministry. I am grateful for so many pastors who want to hear from their Bishop and are open to advice and wisdom.

ADVOCATE: Tell us about your family.
REV. HUTTO: I am married to Mary Louise (Kerstetter) Hutto, who grew up in the Liberty church. We will have been married for 37 years this August. I have a daughter, Elizabeth, who is a hospital pharmacist; her husband is a school teacher and they have two sons. My son, Jonathan, is a Boy Scout executive director, and has one son. These three grandsons, who are presently 5, 6, and 7 years old, have given abundant joy to this Papa!

ADVOCATE: What’s fun for you? What do you enjoy doing when you’re not working?

REV. HUTTO: I love reading and listening to and playing music. I also love to hike and discover new waterfalls (just ask my S3 group)!

ADVOCATE: If you weren’t a pastor, what would you be?

REV. HUTTO: That’s a hard one! I’ve been a pastor so long, it’s hard to think of doing anything else. I guess because of my love for music, I would consider something in that field, maybe a church musician or a choir director . . . is it too late to consider rock star?!

Conference Pastoral Counselor and chaplains comfort, share messages of hope during pandemic

By Kara Witherow, Editor

We are not alone.

That’s the message of South Georgia’s chaplains and its Conference Pastoral Counselor.

Whether that message is communicated by a handmade pocket prayer shawl, a daily prayer heard over a hospital intercom, or in a personal conversation, it’s one that’s echoed across the Conference as chaplains and pastors care for those in their flock.

As Rev. Columbus Burns makes his daily rounds at Savannah’s Candler Hospital, he notices the staff, sees the stress in their eyes, and gives an encouraging word and smile.

“We are all feeling the stress of COVID-19, so we’re very aware as we move around among our staff to encourage them,” he said. “We are also finding that our patients are more in need because they don’t have their family members like they normally would to support them.”

As Director of Pastoral Care and Counseling at St. Joseph’s/Candler Hospital, Rev. Burns oversees about a dozen chaplains at the two Savannah hospitals.

As hospital chaplains, they provide care for patients, family members, staff, caregivers, and visitors. While the pandemic has changed some of their day-to-day work and ministry – they had to suspend in-person worship services and mass – the chaplains are still serving and bringing a message of hope and healing through visitation, a televised weekly worship service, daily prayers offered via phone and over the hospital intercoms, and more.
“The priests and Sisters insisted that they would not and could not leave their flock. This is our parish. I was very proud of them,” Rev. Burns said. “We never quit visiting, we just visit more cautiously and carefully. We never quit visiting our patients, ever.”

Early in the coronavirus pandemic, Magnolia Manor restricted visitors from its nine campuses. Social distancing measures are in place, and coronavirus testing is frequent.

“It’s been a time of grieving and isolation and sadness,” said Rev. John Walker, Magnolia Manor’s senior chaplain and vice president for spiritual care.

To help combat the grief and isolation, Magnolia Manor’s chaplains have been creative in how they’re ministering and caring for the residents and in how the residents are able to interact and visit their friends and family.

At Magnolia Manor’s Americus campus, which is one level, residents are able to see and talk with their families through their windows. Chaplains and staff members have also helped residents connect with family members via Zoom and Facetime.

Rev. Walker’s brief “Thought of the Day” emails – sent on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays – help keep residents encouraged, and his weekly sermons, recorded and posted on Facebook, help them stay connected to their faith when they can’t physically be with their faith communities. When he writes someone a note he includes a pocket prayer shawl – crocheted by residents – to help the recipient remember that God is always with them.

In the midst of the unknown, the grief, and the loss, that’s the message he tries to convey.

“I love the hymns, and ‘In His Time’ is one of my favorites. I remind our residents and staff that, in God’s time, He makes all things beautiful. That’s what the song says. We are going to pull through this as we stay together, as we stay connected, as we pray for each other, and as we support each other,” Rev. Walker said. “God has not left us, God is Emmanuel, and He truly is with us. We hear that at Christmas, but we need to hear that all year long.”

In the past four months, Conference Pastoral Counselor Rev. Deborah Wight-Knight has seen three to four times her normal volume of pastors, family members, and laity.

As a counselor to pastors and their families, Rev. Wight-Knight knows the challenges normally faced by clergy, but they are even greater during these trying and tumultuous times.

“Our pastors have had to negotiate the difficult task of how to minister in these unprecedented times,” she said. “This is more challenging than most people realize. As a result, their stress level has increased tremendously.”

Telemedicine has helped her connect with clergy and help them cope, brainstorm creative ways to deal with their circumstances, manage crisis, and manage pastoral care.

Pastors are accustomed to being a part of people’s lives, whether in their homes, at church, or beside their hospital beds, she said, and the shutdown of in-person worship, discontinuance of constant activities and meetings at church, the absence human-to-human contact with their
congregation – while necessary – has contributed to clergy feeling more isolated than ever before.

She does think, however, that the regulations and precautionary guidelines that many South Georgia congregations have undertaken are critical for safety.

As Christians and United Methodists, she says, it’s a believer’s responsibility to care for and love one another.

“We’re all suffering from an adjustment disorder, and we’ve had to adjust our faith accordingly given that the myriad ways in which we are called to offer grace and reconciliation sometimes require looking for God in the dark places, in the shadows, standing right with us,” she said. “I think that our story of faith is that, in the midst of darkness and despair and conflict, we know and learn what God’s presence in our life really means. It is an honor and a blessing to serve in this position at this particular time.”

Rev. Burns echoes several of Rev. Wight-Knight’s sentiments and reminds people that they are not helpless or hopeless.

“There are things we can do during this time. Social distance. Wear masks. We can do things to help and to keep ourselves safe,” he said. “We Christians know that life is not without its challenges. We have lived through difficult and challenging times, and this is just one of them. We have made it through before and we will make it through this challenge as well because God is on our side. God is with us. We are not alone.”

Faith, prayer help college freshmen prepare for new, uncertain school year

By Kara Witherow, Editor

On Lily Packard’s list of college essentials are the usual items: sheets, towels, pillows, hangers, a laundry hamper, storage bins.

And there’s one more item she has to add this year: face masks.

The start of classes this fall is full of uncertainty for students and university administrators, faculty, and staff. The coronavirus pandemic has altered the way classes are taught, how students can congregate, and even the way campus ministries meet.

“I am a little nervous going into college just because everything right now is so uncertain,” said Packard, a 2020 graduate of Brunswick’s Glynn Academy and member of Wesley at Frederica United Methodist Church on St. Simons Island.

When she moves to Milledgeville Aug. 2, she and her fellow classmates at Georgia College and State University will be required to wear masks when inside campus buildings.

Packard is grateful that the university will host in-person classes and appreciates the safety measures that have been put in place.
Excited to get back to in-person classes, she has kept in touch with friends and loved ones virtually. Keeping her relationship with God strong is important, too, and one she intends to continue nurturing in college.

Recent Veterans High School graduate Sam Hagan, 19, was shocked when, in March, his principal announced that in-person classes were suspended until further notice.

