South Georgia Conference sends $20,000 to aid tornado victims

A deadly string of tornadoes left a trail of devastation and ruin across six Midwestern and Southern states Dec. 10-11. Homes, businesses, churches, and lives were lost.

The South Georgia Conference of The United Methodist Church is responding with support by sending $20,000 of disaster response funds to the Tennessee-Western Kentucky Conference, led by Bishop Bill McAlilly, to help those on the ground meet immediate needs.

“We are overwhelmed with the generosity of the people of South Georgia,” said Rev. Stacey Harwell-Dye, pastor of missions and outreach at West End United Methodist Church in Nashville, Tenn. and a member of the Tennessee-Western Kentucky Disaster Response Team. “Portions of our conference have been hit hard repeatedly with a variety of storms, from the March 2020 tornadoes to the straight-line winds and derecho later that year to devastating flooding in Waverly and Metro in March 2021 and now the latest tornadoes of December 2021. It is easy to get discouraged, but the response of United Methodists from across the connection and the faithfulness of the God we all serve keep us going. Your funds will help both in the immediate cleanup and in the long-term recovery that will take months. The United Methodists through our local churches and through UMCOR stay long after the cameras and attention move to other disasters. Thank you.”

South Georgia United Methodists have shown in previous similar disaster response situations that they have a desire to walk alongside those in need. Conference leaders invite those who are able to give a monetary donation to the Conference’s disaster response special offering. 100 percent of the donations will be sent to the Tennessee-Kentucky Conference. Click here to give online. Donations may also be given through local South Georgia United Methodist churches. Local churches will then send the money to the Administrative Services Office. Money may also be directly earmarked for Conference Advance Special #6798 and mailed to Administrative Services, PO Box 7227, Macon, GA 31209.

Financial donations may also be given to the United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR) through this link (US Disaster Response and Recovery #901670). UMCOR will be on the ground and assisting devastated areas. 100 percent of the donations help those directly affected.

Our district disaster response coordinators are currently working to coordinate teams. Those interested in serving in affected areas should contact their District Disaster Response Coordinator.

Please do not send goods or supplies at this time. If specific material needs are requested, they will be shared. Monetary donations are the best way to help from afar.
Bishop Graves requested South Georgia United Methodists pray for all who experienced loss or trauma from the storms.

Conference awards $25,000 for children’s, poverty ministries

By Kara Witherow, Editor

The South Georgia Conference, through the Office of Connectional Ministries and the Conference Outreach Team, has awarded grants totaling $25,375 to 27 local churches for ministries focused on children and poverty.

Funding for the grants was made available through the Bishop’s Initiative for Children and Poverty, to which local churches have supported generously over the years.

Ministries or projects, which may be ongoing or new, must be completed between December 2021 and July 2022. Grants ranged from $500 to $2,000.

A team of five reviewed applications and awarded the grants. The selection committee included Connectional Ministries Team Leader Kelly Roberson; Outreach Chair Susan Hughes; and Outreach Team members Rev. Christy Bandy, Rev. Lee Pettis, and Rob Belknap.

“We are pleased to say we made a conscious decision to offer grant money to every local church who submitted a grant application,” Hughes said. “For new projects, our prayer is that the gift provides the seed money to jumpstart the church’s proposed idea. For ongoing projects, our prayer is that the money provides a boost for the great ministry the local church is already involved in within their community.

“We are so thankful for the Kingdom work these grants represent.”

Grant recipients:

**Andrew Chapel UMC:** Andrew Chapel UMC in Ellaville, in partnership with Feeding the Valley in Columbus, is providing weekly meals to children in the local school system. The “Buddy Packs” project currently serves 50 elementary school students and five middle school students. The meals are designed to provide food throughout the weekend when children do not have access to free school meals.

**Baxley First UMC:** Baxley First UMC will develop “Fight Poverty through Healthy Eating Choices,” a five-month intensive program focused on teaching participants how to supplement the Appling County Food Bank groceries with healthy food to cook meals that are cost-effective, nutritious, and enjoyable. Families chosen to participate in the program will be low-income with at least one child between the ages of 9-12.
**Buckhorn UMC:** Buckhorn UMC in Dexter operates the only food pantry in the West Laurens area. The Buckhorn Food Ministry provides food three times per month in a drive-through food line. More than 50 volunteers from seven area churches participate in the ministry to help provide nutritious food and lessen food insecurity.

**Concord UMC:** Concord UMC in Americus partners with Called to Care of Sumter County through their annual Christmas stocking project. Each year, the ministry provides a Christmas stocking to each child currently in foster care in Sumter County. Each stocking contains small gifts and a gift card. The grant will help Concord UMC provide gift cards, age-appropriate Bibles or Bible storybooks, and accompanying Gospel tracts.

**Darien UMC:** Since 2015, Darien UMC has served 50-70 students at Todd-Grant Elementary School through its Backpack Buddies ministry. Each child receives enough food for the weekend and more on longer holidays. Darien UMC would like to expand the current Backpack Buddies program to McIntosh Middle School.

**Douglas First UMC:** The grant awarded to Douglas First UMC will support two ministries, Project Munch and Caring Christmas Tree. Project Munch provides weekend food to local elementary school children. The Caring Christmas Tree program provides Christmas gifts and clothing to local children who otherwise would not receive gifts.

**Eastman First UMC:** Eastman First UMC has long partnered with The Club to support its after-school program, Reading Buddies Program, and other after-school initiatives. The church wants to continue this partnership and support and offer scholarship funds to families who struggle to afford the after-school program.

**Epworth UMC:** Epworth UMC in Jesup has, for years, supported 14 low-income families from a local elementary school with weekend food supplements. The past two years the support has expanded to include two holiday meals, Christmas gifts, backpacks, and school supplies. The grant will help the congregation also provide new shoes and/or a winter coat for each student.

**Forest Hills UMC:** Forest Hills UMC projects that in 2022 it will serve 2,000 children in 25 schools through its Backpack Ministry. Begun in 2011 with nine children in one school, the church’s Backpack Ministry provides supplemental, child friendly food to students who are at risk of poor nutritional intake when not receiving school meals. Forest Hills UMC plans to use the money from the grant to purchase food from the Middle Georgia Community Food Bank.

**Grace UMC:** For several years, Grace UMC in Savannah has served children at Heard Elementary through the Back-Pack Buddies ministry. The congregation is expanding their partnership with Heard Elementary by setting up a clothes closet at the church so the school may call upon them when there is a need for clothes, backpacks, uniforms, shoes, jackets, underwear, and personal hygiene items.
**Greater Trinity UMC**: Greater Trinity UMC in St. Marys proposes hosting a Children’s Winter Workshop consisting of three distinct activities during the winter: a Children’s Christmas Program in December, a Mid-Year Back-to-School Bash in January, and a Black History Month Program in February. All programs/activities would assist and target children and families in the area surrounding Greater Trinity UMC.