Eight weeks later, he and the rest of his senior class were graduating in a socially distanced ceremony on Freedom Field in Warner Robins.

Hagan, who will attend Georgia Southern University this fall, had his senior tennis season cut short and his senior prom cancelled.

Prayer helps him maintain perspective and stay positive.

“I’ve been praying about it. I’ve been trying to be open to change, which is hard. All of this – change and getting used to new habits – is challenging, but it’s not the end of the world,” said Hagan, son of Julie and Dr. Scott Hagan, pastor of Statesboro United Methodist Church. “I’m going to keep praying and keep reading the Bible and keep trying to stay as close to God as possible because these times are super hard, and that’s truly the only way to overcome challenges.”

Rev. Michael McCord, executive director of the UMCommission on Higher Education and Campus Ministry, is concerned about college students – especially freshmen – being able to connect with faith communities this fall, especially with in-person summer orientation events cancelled.

Rev. McCord, who works with United Methodist campus pastors around the state, worries that students will face even more pressure and uncertainties as the year progresses. Finding a community that will encourage and support them will be critical, he says.

“This year is going to be really hard, especially for incoming freshmen,” Rev. McCord said. “They never got to say goodbye, they didn’t really get to graduate, and then we’re going to throw them into their first year of college in a really unknown situation, and we still don’t know what it’s going to look like at this point.”

It’s important that rising college freshmen are connected to campus ministries before arriving on campus, he says.

“There’s so much uncertainty. It’s a perfect storm and these are our young people; they’re our future. And that’s why I think what we’re doing through our college ministries is so important.”

He requests that youth ministers, pastors, parents, and anyone else who knows a college student help connect them with campus ministries across the state by visiting www.umcommission.org.

Packard combats the uncertainty by staying in touch with friends and growing in her faith. This summer she’s participating in a Zoom Bible study with other senior girls.
“It has been a light in a dark time. I have been trying to stay optimistic and positive by focusing on everything God has given me rather than what has been cancelled.”

She plans to connect with GCSU’s Wesley Foundation when she arrives on campus.

“I hope to continue this when I am in college by attending Wesley events at my school and joining a Bible study there.”

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**Amid COVID pandemic, colleges prepare to welcome students back to campus**

By Kara Witherow, *Editor*

This August, students across the state and around the country will converge on college campuses, ready to start a new school year.

While much will look different – masks are required on all University System of Georgia campuses, social distancing will be enforced, and hand sanitizer will be used more than ever – a good deal will stay the same, say leaders at two South Georgia United Methodist-affiliated colleges.

Keeping their 750 students safe and healthy is the top priority of Wesleyan College’s leadership.

“We are going to do everything we can to bring them back safely and keep them healthy while they’re here,” said Dr. Vivia Fowler, president of Wesleyan College.

Since early spring, Wesleyan faculty and staff have been planning and preparing for the start of the fall semester and have developed guidelines and protocols on how to safely return to in-person instruction.

Upon their return to campus, every student, faculty and staff member will sign a pledge to “Protect the Pack.” By signing the pledge, they promise to monitor themselves for coronavirus symptoms, to isolate themselves from others if they are symptomatic, to wear a mask when around others, and to observe social distancing and good hygiene practices.

“We’re moving ahead with rigorous plans to alter our behavior and the way we interact with each other to keep everyone as safe and healthy as we possibly can with the understanding that anything can change,” Dr. Fowler said.

They’ve gotten creative in redesigning class schedules to meet in larger spaces, changed the guidelines for room capacities for all spaces, have installed technology so every classes can be simulcast, and have set aside one wing of one residence hall in case the need for isolation arises.

“We have the benefit of a large campus and a small college,” Dr. Fowler said. “We’re going to do as much outdoors – outdoor meeting, outdoor dining, outdoor activities – that we can possibly do, and we’re blessed to have a wonderful campus and good weather into the fall.”
Like other colleges and social institutions, Andrew College has felt the impact of the coronavirus pandemic.

“We have grieved the loss of being together in the spring, of experiencing the normal rhythm of friends, sports, the arts, college activities, and one on one support and conversations,” said Dr. Linda Buchanan, president of Andrew College. “We have also grieved the souls lost in our community and around the world.”

With small class sizes – Andrew College’s average class size is less than 15 students – they’ll be able to abide by social distancing guidelines, Dr. Buchanan said. Modifications have been made to the dining hall, athletics, academics, and cocurricular offerings.

Religious life groups and organizations will be able to meet on campus with masks and social distancing guidelines in place and enacted.

Both Dr. Fowler and Dr. Buchanan said their schools are at an advantage to care for their students well.

This spring, Wesleyan College created a group comprised of faculty and staff who each called 25-30 students weekly. Called Campus Connectors, they contacted the students, talked with them, and if there was a need, helped connect them with the appropriate people. Wesleyan College plans to continue the Campus Connectors program into the fall semester.

“We have a very intimate campus environment and we stay in really close contact with our students,” Dr. Fowler said.

Andrew College uses its size to its advantage, too. Faculty are able to form close relationships with students and help mentor them through college and life.

“Resident advisors will be particularly mindful of building community on each floor,” Dr. Buchanan said. “Our faculty are always attuned to the needs of first-year students; it’s what we do best.”

Both Dr. Buchanan and Dr. Fowler said that they covet prayers as they prepare for a new, uncertain school year.

“South Georgia United Methodist churches can support us with prayers,” Dr. Buchanan said. “It is going to be a difficult fall semester, no doubt about that.”

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**Book of Recommendations & Reports for the 2020 Annual Conference Session now available**

Business items for the 2020 Annual Conference session are contained in the *Book of Recommendations and Reports* (BOR). One of the purposes of the BOR is to encourage delegates to read the recommendations, reports, and resolutions prior to arriving at conference. A good delegate is a prepared delegate.
The 2015 Annual Conference session voted that all Annual Conference materials, including the *Book of Recommendations and Reports*, be made available online on the conference website and through other electronic means. The BOR is now available for download as a PDF file at no cost in its entirety or in sections. You can also purchase it for $11 (plus tax and shipping) as a professionally bound book through lulu.com. Additionally, a version has been designed specifically for those wishing to utilize the information in electronic form only.

Please check out “AC 2020” regularly on the conference website as we get closer to annual conference. There are some reports that will appear on the website which are not included in the BOR. These reports will be important to have with you during the Annual Conference session. Please download onto your digital device, or print out, all the materials that you wish to have with you, because wireless internet capabilities in the Conference Center may be limited.

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**Full version of the 2020 Book of Recommendations and Reports for printing/Electronic Viewing:**

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Remembering John Lewis

FROM THE BISHOP
R. LAWSON BRYAN

John Lewis, who died Friday, July 17, had connections to both Alabama and Georgia. He was born in Troy, Ala., and represented Georgia’s 5th district in the U. S. House of Representatives for more than 30 years. In the coming days, many will share much about this icon of the civil rights movement. I hope it will be remembered that he was a Christian who sought to be faithful to Christ by living out a commitment to non-violence in human relationships.