**Isle of Hope UMC**: Isle of Hope UMC in Savannah, through its new Literacy & Relationships program and its partnership with Isle of Hope K8 School, seeks to address students’ literacy gap by providing resources that are rarely available to lower-income families.

**Korean UMC of Savannah**: The Korean UMC of Savannah will launch a free language education program for children of low-income families who want to learn Korean. The program, developed, written, and taught by volunteer members of Savannah Korean UMC, will help participating students develop their comprehension of the Korean language, enhance their abilities to read, write, understand, and speak in Korean. They will also learn about Korean culture.

**Landsburg UMC**: For 10 years, Landsburg UMC in Glennville has served the citizens of Wheeler County with its food bank. Open the fourth Saturday of each month, the food bank gives away a bag of groceries to each family, including at least one meat item. Whole turkeys are given in November. The grant will help the food bank purchase additional groceries.

**Leesburg UMC**: In July 2022, Leesburg UMC will host a Back to School Bash for children in Lee County. In addition to being a grand celebration that will include food, free haircuts, games, bounce houses, free school supplies, books, and other activities that create a fun and exciting back-to-school atmosphere, the event will also provide children with necessities like new socks and underwear to start the school year.

**Martha Bowman UMC**: Martha Bowman UMC supports The Mentor’s Food Pantry, which helps address the needs of hunger and food insecurity facing children and their families in Bibb County. The grant will allow the congregation to serve 80 additional families during times of greatest need of food insecurity, when school is not in session.

**Morgan’s Chapel UMC**: Through its BUC SNACKS program, three to four times a week, members of Morgan’s Chapel UMC in Townsend make and take 100-150 peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to McIntosh County Academy. The sandwiches feed the football, basketball, baseball, and softball players after school, before practice. The grant will allow the church to purchase food for the program.

**Pinkney Chapel UMC**: Pinkney Chapel UMC in Folkston proposes hosting a Children’s Winter Workshop consisting of three distinct activities during the winter: a Children’s Christmas Program in December, a Mid-Year Back-to-School Bash in January, and a Black History Month
Program in February. All programs/activities would assist and target children and families in the area surrounding Pinkney Chapel UMC.

**St. Andrews UMC:** Through its Elijah’s Promise Food Pantry, St. Andrews UMC in Sylvania helps feed 200 to 300 families each month. Food boxes filled with nutritious, filling foods are given out on the first and third Saturdays of each month.

**St. Mary’s Road UMC:** St. Mary’s Road UMC in Columbus has expanded its Seeds 2 Trees tutoring ministry which serves low-income children from across the city. The grant will help the ministry expand its technology and will allow the church to reach more students virtually.

**The Chapel UMC:** A Little Free Food Pantry is a “no strings attached” way to feed people or families in need. The pantry is a simple wooden box with shelves and a door that is placed in an area of need, often an area filled with young families with multiple children. Two have already been built and The Chapel would like to build an additional five Little Free Food Pantries to be placed around Brunswick.

**The Porch Community UMC:** Every year, The Porch partners with a local Hispanic ministry to help provide Christmas gifts for children in the Valdosta area. The Porch congregation purchases new backpacks, a local ministry provides information sharing the Christmas story and the Good News of Jesus, and those, along with Christmas gifts from each child’s wish list, are packed into the backpacks. The grant will help offset the cost of the bags and printed materials used.

**Trinity UMC, Pooler:** Each month, Trinity UMC in Pooler delivers bags of groceries to about 20 area families. The grant will help purchase groceries.

**Trinity UMC, Warner Robins:** Trinity UMC operates a Wednesday after-school program known as Kids In Our City. It currently serves 78 elementary-age children but has the potential to immediately reach twice as many. Trinity would like to develop a leadership development component to the program for middle school, high school, and college students. The leadership program would train students on time management, money management, social skills, and conflict management. The program would also compensate the students for their time serving the elementary students in the after-school program.

**Vineville UMC:** Vineville UMC serves nearly 200 elementary school students through its Backpack Ministry. In partnership with L.H. Williams Elementary School, the congregation packs bags of nutritious food each week – the equivalent of two meals per day for the weekend per child – from August through May.

**Warwick UMC:** Since 2007, Warwick UMC has served Worth and Crisp Counties through its Fishes and Loaves food pantry. Each month, bags of groceries are distributed to 41 families (105 individuals).
**Wesley UMC:** Wesley UMC’s congregation entered 2021 with a goal to support its Macon community with at least one mission project each month. The church’s December project was to host its first quarterly “Families Give Back” day of service. The goal was to give families in the church and community an opportunity to give back by participating in a day of serving the vulnerable population in the community.

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**White Bluff UMC’s Christmas Light Extravaganza shares joy, light of Christ with Savannah**

By Kara Witherow, *Editor*

Rev. Barry Giddens loves Christmas.

Each year he and his three boys – Maddux, 11, Paxton, 9, and Lennox, 7 – cheerfully channel their inner Clark Griswold and decorate their home for the holidays with their thousands of lights, more than 100 inflatables, and various other Christmas decorations.

To the Giddens family, lights, as Paxton said, “represent Christmas.”

This year, however, they are in a new-to-them parsonage in Savannah. The homeowners’ association prefers understated décor, Rev. Giddens said, so he had to tame his décor tendencies and find a new use for his multitude of lights and collection of inflatables.

That’s when a (twinkly, multicolor, LED, Christmas) light went off in his head. White Bluff United Methodist Church doesn’t have an HOA. The church sits in a prominent location, at the end of Truman Parkway near Abercorn Street. And the congregation wants to reach out to the community.

“Keeping in mind that we want to minister from our strengths, I asked what the church can do well and what we can thrive in,” said Rev. Giddens, who serves as senior pastor. “One of the things I thought about, easily, were the Christmas lights.”

His idea, the [Savannah Christmas Light Extravaganza](#), was warmly embraced by the congregation. A nightly event that would make even the grinchiest of folks jolly, it launched Dec. 6 and runs from 6-9 p.m. through Dec. 23.

The church – now decorated with 15,000 to 20,000 lights – can easily be seen from busy Truman Parkway. Around the sanctuary, faith-themed nativities and inflatables are displayed. The education wing features secular decorations and inflatables like the Stay Puft Marshmallow Man, Frosty the Snowman, and Buddy the Elf. A sleigh sits nearby for photos, and an eight-seat barrel train, made by Rev. Giddens out of 55-gallon metal drums, is pulled by a volunteer driving a John Deere tractor. Santa’s even been spotted on Friday and Saturday evenings.
Everyone loves Christmas lights, Rev. Giddens said, and the Savannah Christmas Light Extravaganza is a way White Bluff UMC can serve the community and be a visible, welcoming presence in Savannah.

“The lights give people a vision of White Bluff even if they never come inside or drive into the parking lot,” he said. “They know we’re here and we’re here to serve the community.”

While lights and decorations are pretty and fun to look at, they serve a deeper meaning for Rev. Giddens and his family, and he hopes visitors leave White Bluff UMC’s Savannah Christmas Light Extravaganza with an understanding of the true meaning of Christmas.

“While I’ve always had a little Clark Griswold in me, these lights also represent the light of Christ in the world. People, whether they are Christian or not, love Christmas lights. Lights are a gateway to invite people who may not know Christ into our homes and our church and they’re a chance for us to take something that is secular and impart Christ into that.”

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St. Marys United Methodist Church Foundation announces fall grant recipients

The Board of Directors of the St. Marys United Methodist Church Foundation, Inc. has approved grants for the Fall 2021 Grant Cycle. Grants totaling $824,433 were made to 14 organizations the week of Dec. 6, 2021. The following is a brief description of each recipient and the purpose of the grant.

Organizations Serving Southeast Georgia:

Camden Community Family Center, Inc. (www.camdenfamilycenter.org):

A $50,433 partial challenge grant to Camden Community Family Center, Inc., (CCFC) to provide general operating support. CCFC provides a safe, child-friendly environment for supervised visitation for children in foster care and other court ordered child parent visitations. CCFC works as a resource to Camden County DFCS and with families whose children are victims of domestic violence, neglect, physical abuse, and/or sexual abuse.

Coastal Coalition for Children (www.coastalcoalitionforchildren.org):

A $20,000 challenge grant to Coastal Coalition for Children for Grandparent Connection in Glynn County. Grandparent Connection began in 2005 to meet the needs of isolated grandparents raising grandchildren by providing information, referrals, group support sessions and case management. These services have been shown to improve individual sustainability in a number of ways for grandparents, relative caregivers, and the grandchildren who are being reared by them. Engagement with and support of “grandfamilies” presents a unique opportunity
to address generational poverty and to influence individual sustainability for two generations simultaneously.

**Communities in Schools of Glynn County** ([www.glynncounty.communitesinschools.org](http://www.glynncounty.communitesinschools.org)):

A $60,000 grant to Communities in Schools (CIS) of Glynn County to provide funds to support the salary of a Site Coordinator at Glynn Academy and the partial salary of a Site Coordinator at Brunswick High School. The program provides before-school academic support programs, incentives, case management, parental engagement / family support services and on-site program coordination to prevent at-risk students from dropping out of school. CIS is making a significant difference in improving the high school graduation rates in Glynn County.

**Gathering Place** ([www.TheGP.org](http://www.TheGP.org)):

A $55,000 partial challenge grant to The Gathering Place (The GP) for operational expenses, salary support to add a female Campus Ministry Associate and continue support for the current Campus Ministry Associate. The GP’s mission is “to reach students with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, equip them to be effective Christian leaders, and send them to impact their local schools, churches, and communities.” The Campus Ministry program connects Glynn County middle and high school students with positive, caring adults in order to improve academic performance, self-confidence, moral decision-making, and hope for each students’ future. Through on-campus mentoring, school assembly programs, motivational speakers, and college tours, the Campus Ministry reaches students where they are.

**Golden Isles Veterans Village Initiative, Inc.** ([www.goldenislesveteransvillage.org](http://www.goldenislesveteransvillage.org)):

A $50,000 challenge grant to Golden Isles Veterans Village Initiative, Inc. (GIVVI) to complete construction of 30 tiny homes and a community center for homeless Veterans in Brunswick. By providing the 30 tiny homes, GIVVI will not only provide them a place to reside, but also a place to enjoy camaraderie in the village community, while receiving the counseling, physical and mental support, everyday life training, and job training necessary to help them heal and become ready to reintegrate into society. This is a transitional housing community not permanent houses, to give a “HANDS UP TO THOSE WHO HAVE SERVED US.”

**Grace House of Brunswick, Inc.** ([www.gracehousebrunswick.org](http://www.gracehousebrunswick.org)):

A $35,000 challenge grant to Grace House of Brunswick, Inc. to provide general operating support for their residential treatment program in Glynn County. Grace House, located in Brunswick, Georgia, is a long-term residential recovery home for women recovering from drug and alcohol addictions. Grace House exists to provide women, regardless of their socio-economic situation, an opportunity to seek recovery from their addiction to drugs and alcohol through the teachings of Jesus Christ and his reconciling love for all.

**MAP International** ([www.map.org](http://www.map.org)):
A $20,000 grant to provide operational support for distribution of various medicines to free clinics serving Charlton and Brantley Counties. MAP International, located in Brunswick, Georgia, is a Christian, non-profit, global relief and development organization serving people living in 112 of the world’s poorest communities. Their mission is to promote the Total Health of people living in the world’s poorest communities by partnering in the provision of essential medicines, prevention and eradication of disease, and promotion of community health development. Although MAP’s focus has historically been international, they recently expanded their mission field to rural areas of the United States.

**Morningstar Children & Family Services, Inc.** ([www.morningstarcfs.org](http://www.morningstarcfs.org)):

A $125,000 grant for operational support for the Glynn County facility. Morningstar, located in Brunswick, Georgia, serves children with developmental disabilities and children who are unable to function in a foster home environment and who need the structure of an on-campus program. Morningstar provides three primary services: residential care, mental health care, and therapeutic foster care services.

**Safe Harbor Children’s Center** ([www.safeharborcenterinc.org](http://www.safeharborcenterinc.org)):

A $50,000 grant to provide operational support for the Brunswick facility. Safe Harbor is guided by their mission statement: to provide services that promote security and stability for at-risk families, children and individuals. Shelter and therapeutic services are provided to children who have been abused, abandoned, or neglected; who are homeless or have run away from home; or who are otherwise at risk or feel threatened. They provide an array of life-changing services, including residential facilities, drop-in centers, outreach programs, children’s advocacy, family preservation, and parenting education.

**Southeast Georgia CASA, action pact, Inc.** ([www.myactionpact.org](http://www.myactionpact.org)):

A $34,000 partial challenge grant to promote recruitment in Brantley and Charlton County, especially the St. George and Waynesville areas. SE GA CASA of action pact, Inc., the Court Appointed Special Advocate Program, provides community-based advocacy to make certain the needs of abused and neglected children in the court systems are met quickly.