This is remarkable when you consider that Lewis had many experiences in which he was knocked down, beaten, kicked, and insulted. Non-violence is not an easy way of life, but the Cross of Christ teaches us that it can be a powerful way of life. It is not easy to be a leader of a movement and refrain from violence when others in the movement are insisting on the use of violence.

I was in college in the 1960s and saw different responses to the Vietnam War. Some marched in peaceful protest. Others expressed their support for our soldiers who were thrust into that conflict. But then there were those who engaged in rioting, looting, and burning buildings. This kind of violence seems to happen in every time period no matter what the issue.

There are those who speak up and get involved and challenge the way things are without becoming what they say they oppose. And then there are those who act in ways that increase the level of violence in the land.

John Lewis and others like him remind us that we each have a choice in how we behave in every situation every day. I hope it will be noted that, through Christ, John Lewis made that choice as a teenager and then lived it for the rest of his life by doing justice, loving mercy, and walking humbly with God.

Do not envy the violent and do not choose any of their ways. Proverbs 3:31

Pivot

OUR CONNECTION MATTERS
ALLISON LINDSEY

“Pivot: A change in strategy without a change in vision” – Eric Reis

One of the most difficult decisions heading into the summer in Connectional Ministries involved Camp Connect, our summer camping program. For nearly 70 years, summer camps for children and youth have been a ministry of the South Georgia Conference at Epworth By The Sea. That legacy was in jeopardy due to COVID-19, and no one wanted to make the final call to cancel.
Back in early March, the 2020 Leadership Team, our group of college students who serve as counselors (many former campers themselves), had been hired and head counselors chosen. As we moved further into the spring and began to see the impact and uncertainty of COVID-19 across our state, it became evident that campers could not be brought together safely – social distancing, wearing masks, and many other restrictions staff would have been required to be put in place – while also providing an amazing camp experience. In May, when a final decision had to be made, all the energy and excitement leading up to a “normal” summer of camps came to an abrupt halt. Suzanne Akins, our Camp Connect director, shared her heartfelt announcement when the decision was made to cancel camps. Yes, there were tears. (Click here for video)

You see, for many, Camp Connect is much more than simply a week at camp. Camp Connect is a culture and a strong community – one that spans more than 70 years – with a kingdom vision that is brought to life in big ways each and every summer. On the Camp Connect website there is a section titled, “What Makes Us Different.” Here is an excerpt that highlights this kingdom vision:

“The Souls: It’s not about us. It’s about every single camper that enters our camp for the first time, the third time, or the eighth time. Our goal is to show each camper the love of Christ. To help them know they matter to God, and to us. To create life-changing moments in the small things of everyday camp life. The life-saving grace of Jesus Christ has touched the lives of each of our staff and we want others to experience it. If campers leave on Friday knowing they were created for a purpose and are loved unconditionally, we have done our job.”

Camp Connect is a healthy culture – a thriving community – and once the call was made to cancel and the reality sank in, I witnessed the most incredible pivoting begin to happen. The first pivot happened quickly: they shifted the focus from what they COULDN’T DO to what they COULD DO. What has transpired over the past several weeks has been the most amazing creativity and continuous pivoting from Suzanne and her head counselors, Gabriela Reincheld and Wesley Hanson. They rose to the occasion!

Let me share a brief glimpse of Camp Connect 2020:

- Head Counselors reported in May and committed to make 2020 unforgettable even without campers on-site
- A fun online presence on Facebook and Instagram
- Camp Connect 2020 fundraiser selling shirts (our famous soft-tee with graphic “Camp Is Where the Heart Is” and a heart pinned at Epworth By The Sea on the state of Georgia)
- Parents choosing to donate registration fees to the camp community
- Pictures and names of campers displayed on a wall in the prayer room where they have been prayed over the past few months
• Zoom with seniors (2020 was supposed to be the first summer of our High School Bridge Camp because they were not ready to age out. The seniors had planned it all!)

• Senior Celebration Boxes: care packages mailed to seniors to let them know they are seen, loved and prayed for as they lost much of their senior year

• Field Day Fridays: four all-day camps for rising 3rd-6th graders complete with temperature checks, masks, lunches brought from home, and distancing. All four camps sold out in 24 hours. I think the staff and parents were more excited than the campers!

• Middle School Mondays: two sold-out camps for rising 7th-9th graders (same precautions taken as outlined above) with the climbing wall, zip-lining, swimming, devotions and more. Parents drove from out of town to bring their youth for the day!

How was all this possible with a director and only three summer staff members? Former Leadership Team counselors gave their time off to be a part of one or more of these events. Now that is culture and community at its best!

All of this has taken place over the past six weeks without advanced planning; so much of it was planned in real time. There is more I could write about the culture, the community, and the ways Suzanne pours into her Leadership Team. Incredible ministry has taken place, and I have been blessed by having a front row seat. As this year’s summer camping season comes to an end, we are hopeful that we will gather in person in 2021.

Eric Reis describes pivoting as a “change in strategy without a change in vision.” This very quote continues to unfold before my eyes every day. I can’t help but reflect on our churches in South Georgia. Our clergy and laity continue to pivot again and again in response to what COVID-19 throws their way, and we are witnessing incredible creativity in strategy to reach people for Jesus.

Thank you for the many ways that you, like Camp Connect, are keeping the main thing the main thing – adapting, pivoting, and remaining Alive Together In Witness!

Allison Lindsey is the incoming director of Connectional Ministries. She has a passion for the local church and its people. Contact her at allison@sgaumc.com.

Wisdom to Follow

Summer Quarter: Many Faces of Wisdom
Unit 2: Wisdom in the Gospels

Sunday school lesson for the week of July 26, 2020
By Rev. Ashley Randall
**Lesson Scripture:** John 14:1–14  
**Key Verse:** John 14:6  

**Purpose:** To affirm that Jesus shows us the way to live a life that honors God  

**No Place to Call Home**

This season of isolation, social distancing, and self-quarantine has gone on for much longer than any of us would have imagined. Perhaps you remember hearing that if we would just be careful for a couple of weeks, we could flatten the curve and return to life as normal. Now our patience is wearing thin. People are tired and frustrated. A pervasive cynicism has taken root, and people are not sure who they can trust or what advice they should accept.

As tough as it seems, though, let me ask you to imagine going through this season without access to a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence that is decent, safe, sanitary, and affordable. Imagine what it is like for those who are homeless. Whether they are living under the bridge, squatting in an abandoned building, spending their nights in a shelter, camping in their car, couch surfing, or making due in a motel room, there are more than half a million people across the United States who are living through this crisis without a place to call home.

On top of that, there may be another four million who are “doubling up,” or sharing the housing of others for economic reasons. Some of these people have fragile relationships with their hosts or face other challenges in the home, putting them at risk of homelessness.

There are many reasons a person or family may experience homelessness, including high housing costs, low-wage jobs, job loss, catastrophic illness, physical or mental disabilities, substance abuse, death of a family member, family break-up, or domestic violence. According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness, the nation is currently facing one of the most severe affordable housing crises in history.