**Organizations of the South Georgia Annual Conference of The United Methodist Church:**

**Open Door Community House** ([www.opendoorcommunityhouse.org](http://www.opendoorcommunityhouse.org)):

A $75,000 challenge grant to provide program support for the Circles in Columbus poverty reduction initiative in Columbus, Georgia. Open Door is an agency of the South Georgia Conference of the United Methodist Church. Circles in Columbus addresses the issues of poverty by establishing a community that empowers and equips families with the tools and resources families need to increase income, decrease debt, and maximize social connections that lead to a life free of poverty.
Wesley Community Centers of Savannah, Inc. (www.wesleyctrs-savh.org):

A $25,000 challenge grant to provide general operating support for the community resource center in Savannah. Wesley Community Centers serve children of all abilities as well as providing programs and services to low and moderate-income women and families throughout Savannah and the surrounding area.

Christian Organizations Working Internationally:

Partners Worldwide (www.partnersworldwide.org):

A $200,000 grant was approved to provide an additional year of funding to leverage entrepreneurs and job-creators to achieve increased sustainability and resilience for vulnerable people in Ghana, West Africa. Partners Worldwide mobilizes long-term, hands-on global relationships to form a powerful Christian network that uses business as the way to create flourishing economic environments in all parts of the world.

Additional information about the St. Marys United Methodist Church Foundation, Inc. is available at www.smumcfoundation.org or by calling 912-510-9350.

21st annual Join the Journey Confirmation Retreat set for March 4-6

“Join the Journey” Confirmation Retreat is back! The South Georgia Conference’s 21st annual retreat will be held at Epworth By The Sea March 4-6, 2022. Online registration is now open for South Georgia UMC churches through Jan. 7 when it will open up to all churches, both in and out of conference. The deadline is Feb. 18, 2022, or until the event reaches maximum capacity. Click here for more information about registration.

Tailored to 5th grade students and above, confirmands will enjoy learning about their United Methodist heritage in a high-energy, exciting atmosphere. Participants will also be exposed to the diverse leadership that makes up the South Georgia Conference as pastors, youth directors, children’s directors, and lay members share during the general sessions and workshops. Throughout the weekend, confirmands will journey through the church seasons, gaining a better understanding of their role as a United Methodist and a member of the body of Christ.

For more information, contact Suzanne Akins, Director of Camping and Retreats, at (912) 638-8626, ext.107 or suzanne@sgaumc.com.

Register today for Youth Worker Winter Retreat
Registration is now open for the South Georgia Conference's Youth Worker Winter Retreat, Jan. 20-21, 2022, at Little Ocmulgee State Park. This retreat is a time for youth workers to remember their calling, their why. The last 18 months have been the hardest times to navigate in ministry; youth ministry has changed and youth workers need the tools, the relationships and reliance on God (and God alone) to continue. This one-day retreat will give youth workers time together to worship, to reset, to learn, to encourage, and to dream, again. For more information, contact Suzanne Akins, Associate Director, Connectional Ministries at suzanne@sgaumc.com or call (912) 638-8626 ext. 107. More information / Register

Christmas greetings from Bishop Graves

In a special Advent video, Bishop Graves offers Christmas greetings to the South Georgia Conference. Watch video

Justice and Deliverance

Winter Quarter: Justice, Law, History
Unit 1: God Requires Justice

Sunday school lesson for the week of December 26, 2021
By Dr. D. Craig Rikard

Background Scripture: Nahum 1
Key Scripture (NIV): “The Lord is a jealous and avenging God; the Lord takes vengeance and is filled with wrath. The Lord takes vengeance on his foes and vents his wrath against his enemies.” Nahum 1:2

Lesson Aims

1. To better understand progressive revelation as we read the prophet Nahum.
2. To better grasp the beauty and wonder of God’s patient love.
3. To better understand the dynamic of judgement as it relates to grace.
4. To better grasp the hope that always emerges from adversity.

Introduction

I confess struggling with this particular text on the day after Christmas. After basking in the sweet glow of the nativity it seems a sudden sharp turn to head for Nahum. As a matter of fact, on the surface it appears to be a turn of 180 degrees. From the nativity to Nahum we move from birth to violence. We move from sacrificial love to judgement. And, we move from comfort to challenge.
Nevertheless, those who plan our lessons want to ensure we do not cherry-pick the texts we study. We should read all of Scripture and seek to understand every facet of the sacred writ. I prayed to understand some connection between last week’s messianic text from Isaiah to the prophetic text of Nahum years earlier. One expression of truth was evident. Sin did not “take a break” during the Christmas nativity. Injustice, neglect, apathy and hate continued to exist. The beauty of the Gospel is the reality that beneath this dark current of violence and oppression is a “river of living water.” Behind and beneath the scenes of suffering and adversity is the movement of God’s redeeming love in the world. We often overlook the fact that the story of Jesus’ birth contains the story of Herod ordering the deaths of innocent children two years of age and under. There exists deceit in the story as Herod seeks to trick the Magi into helping him find and destroy the King of the Jews. Let us not forget what Joseph and Mary must have experienced from their strict Jewish culture. She was with child before the marriage was consummated. The finger pointing had to bother young Mary. The social scorn would not have been intended for Joseph, however, from what we read of his character, it would have bothered him. Without doubt he cared for Mary. Joseph considered putting her away but was warned against doing so. The trek from Nazareth to Bethlehem was anything but easy. Imagine being nine months pregnant and having to journey by walking, or riding a burro, for at least five days. After arriving late in Bethlehem they must settle for shelter among the animals in what was most likely a grotto. The beauty of Christmas was occurring beneath the backdrop of difficulty.

Even the story of the Magi is revealing. The Magi live in the East. The Star of Bethlehem rose in the western sky. They were to travel westward to find the Messiah. Most religions ascribe great religious significance to the East. The sun rises in the east, driving away the darkness. The Eastern Gate in Jerusalem has great messianic significance. Since traveling toward the east was understood as a spiritual journey toward light, traveling west was thus a journey into the darkness. Messiah would be found by the Magi in the west, the direction of sunset and darkness. Thus, God is present in both joy and suffering.

Nahum is a prophetic book about the darkness in which Israel lived. Isaiah 9 called to people groping in “deep darkness.” Nahum describes that darkness. Israel understood darkness as it related to their social and national suffering. When another national power suppressed and oppressed God’s people it was “darkness.” For the disciples of Jesus, darkness was initially the presence of Rome in their promised land. They desired a messiah who would overthrow Rome and all enemies. Of course, Jesus reminded and taught them repetitively that his kingdom “was not of this world.” Read John 17. Prior to Rome, the dark power was Babylon. Prior to Babylon the dark power was Assyria. Nineveh was the most violent, sinful city in Assyria. Nahum is declaring God’s judgement on Nineveh.

The book of Nahum therefore can serve as a resource toward understanding the difficult history of God’s people as the northern and southern kingdoms fell. The Israelites truly believed they lived in darkness as long as another power ruled them. Accompanying the foreign powers was
the worship of pagan gods, and at times restrictions against worshiping the God of Israel. Thus, they were indeed groping, waiting for their Messiah.

As we consider our current culture and world, how would you describe the “days in which we live” in relation to God’s covenant fully expressed in Christ? Are we a people groping in the darkness? Do you believe there is an urgent desire for God’s light and love in Christ to break into our current circumstances? If so, how do we as individuals participate in that intervention? How do we as the church participate?

Background

Solomon reigned over a united Israel. He greatly expanded their boundaries as the nation became a superpower in the near-eastern world. He had fulfilled his father’s dream of building the temple. The Jewish people began to complain in the latter years of Solomon’s reign. His expansions resulted in higher taxes which began to feel oppressive to the masses. Furthermore, the temple stood in Jerusalem in the far southern area of the kingdom. Those in the far north felt much of their offerings were supporting an area of Israel with which they felt disconnected. When the kingdoms divided, the northern kingdom said to the people of Judah, “Take care of your own house David!” which meant, “The temple is in your land, you pay for it!”

After Solomon’s death, his sons battled for the throne. Eventually, Israel divided into the northern kingdom of Samaria and the southern kingdom of Judah. The north worshiped God in Shiloh while those in the south worshiped in the Jerusalem temple. The newly divided kingdom could not withstand the mighty empires arising around them. One of those empires was Assyria, with its capital city of Nineveh. Assyria conquered the northern kingdom of Israel. Many of the Jewish people were driven into exile. The fall of the north in 722 B.C. inflicted a physical, social and spiritual blow to God’s people. Over the next century Assyria fell to the powerful emerging empire of Babylon. The only remnant of the once flourishing nation of Israel was tiny Judah. Judah was no match for Nebuchadnezzar and his Babylonian army. The small nation fell in 586/87 B.C. Their beautiful temple, the most glorious and unifying structure of their faith, was razed and burned to the ground.

Questions began to arise regarding who was to blame. Blame is always the favored choice of behavior when adversity arises. Among those questions was the inquiry, “Where is God?” Israel possessed a faith rife with fatalism. That is, God made everything happen. If it rained, God made it rain. If drought occurred, God created the drought. If the nation conquered an enemy, God helped them. If they lost, God wanted them to lose. Almost always, Israel perceived loss and hardship as God’s judgement against them for their failure to remain faithful to covenant. The Retribution Principle proved a major dynamic in the Israeliite understanding of God. The principle states that if one is faithful to God and covenant, they will be blessed. If one disobeys and breaks covenant, they will be cursed. Therefore, suffering was understood as the result of one’s sin, or a nation’s sin.
When the northern kingdom of Samaria fell to Assyria, God’s people believed their suffering to be the consequence of their disobedience. In reality, Israel was indeed guilty of such sin. Idolatry remained a temptation for Israel since their beginning. Remember, while Moses was receiving the Ten Commandments Israel was creating a golden calf! The sin of idolatry flourished when covenant was neglected and worship of God diminished. King Ahab and his queen Jezebel serve as prime examples of the northern kingdom’s sinful existence and the nation’s destructive paganism.

The prophets called upon Israel to recognize such sin prior to the consequence. Most of the prophets were ignored. In later years, some prophets were even punished for daring to claim Israel would pay for its sins. Jeremiah was placed under house arrest for proclaiming the fall of the southern kingdom to Babylon. Again, prophets were cultural observers. They understood the culture’s relationship with God through the eyes of covenant. The Mosaic Law was the plumb line against which Israel was measured. Were the people obedient to covenant and faithful to God? If not, the prophet called the people to repent. Since the call of the prophets went unheeded, Israel suffered and eventually fell.

The prophet Habakkuk added another question to the chaos. Why did God allow a wicked people to punish God’s people, even if Israel was sinful? Eventually, Habakkuk grows to understand that the oppressive conquering nation would suffer as well. They were subject to God’s judgement, even more so than Israel. They were simply instruments God used to punish Israel for their sins.

As people who have experienced Jesus as light and truth, we possess a greater understanding of God’s grace. We understand the Bible to be “progressive revelation.” That is, God reveals the divine nature and intent to people at a particular time in history, in a manner they can understand. For example, in the earliest years of Israel’s life, sacrificing bulls and sheep was perceived and believed to be the means to atone for one’s personal sin and the corporate sin of Israel. However, later the prophet proclaims that God is sick and tired of such sacrifices for they do not emerge from a loving, obedient heart. Read Isaiah 1:11. Had God changed? Of course not! However, people who have experienced years of God’s grace should better understand the meaning beneath such sacrifices.

Thus, we read the book of Nahum from “this side of Jesus.” The book was written prior to Jesus, yet we read it as people enlightened and illuminated by Jesus. Consequently, let us seek to understand what this prophetic book has to say to us, a Christmas and Easter people.

The Text

God’s Patience

Nahum lets us know from the onset that judgement is not the ultimate desire of God. God in no way delights in judgement. Though the judgement against Nineveh is harsh, we are reminded
that it was not the immediate action of God. Prior to judgement is always God’s longsuffering. I especially like the term “longsuffering.” It reminds us that God is not “disconnected” from the pain of his people. God suffers with us. In a previous lesson I offered a quote from a film entitled “The Centurion.” A Roman general says to a subordinate concerning the role of the gods in battle, “It’s the soldiers who do the fighting, and soldiers who do the dying, and the gods never get their feet wet.” In this one memorable line we can hear the distinction between the Judeo-Christian God and the pagan gods in biblical history. It was difficult for pagan nations to believe a god would dare get too involved in human affairs. According to William Barclay, the Greeks understood the primary characteristic of god or gods was what he called apatheia. The term means the “total inability to feel any emotion whatsoever.” However, the revelation we receive in Judeo-Christian faith stands in stark contrast. God chooses to feel our pain. Perhaps the shortest verse in the Bible is also one of the most revealing: “Jesus wept.” At the tomb of Lazarus, the Son of God weeps uncontrollably.

What did Jesus say and does that reveals God’s choice to identify with our suffering? Can you identify events from the Gospels that reveal God’s patience and longsuffering? Where do you recognize God’s patience in your own life and faith? What should be our response to God’s choice to identify with his people? What should be our response to God’s patience toward us as we interact with others? Are we quick to judge and slow to love?