For those who are low-income but employed, wages have been stagnant and have not kept pace with rising housing costs. The typical American worker has seen little to no growth in weekly wages over the past three decades. Low-income households are typically unemployed or underemployed due to a number of factors, such as a challenging labor market, limited education, a gap in work history, a criminal record, unreliable transportation, poor health, or a disability.

An acute physical or behavioral health crisis, any long-term disabling condition, or substance abuse may lead to homelessness. A person can become chronically homeless when his or her health condition becomes disabling and stable housing is too difficult to maintain without help. According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), people living in shelters are more than twice as likely to have a disability compared to the general population.
Many survivors of domestic violence become homeless when leaving an abusive relationship. Sadly, domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, stalking, or other dangerous or life-threatening conditions that relate to violence are common among youth, single adults, and families who become homeless.

Racial disparities also contribute to homelessness. Most minority groups in the United States experience homelessness at higher rates than Whites, and therefore make up a disproportionate share of the homeless population. By far the most striking disproportionality can be found among Blacks, who make up 40 percent of the homeless population, despite only representing 13 percent of the general population. From slavery to segregation, Blacks have been systematically denied equal rights and opportunities. The effects of long-standing discrimination linger and perpetuate disparities in poverty, housing, criminal justice, and health care.

Every year, HUD requires that those providing shelter for the homeless conduct a count of people experiencing homelessness who are sheltered in emergency shelter, transitional housing, and Safe Havens on a single night in January. In January 2019, 17 out of every 10,000 people in the United States were experiencing homelessness. These 567,715 people are associated with every region of the country, family status, gender category, and racial/ethnic group.

Compared to the previous year, homelessness increased by 3 percent. This marked the third straight year of national-level increases. Over the last decade, the nation hasn’t made any real progress in reducing the number of Americans who are at risk of homelessness. The current COVID-19 crisis has the potential to overwhelm the current systems of support.

**A Place for You**

John gives us more details about what occurred in the Upper Room on the night of Jesus’ arrest than any of the other Gospel writers. While the passage we are considering for this lesson begins at the start of chapter 14, John’s account of that night actually starts a chapter earlier. Before we get to the passage we are going to study, it would be helpful to do a quick review of what has just transpired.

Jesus begins by excusing himself from the table and washing the disciples’ feet – including Peter’s, even though he is initially resistant to the idea. Jesus tells them that he is setting an example for them to follow, but then announces that he is aware that not all of them are on board for the mission. Indeed, one of them will betray him. Judas leaves the room, rather conspicuously, but the disciples remain clueless.

Jesus tells them he is leaving them soon and gives them a “new commandment:” “Love each other. Just as I have loved you, so you also must love each other” (13:34).
Peter seems to be stuck on Jesus’ announcement that he is going away, and they cannot follow. Peter makes the bold proclamation, “I’ll give up my life for you” (13:37b). To which Jesus replies with the prediction of Peter’s denial.

That is where we start chapter 14. “Do not let your hearts be troubled.” These are powerful words of comfort. So powerful that they are included as the primary suggested gospel passage to be read at funerals. We are so used to hearing these words in that context that we might miss what Jesus was saying to the disciples.

Jesus is saying more than, “I’m going to turn back the sheets, fluff your pillow, and leave you a mint.” Jesus is declaring once again God’s great promise: “I am the Lord their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt so that I could make a home among them” (Exodus 29:46). Jesus is not leaving his disciples to go put the finishing touches on their cabin in the sky; Jesus is announcing that he committed to completing his mission to be “God with us” – “Emmanuel.”

From the Garden in Genesis to the New Jerusalem in Revelation, God does all that God can to establish a “place” where God can be in relationship with those God created. “Look! God’s dwelling is here with humankind. He will dwell with them, and they will be his peoples. God himself will be with them as their God” (Revelation 21:3). Indeed, in John’s prologue, he testifies: “The Word became flesh and made his home among us” (1:14a).

Recall that Proverbs is pointing God’s people to the kind of community God desires. It is not an impossible dream. Woman Wisdom promises that it is within the grasp of those who will turn to God. The goal of the faithful must be to know God and God’s ways more fully and to commit themselves to following the path of righteousness, the way of wisdom – to “walk blamelessly.” People of faith must value community as a place where the presence of hope, peace, and joy flourish.

Still this is more than just a promise of a place to reside that will be fulfilled following some mysterious future apocalyptic cataclysm. Remember that Woman Wisdom invited those on the street to come into her house. The way of wisdom is the way to fellowship with God. It is not just an invitation into the living room, but an invitation to the table – an invitation to a feast. “Come, eat my food, and drink the wine I have mixed” (Proverbs 9:5).

Jesus is saying that he is going to prepare more than a room in God’s mansion; Jesus is preparing a place at the table for his followers. Not only is Jesus preparing a place at the table for them, Jesus is the feast: “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them (John 6:56). In John 15 Jesus declares “I am the vine; you are the branches” (5), and then over and over he says “abide in me,” “remain in me,” “live in me.” Somehow Jesus is saying that what he is about to do will accomplish God’s intention – and Jesus’ intention – “that where I am you will be too” (John 14:3c).
This is not the only time that Jesus has promised his disciples that he will be with them following his death, resurrection, and ascension. “For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them” (Matthew 18:20). “Look, I myself will be with you every day until the end of this present age” Matthew 28:20b). If we only offer people the promise of the presence of Jesus in some other life, we have robbed them of a great treasure.

Finding Your Way

This was difficult for the disciples to comprehend. What Jesus says next was even more mystifying: “You know the way to the place I’m going” (John 14:4).

Perhaps everyone in the room feels like Jesus is speaking in riddles, but it is Thomas who asks the awkward question: “Lord, we don’t know where you are going. How can we know the way?” (John 14:5).

Before we look at Jesus’ answer, let’s review what we have learned about “the way” when we were still studying Wisdom in the book of Proverbs. Halakha is the Hebrew word for the practical application of the 613 commandments in the Torah. It is commonly translated as “law.” However, this word is derived from the Hebrew root halakh – “to walk” or “to go.” So taken literally, halakha translates as “the way to walk.” This is important because wisdom leads one to “walk blamelessly.” And when a person is walking blamelessly – in a way that honors God’s will and purpose – that path leads to righteousness, justice, and equity – or put another way, “to grow in favor with God and humans” (Luke 2:52).

Why did Jesus invite disciples with the words, “follow me”? Could it be that Jesus was fully committed to “walking blamelessly” the “path of righteousness”? That is why Jesus declares, “I am the way” (John 14:6). And Jesus is the true way, the way that leads to life.