Consequently, anger is not the first emotion expressed by God toward us. In contrast, it is patience, understanding, and love. Judgement has always been the last resort. The prophets cried aloud for long periods of time for repentance. Prophets reminded God’s people of God’s goodness toward them and warned of the severe consequences of ignoring that goodness while choosing rebellion. Prior to describing the judgement of God toward Nineveh God first called the city and nation to repentance. The story of Jonah is important in our study. Jonah the prophet was called to travel to Nineveh. There he was to preach the coming judgement of God upon them for their violent paganism. Jonah had no desire to visit the pagan city. He must have thought, “Other prophets speak to Israel, yet I am called to go to a pagan nation!” His reluctance is understandable in that Nineveh was infamous for its violence. Jonah had no guarantee that he would not personally suffer as a result of his preaching. Of course, in the book of Jonah we learn that Jonah’s prophetic word had a transforming effect upon Nineveh and the people repented. Undoubtedly, their change of heart was short-lived. By the time Nahum appears in Nineveh’s history the city has reverted to its former violence. It is believed Nahum arrives some 150 years after Jonah. In chapter 4 of Jonah the prophet too recognizes God’s patience. In Jonah 4:2 the prophet states: “I knew that you are a gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God who relents from sending calamity.” Again, God’s love called first, repeatedly, prior to the Lord’s judgement.

What does the life of Jesus teach us about God’s patience? What does the Apostle Paul have to say about the virtue of patience? Why do you think we so quickly blame God for our adversity, or interpret adversity as God’s judgement? Why do we so easily forget God’s patience?
God’s Judgement

Until the early 600s B.C., Nineveh was the largest city in the known world. Even sources outside the Bible speak of Nineveh’s violence. The entire world was violent in those ancient years. Warfare was common. Most wars were fought hand to hand, face to face. Sadly, violence was becoming almost an acceptable way of life. When we are exposed to a reality over a long period of time, that reality will morph into the norm. I remember watching Hitchcock’s “Psycho” as a young boy. It was considered a film of horrific terror. In light of today’s horror genre, that movie appears mild. Our culture has become desensitized to such horror, and it requires even more horrific expressions of terror to frighten us. This should be an unsettling truth. God help us when we become insensitive to suffering! Violence was so common in the Old Testament era that many were losing the ability to value human life or to identify with the suffering of others. This was the great wickedness of Nineveh. Sadly, their pagan gods were created and embraced to endorse such violence. Again, we can understand Jonah’s reluctance to visit the city and preach of Israel’s God.

Can you identify areas of life in which we have become desensitized to wrong? To suffering? What can we do to avoid such desensitization? How can the church help us avoid becoming too accustomed to that which is destructive?

Many struggle with the violence ascribed to God in the Old Testament. However, we must examine that violence in historical context. In relation to the violence in the world about them, Israel’s God was very different. God cared about his people. God was slow to anger and abounded in love. Above all, God offered forgiveness and a new beginning.

Still, any violence and judgement seem to stand in contrast to the life and teaching of Jesus. However, remember the Old Testament writers understood the world in a fatalistic manner. Violence was often ascribed and attributed to God when it was actually the behavior of humankind. Such violence was attributed to God when the violence helped God’s people. In other words, since Nineveh was an evil city, the violence that fell upon it was perceived as God’s judgement for that violence.

This pattern of attributing violence to God reveals some important dynamics. First, it shows the Jewish people did not understand God as having nothing to do with this world. God was a part of every facet of human life. Though they often struggled to understand the difference between the actions of God and the actions of humanity, still, God was real, and important to life.

We must also remember our belief in “progressive revelation.” People could see and experience God’s truth as they were able in the world in which they lived. The important dynamic for us to understand is that God is involved in human affairs, and we should seek to understand how God works in human life. Again, we do so on this side of Jesus. This does not mean the Old Testament is unimportant. We understand Jesus as we do because of what God revealed prior to his coming. Paul reminded us in Galatians that in the “fullness of time” God sent forth his Son.
The timing was the right time, the perfect time. There had been a succession of previous revelations of God’s light, love, truth, and promise.

Still, how are we to deal with the issue of judgement in the Old Testament? God created the world in such a manner that what is sown is reaped. If we violate God’s created order there are consequences. If we abuse the world, we will suffer for our actions. Did God cause the exact form of suffering we experience? No. If society poisons the water with toxins, leading to cancers, God did not give us the cancer. Yet, God did create nature in a manner that such a consequence can occur. God’s judgement is present in natural and moral law. A person who lives a violent life will eventually suffer violence. In contrast, a kind, compassionate life will experience love and kindness. However, we live in the world together. The violence of another can invade and interrupt our life of kindness. Likewise, our life of kindness and love can interrupt the violent life of another. It is this interconnectedness of all living things that should drive us to our knees in prayer prior to making a judgement. God’s justice in the world can prove more complex than we understand. We seek prayerfully to understand all that is possible while recognizing there will always exist questions we cannot answer. It is for this reason that we are called to pray, study, and walk with the Lord.

Judgement is to be left to God. When calamity comes upon a people it can be the result of consequences of their own destructive behavior or it can be the result of human interaction. Again, good people can suffer from the bad choices of others, and vice versa. It is for this reason that we leave all judgement to God. We also recognize that there are definite consequences for destructive dehumanizing behavior. God knows what we do not. However, we are called to remember that God is in life and God’s Kingdom is present and moving in the world. We are to live in the love of Christ in a manner that enriches our own life, and invades and interrupts the lives of others.

Babylon, another pagan nation, conquered Assyria and its capital Nineveh. Nahum understands and proclaims this defeat as an expression of God’s judgement in the world. He recognizes that injustice and violence cannot avoid or sidestep judgement. Thus, Nahum proclaims: “the Lord will not leave the guilty unpunished.”

In discussing the issue of judgement it must be understood that this endeavor is complex. In the Old Testament it is as though the prophets see rays of light breaking through the dark clouds, and yet not yet seeing with perfect clarity. They see what they understand and are inspired by God to express what they see. How do we seek to reconcile God’s judgement in the book of Nahum with the teaching and life of Jesus? How are we to understand the Old Testament in light of the revelation of Jesus? How do you understand “progressive revelation” and how does this understanding affect your own study? Where do you recognize God’s judgement in creation? What do you think is meant by “reaping what we sow?” What do you believe is the danger of seeing all consequences as God’s judgement? What do you believe is the danger of refusing to
see consequences as judgement? How does the issue of behavior and consequence effect the way you live your life? How does Jesus inform your understanding of this question?