One of the distinctive features of the gospel of John are the seven “I am” statements of Jesus. This is one of those seven. All of them are invitations to living life in right relationship with God and with one another. Each of them acknowledges the sovereignty of God and of God’s desire to restore the relationship with humanity. Throughout his life Jesus has affirmed by the words he has said and the life he has lived that God deserves our respect, our obedience, and our utmost regard for the ineffable wonder of God’s presence, power, and glory. Those who live in alignment with the way of wisdom – those who “fear the Lord” – experience a covenant community where people live in right relationship with one another and with God. In this community – founded on the wisdom of God – people discover a more complete understanding and a deeper appreciation of the power, presence, and wisdom of God – Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

Doing the Work

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.* John 1:1
From the beginning of his gospel, John has explicitly and repeatedly made the point that Jesus and God are inextricably united. Look at the long discourse in chapter five where Jesus begins by saying, “Very truly, I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise” (5:19). When Jesus is declaring that he is the bread of life, he says clearly this is not his idea: “I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me” (6:38). When Jesus announces, “The Father and I are one” (10:30), the religious leaders start looking around for stones. So if you hear a bit of exasperation in Jesus’ reply to Philip’s question, it may have something to do with the reality that this is not the first time Jesus has made this claim.

Jesus pushes on. “Trust me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or at least believe on account of the works themselves” (14:11). Let me paraphrase: “If you don’t trust my testimony, just look at the evidence.” Some have said that Jesus is asking his disciples to consider the miracles he has performed. When you review all four gospels, most scholars agree they recount 36 distinct supernatural events.

John includes only seven “signs” in his gospel: changing water into wine at Cana (2:1-11), healing the royal official’s son in Capernaum (4:46-54), healing the paralytic at Bethesda (5:1-15), feeding the 5,000 (6:5-14), Jesus walking on water (6:16-24), healing the man born blind (9:1-7), and the raising of Lazarus (11:1-45). At the close of the gospel John writes that Jesus did many other signs, but that he chose these, in particular, that his readers would “believe that Jesus is the Christ, God’s Son, and that believing, you will have life in his name” (20:31).

Over the centuries, scholars and theologians have considered these seven signs and the seven “I am” sayings as more than evidence of Jesus’ supernatural power, but as an indication of the type of kingdom Jesus came to announce and establish. Healing, feeding, forgiving, restoring are all characteristics of a realm based on mercy, grace, and love. It could be that Jesus is asking the disciples to consider the congruity between what he has done – “the evidence of the works” – and the character of God’s nature. He trusts that when they consider that evidence, they will believe that he is in the Father, and the Father is in him.

And when they believe, they will “do the works that I do. They will do even greater works than these because I am going to the Father” (14:12). This is a powerful promise, but it is not necessarily the promise of supernatural power. It is the promise that those who follow the path of wisdom – “the way” – will be empowered to establish a community that more fully reflects the character of God. Working in line with God’s plan and purpose – healing, feeding, forgiving, and restoring in Jesus’ name – they will extend God’s reputation and more people will come to trust in God’s mercy, grace, and love.

Even Greater Things

Thanks to the work of Rev. Bobby Gale and the mission organization he established and leads, Unto the Least of His ministry (www.totheleast.com), more than 50,000 people are able to drink
fresh, clean water. Their vision is to equip individuals and churches to become more actively involved in Christian mission opportunities and service. “We are called to present the Gospel to the lost and encourage the faithful, give a cup of water to the thirsty, clothe the poor, feed the hungry, visit the sick and the imprisoned. We are called to equip and train leaders and churches to reach out to people of all ages and in all walks of life.

Second Harvest of Coastal Georgia (www.helpendhunger.org) serves as the food safety net for tens of thousands of children, senior citizens, low-income families, and people with disabilities who are at risk for hunger. They work diligently to feed the hungry by distributing nutritious food to non-profit agencies and at-risk elderly and youth. Their programs are designed to provide hunger relief to those most vulnerable. They partner with 298 faith based and non-profit agencies to provide emergency food assistance. Last year, Second Harvest food bank provided more than 16.1 million meals (more than 19.4 million pounds of food) to hungry people.

In May 1968, a group of young doctors decided to go and help victims of wars and major disasters. This new brand of humanitarianism would reinvent the concept of emergency aid. They were to become Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), known internationally in English as Doctors Without Borders (www.doctorswithoutborders.org). MSF was officially created on December 22, 1971. At the time, 300 volunteers made up the organization: doctors, nurses, and other staff, including the 13 founding doctors and journalists. MSF was created on the belief that all people have the right to medical care regardless of gender, race, religion, creed, or political affiliation, and that the needs of these people outweigh respect for national boundaries. Since 1980, MSF has opened offices in 28 countries and employs more than 30,000 people across the world. Since its founding, MSF has treated over a hundred million patients – with 8.25 million outpatient consultations being carried out in 2014 alone.

Habitat for Humanity (habitat.org) is a global nonprofit Christian housing organization that was founded in 1976 outside Americus, Ga. by Linda and Millard Fuller. Habitat now works in all 50 states in the U.S. and in more than 70 countries and has helped more than 29 million people achieve strength, stability and independence through safe, decent and affordable shelter. Their mission is to bring people together to build homes, communities and hope as they seek to put God’s love into action. Habitat subscribes to a vision of a world where everyone has a decent place to live.

Clean water to drink, food to eat, healing for bodies and communities, a place to call home: I give thanks for those who follow “the way” in our world today.

**Discussion Questions**

- What do you know about the state of homelessness in your community?
- How have you experienced Jesus preparing a place for you?
• What other organizations do you know are doing great things in Jesus’ name?

*Rev. Ashley Randall is the pastor of Garden City UMC in Garden City, Ga.*

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**Faith and Wisdom**

**Summer Quarter: Many Faces of Wisdom**  
**Unit 3: Faith and Wisdom in James**

**Sunday school lesson for the week of August 2, 2020**  
**By Rev. Ashley Randall**

**Lesson Scripture: James 1:1–11**  
**Key Verse: James 1:5**

**Purpose:** To acknowledge God as the source of wisdom that leads to life

**Trials and Sufferings**

My daughters were (and still are) avid readers. They happened to be about the same age as the title character in J. K. Rowling’s novel, “Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone” when it was published in 1997. We never stood in line to be one of the first to purchase a copy of the subsequent six installments of the chronicle of this young wizard’s education at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, but they did read each of them within a month or two of their release.

When the first movie was released in November 2001, we went to the theater as a family to experience the magic – and it was magical. As each of the movies were released, we arranged a time to see them in the theater. These days it seems that nearly every month there is at least one “Harry Potter Weekend” with the movies running back to back on one cable channel or another.

For the few who are unfamiliar with Harry’s story, he in an orphan who survived the murder of his parents by the power-obsessed dark wizard, Lord Voldemort, but not without receiving a distinctive lightning-bolt shaped scar on his forehead. The infant Harry is delivered to his aunt and uncle, the Dursleys, who live in the outskirts of London, to keep him safe, but they treat him more like a servant than a family member. In fact, when we meet the 10-year-old Harry a few days before his 11th birthday, he is living in the cupboard under the stairs in the Dursley’s home. Indeed, that detail is included in the address of the letter Harry receives informing him that he has been accepted as a student at Hogwarts.