God’s Redemption

Our text ends with an expression and image of hope. Nahum proclaims that Judah will once again worship the Lord! Whereas Jonah had been terrified to preach in Nineveh, God’s prophets will be welcomed, for they bring good news! As Assyria and the violent city of Nineveh are destroyed, a new world will emerge! It will be a world of peace!

The beauty of Old Testament prophetic literature is that the prophet never leaves us hopeless. Though there exists serious consequences for humanity when we act and live in a dehumanizing and destructive manner, we can change. We can repent and alter our manner of life. The promise of forgiveness and a new beginning are constant in the writings of the prophets. Nahum could be understood as a dark, judgmental book that celebrates the destruction of a nation. However, Nahum, like all prophets of God, understood this judgement as a prelude to a new reality of truth and liberation. Jesus Christ would become the embodiment of God’s continual call to new life. He would become the embodiment of a new beginning. He would be the embodiment of a new reality that is beyond our imagination.

In the Advent texts we revisited the words “In those days.” We revisited Isaiah’s description of those days as people groping in deep darkness. Nahum expresses the pain and fear of those days. However, Advent ends with the arrival of Messiah! Light has come! A new day has come! Nahum recognized God’s judgement upon Nineveh, but in the end glimpsed that new day.

When you read the promises of hope and redemption in the prophets, do you see them in Christ? In what manner? Since the prophets follow God’s judgement with the hope of a new day, what does this say about our struggles with adversity? What is the great hope you can take from Nahum?

Prayer

Almighty God, though the Light has come in Christ, we still recognize the remnant of darkness. By your Spirit, empower us to feel no romance with that darkness. Teach us to seek your redemption in moments of adversity. Reveal to us our better selves as we learn from the consequences of our actions and perceptions. Empower us to be the feet of those proclaiming good news in a broken world. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Dr. D. Craig Rikard is a South Georgia pastor. Email him at craigrikard169@yahoo.com.

Justice, Vengeance, and Mercy
Winter Quarter: Justice, Law, History  
Unit 2: The Source of Justice  

Sunday school lesson for the week of January 2, 2022  
By Dr. D. Craig Rikard  

Background Scripture: Genesis 4  
Key Scripture (NIV): “The Lord said, “What have you done? Listen! Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground.” Genesis 4:10  

Lesson Aims  
5. To better grasp the breadth and depth of the human family.  
6. To better recognize the walls that divide and the consequences of hostility.  
7. To better understand the responsibility we have toward others and God.  
8. To better grasp the wonder of mercy and forgiveness.  

Introduction  
In a theological manner, the entire Bible is anchored in Genesis. This ancient book presents us with the one thread that runs through every book: Covenant. God initiated a relationship with us through covenant, and that covenant was fully expressed in Jesus Christ. Genesis offers us a repetitive pattern. The pattern is presented in this manner: A. God creates and blesses humankind. B. Humankind abuses and violates that creation and blessing. C. God restores humankind and creates a new beginning.  
The creation hymns that open Genesis are placed there to remind the reader that the one who has established covenant with us, the one who forgives and renews, is the very same creator of all. The repetitive pattern cited above reaches a climatic point in Genesis as a covenant is initiated and established by God with Abraham and Sarah. The Lord has remained true to this covenant, even thou we have often treated the relationship with neglect, apathy, and even abuse.  

This one thread of covenant not only runs throughout Scripture, it is also enlarged and enriched. For example, as Abraham and Sarah and their descendants are called to be God’s people, how are they to live out that calling? Thus, the Covenant is fleshed out in the Mosaic Law. Through the Law we are to understand how we live as God’s people before God and with one another. In the historical books we read of how Israel attempted to live in this Covenant in relationship with the rest of the world. In the prophets Israel is “measured” as to whether or not they are living as a covenant people or a rebellious people. Jeremiah is allowed to gaze into the future and see a coming day in which Covenant Law will no longer exist just on tablets or parchments, but also in the heart. It will be “written upon the heart.” Read Jer. 31:33. Christ then embodies this Covenant fully. He is the personification of the one law that fulfills every law: the Shema. The Shema is found in Deut. 6:4, and Jesus declares it the “law of laws.” It reads, “Thou shalt love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.” Jesus adds, “And thy neighbor as thyself.” The Pauline letters and other writings in the New Testament reveal how this
Covenant of the Shema is being embodied by the Church in the world. Thus, again, we can say every Biblical book is anchored in Genesis.

Our lesson today reveals how humankind’s earliest relationship with God was observed and lived. The story of Cain and Abel precede the covenant with Abraham and Sarah, and thus precedes Mosaic Law. This does not mean that our earliest ancestors were lawless. They possessed an “inner” understanding of right and wrong through God’s voice in their conscience. Someone once said our conscience is nothing more than the voices of others in our heads. They were speaking more truthfully than they imagined. As Christians, we believe the conscience is the instrument through which God speaks regarding our choices and actions. Cain and Abel knew murder to be wrong prior to the commandment in the Decalogue, “Thou shalt not kill.”

Covenant has everything to do with relationships. It begins with our relationship with God and is lived through our relationships with others. Today’s text reveals the relationship between two brothers and God. This old story asks some stirring questions as we live in the new covenant of Jesus.

This lesson is best understood as we examine its three questions. There are as follows:

1. Where is your brother?
2. Am I my brother’s keeper?
3. What have you done?

Living in covenant possess both a vertical and horizontal dynamic. We live in relationship with God (the vertical) and in relationship with one another (the horizontal). However, there exists a third dynamic in covenant living. It involves the relationship we have with ourselves, with our own conscience.

**Question 1: Where is your brother?**

This question was asked of Cain who had murdered his brother. It is rhetorical in that God knows where Abel is, and so does Cain. However, the question itself allows us to consider its implications on a broader and even deeper level.

We were created into, and for community. God’s gift of Eve to Adam and vice versa was not to solely imply the marital relationship. Adam, Eve and their descendants would create the human family in Scripture. This is the family that emerges in Genesis and is the family implied in God’s covenant with Abraham and Sarah.

We live in a large, interconnected community! From the outset, we are to understand that all of us are bound together. Our lives have been intertwined from the beginning. One of the great sins and failures of humanity has been our desire to diminish that community with the pronouns “us” and “them.” Certainly, there are cultural and ethnic distinctions in God’s creation. However, these distinctions were never intended to divide. They exist to enrich God’s creation. Nature is sated with so many different varieties of flowers. Each has its unique shape, color, aroma and
characteristics. Together they create the beautiful panorama of color that touches our lives. Humanity is far more beautiful in togetherness and harmony than living in individual distinction. I once went on a men’s camping trip with five men. Two of them were strangers to me. I mentioned in the coming weeks I was conducting a mission on the Yucatan Peninsula. Immediately both bristled and asked, “Why do you want to help them?” “There are plenty of people right where you live.” To some degree, what they said was true. There were people in need all about me. However, the more time I spent with them led me to realize if I had said, “I am conducting a mission in this or that part of town” their response would have been the same. “Why do you want to help them?” If left to their desires I should only help those they thought worthy of helping, which was a very small group. These two men are not that different from many. Perhaps their perception of the “worthy” is far smaller than most. However, most of us have lines we draw when it comes to our human interactions. Eventually, all of us at some point or another are tempted to use the pronouns “us” and “them.”