J. K. Rowling does a remarkable job of introducing her readers to the characters and locations that Harry and his friends occupy. Basically, each of the novels (and each of the movies on
which they are based) describes the events of each of the years that Harry attends the school. In the course of the telling of Harry’s story, she addresses a variety of themes including the nature of friendship; the use and abuse of power; the importance of free choice; the corrupting influence of prejudice, hatred, and violence; and the redeeming power of love. Throughout the books she has created a moral universe, which she admits deals explicitly with religious themes and questions.

One of those themes is the role of suffering in our lives. There is a scene in the third novel (and included in the movie), “Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban,” that explicitly deals with this theme. We find Harry and his friends in class with Professor Trelawney. She has the responsibility of introducing her students to “the noble art of divination.” In this first class they are focusing on tessonimancy, the art of reading tea leaves to predict events in the future.

The students are sharing a desk with each other. There is tea, and Professor Trelawney instructs her students to exchange cups with the person sitting opposite them. Harry is sharing a desk with his best friend, Ronald Weasley. Professor Trelawney tells Ron to look at Harry’s cup and tell her what he sees.

“Well,” Ron says as he gazes into the cup. “Harry’s got a wonky sort of cross.” Ron pauses to refer to their book, ‘Unfogging the Future.’ “That’s trials and suffering. And that there could be the sun.” He consults the text again. “That’s happiness. So... you’re going to suffer, but you’re going to be happy about it.”

Neither Ron nor Harry seem to appreciate the significance of this insight at the time, but throughout the remainder of the story, it is clear that it is only by confronting the ordeals with which he is presented that Harry develops the depth of character and the strength of relationship with his allies that are necessary to defeat the dark forces that are present in his world and that threaten to overwhelm it.

**Going on to Perfection**

For the remainder of the quarter, we turn to the Letter of James to see what this early leader of the church has to teach us about wisdom and faith. While there are at least a couple of people named James identified in the gospels, most scholars agree that the writer of this letter was James, the brother of Jesus, not James the apostle. He is listed as one of the brothers of Jesus by both Mark (6:3) and Matthew (13:55). All four gospels relate the story of Jesus’ mother and his brothers showing up where he is teaching in an attempt to dissuade him from continuing his public ministry and urge him to return home with them (Matthew 12:46-50, Mark 3:31-35, Luke 8:19-21, and John 7:3-5).

Apparently following Jesus’ death and resurrection, James has a change of heart and becomes a leader of the congregation of new converts in Jerusalem. Peter instructs the believers he finds at John Mark’s mother’s house to go tell James and the others about his miraculous escape from
prison (Acts 12:12-17). When the first church council meets to consider the matter of the conversion of Gentiles, it is James who issues the ruling statement on how they will proceed (Acts 15:1-21). Whether James acquires this position of authority because of his familial relationship with Jesus or not, it is worth noting than when he introduces himself at the opening of his letter, he makes no mention of this relationship. He refers to himself as a “servant” – or more literally, a “slave” – “of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” (1:1).

He addresses this letter rather cryptically, “to the twelve tribes in the Dispersion.” It is unclear whether he means this figuratively or not. The 12 tribes of Israel had been scattered outside the original boundaries of Israel for centuries, going back at least to the Babylonian exile. Succeeding empires had further dispersed those who worshipped the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. So, there were certainly Jews scattered outside the land of Israel.

On the other hand, some had already begun to interpret Jesus’ calling of the 12 to be his disciples as the restoration of the covenant people. In the first few years, that community of believers in Jerusalem dispersed, particularly following the execution of Stephen (Acts 8:1). In addition, Peter, Phillip, Barnabas, and later Paul were all fanning out across the countryside proclaiming the good news and establishing communities of faith throughout the Roman Empire. In any case, James moves quickly to raising his concerns and sharing his counsel.

The first issue is how to deal with the opposition, challenges, difficulties, and trials facing believers. It is interesting to note that James says “when” you face trials, not “if.” A quick review of the book of the Acts of the Apostles makes it obvious why James assumes that his readers are facing trials of all kinds.

James’ advice: “Consider it an opportunity for great joy” (1:2b, NLT). While it may sound surprising, his guidance aligns with that of his brother: “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you” (Matthew 5:11-12).

Like Jesus, James calls on believers to take a broader perspective on the trials they face. There is a bigger context than their own immediate circumstances or situation. There is more in store for them than what they can see in the present moment. Like exercising a muscle to exhaustion, testing produces greater strength. In this case, the strength to endure, persevere, stand fast, overcome. James is confident that developing this kind of endurance leads to maturity, “lacking in nothing.”

This is an indication that James took seriously Jesus's invitation to “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt 5:48). John Wesley also took this invitation seriously. Wesley believed we could become perfect in love in this life. He didn't mean we would be free from mistakes, temptation, or failure. Rather, Wesley believed that through God’s sanctifying grace, a
person could have a heart “habitually filled with the love of God and neighbor,” and as “having the mind of Christ and walking as he walked” – having a mind guided by the wisdom of God.

So, if you haven’t settled the connection between spiritual maturity and wisdom, it may seem rather abrupt that James pivots to “If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God” (1:5a). Wisdom is the recognition that there is more to this life than satisfying our physical appetites. Wisdom leads one to “walk blamelessly.” And when a person is walking blamelessly – in a way that honors God’s will and purpose – that path leads to righteousness, justice, and equity.

As we learned in the book of Proverbs, God’s wisdom is offered as guidance for our daily lives. It is a gift meant to enrich the quality of our relationships and the strength of our communities. The enduring value of wisdom is that it carries with it the understanding that my relationship with God and my neighbor are more important than any pleasures that might tempt me to do any less than love God with all my heart, soul, strength, and mind and to love my neighbor as myself (see Luke 10:27).

James affirms God’s generosity in giving wisdom to those who ask, even as Woman Wisdom promised free access to this good gift of God. But even as Woman Wisdom warned about the temptation of attending to the call of Folly, James warns his readers about being double-minded. “Ask in faith, never doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, driven and tossed by the wind” (1:6a).

I wonder if James had in mind the story of Jesus walking on the water (Matthew 14:22-33). Recall Jesus had just fed the crowds, and he sent his disciples on ahead to the other shore while he dismissed the people. But it was tough going for the disciples, “battered by the waves, … far from the land, for the wind was against them.” When they see Jesus, they are alarmed; but then Peter says “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.” Jesus says, “Come!” Peter gets out of the boat, starts walking on the water toward Jesus; “but when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, “Lord, save me!” Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, “You of little faith, why did you doubt?”

Richard Rohr has written about the consequences of being double-minded: “Dualistic or divided people, however, live in a split and fragmented world. They cannot accept that God objectively dwells within them or others (See 1 Corinthians 3:16-17). They cannot accept or forgive certain parts of themselves. This lack of forgiveness takes the forms of a tortured mind, a closed heart, or an inability to live calmly and humbly inside their own body. The fragmented mind sees parts, not wholes, and invariably it creates antagonism, fear, and resistance.”

There are also echoes of Jesus’ declaration, “No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth” (Matthew 6:24, Luke 16:13). In each of these instances, the warning is about trying to hedge our bets, to spilt loyalties, play both sides at once, rely on God and figure it
out for ourselves. James wants his readers to know that the way through difficult times is to place their trust in God. “On Christ the solid rock I stand, all other ground is sinking sand, all other ground is sinking sand.”

When James turns his attention to the “rich,” he makes the same connection to being double-minded as his brother. Those who acquire wealth are tempted to believe that they are able to care for themselves, insulate themselves from the difficulties that plague others. But as Isaiah attests, “The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever” (40:7-8).

There are also echoes of the parable of the rich fool in these verses. Recall Jesus introduces that parable with this warning: “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions” (Luke 12:15). When we have all we need and more, there is a real temptation to become more focused on keeping what we have than in ways we can use what we have to bless others. We can begin to see others as competitors rather than as fellow citizens of the kingdom God sent his son to establish. We fail to accept the way of wisdom and begin to follow the way of the world.

**Made to Glow in the Dark**

“There is a crack in everything… That's how the light gets in.” Jason Gray says the first time he heard this lyric by the late Leonard Cohen, it changed the way he understood every wound and imperfection in his life. That lyric was on his mind when he and his friend, Ben Glover, wrote the song, *Glow in the Dark*.

> Sometimes the world feels like a mess  
> Full of drama, full of stress  
> And life puts a fist right in your ribs  
> You can hide if you choose to  
> And no one would even blame you  
> Or you can let them see how you deal with it  
>  
> That even in the darkest place  
> His love can make you radiate  
>  
> (chorus)  
> Doesn't matter how deep, how dark the night is  
> Keep hoping, keep on shining  
> And they'll see His light burning in your heart  
> And if the road gets rough, just keep your head up  
> Let the world see what you're made of
That His love's alive in your deepest parts
Like a flame, like a burning star you can shine right where you are
He made you to glow in the dark

Most of Jason’s songs emphasize how “strength is the new weakness.” By being willing to reveal who he really is and what God has done in his life, Jason has connected with others who relate to his reflections on God’s goodness and grace.

“When I’m willing to work out of my weakness, there are more chances for God to show up and for the unexpected to happen,” Jason explains. “My strengths – which are really quite modest – are limited to me, but with my weaknesses the possibilities are boundless.”

Don't be ashamed of your past
If you're shattered like a piece of glass
The more broke you are the more the light gets through
Show your wounds and your flaws
Show them why you still need the cross
Let them see the work He's doing in you

That even in the darkest place
His love can make you radiate

“When we are in the midst of being shattered, there can be so much anxiety. I hope to write songs that help assure people that everything is going to be alright and that even now all things are working ‘together for the good’ of those who love God. Sometimes my own fear tempts me to prejudge my circumstances as ‘good’ or ‘bad.’ But the ‘worst’ circumstances have often produced the best things in my life.”

Jason gives credit to Richard Rohr for expanding this understanding for him: “The word change normally refers to new beginnings. But transformation more often happens not when something new begins but when something old falls apart. The pain of something old falling apart – chaos – invites the soul to listen at a deeper level. It invites and sometimes forces the soul to go to a new place because the old place is falling apart. Otherwise, most of us would never go to new places.”

Discussion Questions

• How has confronting the trials in your life helped you develop the depth of character and the strength of relationship with others that sustains you?

• What are some other ways that double-mindedness is expressed in the lives of people?

• Who have you seen “glow in the dark?”
Ashley Randall is pastor of the Garden City UMC in Garden City, Ga. He is struggling to keep up with his endurance training this summer. The pool is closed. Social distancing has disrupted his running group. The heat makes it difficult to get in the miles on the bike. Races have been canceled or postponed. He is thankful to have friends who continue to encourage him and hold him accountable.

Observations from a train ride

By Dr. Hal Brady

There’s a story about a woman who many years ago took her first journey on a train. As soon as she reached her seat, she began fumbling with the window to be sure that she got exactly the right amount of air. Then she pulled the window shade up and down until she got exactly the right amount of light coming in. Then she worked with her baggage to get it placed just right. Then she took off her hat and was very careful to put it where it would not get mashed. Then she took her mirror and comb, and combed her hair to be sure it was right.

Just about the time she got everything fixed and settled down comfortably, the conductor called out her station. As she got off the train she said, “If I had known the trip was going to be so short, I would not have fussed so much over unimportant details.”

That’s a significant lesson for all of us. Even at its best, life is short. We simply don’t have time to be prioritizing the ultimately unimportant.

So what are some of the more important things? I want us to consider a few.

First, character! In plain truth, God intends that we be people of character. We are directed in scripture to “Examine everything carefully and hang on to what is good. Avoid every kind of evil” (1 Thessalonians 5: 21-22).

As traditionally understood, from the Hebrews and Greeks forward, character is the essential “stuff” a person is made of. Character is what we are in the dark and what we are when no one is looking.

The late Norman Vincent Peale, noted New York minister, said that in every business transaction we must asked ourselves three questions: Is it legal? Is it balanced? Will it make me feel good about myself?

Second, home! As someone observed, “It may be great our going to the moon and all, and it is. But earth never invented anything better than coming home – provided that home is a good place to come home to; provided that home is the center of affection where parents love each other, where children intelligently admire and respect their parents and where there is real joy in being together.”

One of America’s besetting problems is that the benefits of Godly homes are overlooked.
Third, purpose! Recently, the question was asked, “What is the most important thing we should learn?”

The answer given: “To know one’s purpose in life.”

I suppose at the end of my life somebody could say that Hal Brady was a big failure in golf. And they would be right because I was much better years ago than I am now.

However, the truth is I chose to be a failure in golf because golf was not my purpose. I found my purpose is in another area and that is where I found life’s meaning.

Fourth, others! One definition of intolerance goes like this, “Unwillingness to accept values, beliefs, or behavior that differ from one’s own.” In the light of that definition, I always thought of tolerance as a good thing.

But when I read an editorial by Peter W. Marty in a back issue of “The Christian Century” (April 24, 2019) that gave reminder that tolerance was not what Jesus taught. Jesus’ directive was, “Love your neighbor,” not “Tolerate your neighbor.”

In terms of a better present and future, people of color and whites need to move beyond just tolerating one another. Tolerance will never ultimately bring about love or justice.

But a new commitment to get to know one another, befriend one another, identify with one another and to work together to accomplish the goal of a just society offers our best hope for doing so.

Fifth, God! When the late Dr. Leslie Weatherhead, renowned minister at City Temple London, retired he was asked this question, “What is the most important thing you have learned in life?”

Dr. Weatherhead answered, “Life will work out only one way, and that is God’s way.”

And that is an absolute!

*Dr. Hal Brady is a retired pastor who continues to present the Good News of Jesus Christ and offer encouragement in a fresh and vital way though Hal Brady Ministries (halbradyministries.com).*

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**Live to God and bring others to do so**

**WHAT'S OLD IS NEW AGAIN**

**ANNE PACKARD**

“Whither am I going? To the New World. What to do? To gain honor? No, if I know my own heart. To get money? No: I am going to live to God, and to bring others so to do.”

Francis Asbury wrote this while sailing to the New World in 1771.
Welcome to the “New Normal.” This phrase has been used often in the last few months – at times a little too often – to describe current extraordinary events. However, it’s wrong on both counts. These days are neither new nor normal. Cue my favorite tagline: What’s Old Is New Again.

Let’s travel back in time to 1771 and join Francis Asbury on the bow of a ship sailing to his “new normal.” Asbury had volunteered to leave his home, his family, and his friends and take a dangerous voyage across the sea to a land he had never seen to minister to people he had never met. He does not know what his future might look like or what it might hold, but he knows himself and is thereby able to define his purpose. Is Asbury sailing to the New World for glory or financial gain? No. He is going “to live to God, and to bring others to do so.”

For the next 45 years, this was his daily task and his words and actions certainly show this to be true. He continued to push into unchartered territories and unknown regions. When he became comfortable with cities, he ventured into the wilderness, and when he became accustomed to the north, he traveled to the south. He traveled more than 6,000 miles by horseback each year – the equivalent of riding from the Moore Methodist Museum to Seattle, Wash. and back to the Museum again. Francis Asbury’s “new normal” happened almost daily in his effort to “live to God, and bring others to do so.”

So, how might this trip into the Ministry of Memory help us in these extraordinary times? Well, like Francis Asbury, we are sailing into unchartered territories. It’s a wilderness filled with face masks and hand sanitizer and temperature checks. It’s a wilderness where singing may not be healthy and where hugs are discouraged. It’s a wilderness where life is uncertain and we may not be fully prepared. Are we sailing into the unknown for glory or financial gain? I think not. The South Georgia Conference moves forward to live to God and bring others to do so. This is our eternal daily task, even if other aspects change.

So please take heart, dearest Conference, and know that you stand with the finest of those in the Methodist movement who have sailed into unchartered waters. Keep the task at the top of your to-do list and remember that, no matter what the future has in store, we live to God and bring others to do so.

Anne Packard serves as Conference Historian and director of the Arthur J. Moore Methodist Museum on St. Simons Island. Contact her at director@mooremuseum.org.

Retired Clergy Birthdays – July 2020

7/01 – Donald Wood: 157 Arlington Row; Macon, GA 31210
7/01 – Kenneth West: 4183 GA Hwy 93; Pelham, GA 31779
Scripture Readings – July 21

July 26

*Eighth Sunday after Pentecost*

Genesis 29:15-28
Psalm 105:1-11, 45b (UMH 828)
Romans 8:26-39
Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

Aug. 2

*Ninth Sunday after Pentecost*
Genesis 32:22-31  
Psalm 17:1-7, 15 (UMH 749)  
Romans 9:1-5  
Matthew 14:13-21

Aug. 9  
Tenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Genesis 37:1-4, 12-28  
Psalm 105:1-6, 16-22, 45b (UMH 828)  
Romans 10:5-15  
Matthew 14:22-33

Events in the South Georgia Conference – 7/21/2020 edition

Zoom @ Noon: Virtual School – July 22
School systems are faced with difficult decisions for the 2020-21 year. Whether starting solely online or offering families options, how can churches partner with families, schools and their community navigating a safe learning environment? Isle of Hope UMC, Savannah is paving a way. Join us for a ZOOM @ Noon: Wednesday, July 22, 2020. We will host Chrissy Ruehl from Isle of Hope as she shares their plan for standing in the gap during this time and pioneering a way for the church to be in ministry to students, families and schools in their community.  
Register here

ERT Basic Certification & Chainsaw Training, Cairo – July 25
An ERT Basic Certification course will be held Saturday, July 25 at Cairo First UMC. The class will begin at 8 a.m. with the chainsaw training immediately following from 1 p.m. until 5 p.m. The cost is $25 for ERT class, badge, registration, t-shirt, and lunch. Chainsaw training is an additional $6 (must be an ERT badge holder). For questions or to register, call Susan Hughes at 229-423-9381 or 229-425-3068.

Annual Conference Clergy Session, Virtual – Aug. 2
The 2020 Annual Conference clergy session will be held virtually, Sunday, August 2 from 3 - 5 p.m. More information: www.sgaumc.org/annualconference.

Annual Conference Commissioning Service, Virtual – Aug. 8
Those approved for provisional membership or full connection at the clergy session will be commissioned or ordained in a local church setting with only family present. The Commissioning Service is set for Saturday, August 8 at 2 p.m. The service will be live-streamed. More information: www.sgaumc.org/annualconference.

Annual Conference Ordination Service, Virtual – Aug. 9
Those approved for provisional membership or full connection at the clergy session will be
commissioned or ordained in a local church setting with only family present. The Service of Ordination is set for Sunday, August 9 at 4 p.m. The service will be live-streamed. More information: www.sgaumc.org/annualconference.

Pastoral Care as a Gateway to Recovery, Part 3 – Aug. 11
“Pastoral Care as a Gateway to Recovery from Addiction” is a three-part series for clergy led by Rev. Deborah Wight-Knight, Conference Pastoral Counselor. Deborah will interview experts in the area of recovery who can help our clergy identify addiction issues, consult appropriately with parishioners and others around the problem, learn about the “Intervention” process, and then know how/where to refer for treatment. These workshops will also look at addiction from a family systems perspective. Part 3: August 11, 10:30 am – noon | Register

Annual Conference Retiree Recognition Service, Virtual – Aug. 11
The 2020 Annual Conference Retiree Recognition Service will be held Tuesday, August 11 at 7 p.m. to honor and recognize retiring clergy. It will be a virtual service. More information: www.sgaumc.org/annualconference.

Annual Conference Memorial Service, Virtual – Aug. 13
The 2020 Annual Conference Memorial Service to remember clergy and clergy spouses who have passed away this past year is set for August 13 at 7 p.m. It will be a virtual service. More information: www.sgaumc.org/annualconference.

2020 South Georgia Annual Conference session, Virtual – Aug. 15
The 2020 Annual Conference session will be held virtually Saturday, Aug. 15 from 8:30 a.m. - 4 p.m. More information: www.sgaumc.org/annualconference.

Golden Cross Sunday – Aug. 16
Golden Cross began in 1908 with the commitment of Methodists in Dallas, Texas to provide the first health care to persons who could not afford it. They began to receive offerings for the expenses of the poor patients at Methodist Hospital in that city. By 1930, the concept was officially adopted throughout the predecessor denominations of The United Methodist Church. Today Golden Cross is a ministry that reaches out in love to the laity in our Annual Conference who are experiencing financial difficulty due to excessive medical expenses. Through Golden Cross, United Methodists care for members of our local churches in time of emotional stress and financial need. The South Georgia Conference has designated the first Sunday of July to be the Sunday to receive a special offering for Golden Cross. Each church is asked to observe Golden Cross Sunday to receive an offering and send it to the conference treasurer.