Genesis calls us to remember we were created into and for the human community. Therefore, when asked the question, “Where is your brother?” I need to prayerfully consider how I truly answer that question. My words might say, “All are my family.” However, the question asks us to interrogate ourselves with another question, “Who do we really perceive as our family regarding the way we live and love?”

Human sin has isolated us from one another. Sin has created the lines, boundaries and walls that divide. Redemption involves the eradication of those boundaries. In Ephesians 2:14-16, Paul understands Jesus as breaking down the dividing wall of hostility. The wall that Paul addresses is the wall of legalism that impedes grace. However, it is evident in Christian teaching that all walls of hostility were confronted in Jesus. Through Christ they are to be abolished. Any wall that diminishes respect, appreciation, honor, and love is a wall of hostility.

Of course, not every boundary is evil or sinful. Some distinctions are made that draw attention to distinctive differences that enrich life. Yet, when those walls allow us to consider ourselves worthier, more important, and more loved than another, they are hostile. Christ’s life recognizes no such boundaries. There were no boundaries between male and female, Jew or Greek. Notice, all are present at the foot of the cross. There are women and men, immediate family and strangers, Jews and Romans, dignitaries and peasants, etc. Jesus’ sacrificial love represents the “equal ground” upon which the human family stands. In Galatians 3:28, Paul, the once proud Jewish Pharisee, declares the liberating power of Jesus by writing, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Consequently, we return to the question God asked of Cain, “Where is your brother?” Today we also ask, “Who is your brother, and sister?” Prior to knowing where they are I must first know who they are.
When is the last time you have personally asked, “Who is my brother and sister?” How does your faith in Christ inform your answer? Can you articulate some ways you can enlarge your interaction and appreciation of community? Can you articulate some ways and ministries that will help your church do the same? Are you currently engaged in studies or ministries that broaden your understanding of others as family? Can you identify the walls you witness in your personal life that destructively separate? Can you identify those walls in the world? Can you identify the consequences in today’s world of existing disconnects in God’s family? Of disconnects in your own life? What do you believe are the solutions to these disconnects?

Question 2: Am I my brother’s keeper?

Cain was asking what to him seemed a legitimate question. What is my responsibility to and for my brother? Am I to know the comings and goings in his life? Of course, for Cain, this was a question of deflection. He is guilty of murder. He has murdered his own brother and now stands before God. When studying the therapeutic process, we used to refer these types of questions as “head tripping.” That is, it is a question of deflection, a question tossed into the air without intent to answer. Pilate did the same while interrogating Jesus. He asked, “What is truth?” He wasn’t looking for an answer, he was seeking a way out. Cain knows full well that he is guilty, and his brother’s death is on his hands. He just doesn’t want to answer for it or deal with the reality of what he has done.

Real, and often deep, pain in inflicted when two members of God’s family injure each other. Thankfully, most of us have the opportunity to ask forgiveness, or to “make things right.” However, Cain cannot undo what he has done. He is totally dependent upon God’s mercy. It serves us well to consider that though we can receive forgiveness, we cannot undo what has been done. Even when the harmed parties are forgiving, a wrong has been committed and it carries consequences. For example, I can hurt a member of my church through gossip. I can truly be repentant and ask forgiveness. The person may forgive me. However, the trust level once enjoyed has now become damaged. That is the consequence of my behavior, even if I’ve been forgiven. Cain may receive mercy from the Lord, however, that will not bring Abel back from death.

This question prompts us to consider the serious nature of our sins against one another. Too often, the pain we cause others is taken too lightly. We use phrases like, “They will get over it.” “Over time it will be forgotten.” Or, “I can ask forgiveness.” Receiving mercy helps us move beyond the guilt we feel and move forward in life. However, we must ask, “What about the harm caused?”

“Am I my brother’s keeper?” Cain asked God. The answer is an emphatic “Yes!” We are responsible for those God has placed in our path. It is important to realize that this responsibility is not intended to create a burden. The privilege of caring for another is a blessing. Caring for one another is one of the greatest strengths we have as the community of faith. Not only do we
have the privilege of loving another enough to care about their welfare, it also means others care about us in like manner. Paul described the Body of Christ, the Church, as those who rejoice together, and weep together. Read Romans 12:15.

As a clergyperson, I have witnessed the wonder and power of God’s people being responsible for one another. When we lose a loved one God’s people surround us with love and care. We do not walk through that pain alone. I have also witnessed such care on a level that has amazed me. The world rarely cares for another like the church. I knew a well-respected individual who was a vital member of the church. He met with other men every week for a Bible study. He succumbed to temptation. The guilt was overwhelming, and therefore, he stopped attending the study. He felt too unworthy. However, the Bible study group knocked on his door one morning. He asked, “Why are you here?” They answered, “To study God’s word with you brother.” They were not going to allow a member of their family to fall away and suffer in endless guilt. They brought him back into the family. If we asked them, “Are you your brother’s keeper?” they would have strongly answered, “Yes!”

Sadly, Cain knew he was his brother’s keeper and he had failed Abel. He understood there was little he could do but try to disconnect himself from his actions. Such attempts are never successful. Cain would walk in guilt all the days of his life. Though he could not undo his transgression, he could throw himself upon God’s mercy. Imagine Cain’s life if God had no mercy. Without God’s mercy Cain would have attempted to live with his sin, unsuccessfully. He could try to avoid answering to God, yet he would not have been able to avoid his own conscience.

Our text reveals that though God does not destroy Cain, the consequences remain. Cain is told his life will be difficult in the future. He will toil and often fail to receive what he would like. He will feel like a “restless wanderer on the earth.” This phrase perhaps best captures what we can feel after deeply hurting a member of God’s family. A restlessness will exist because our conscience remembers our actions. There will be moments in life that will remind us of our sin and thus rob us of joy.

Consequently, though God offers forgiveness readily in Christ, our actions have created a course of action that we are powerless to undo. However, we can create a new course of action. We can learn from the pain we’ve inflicted and minister to others with passionate determination. We can become intentional concerning being our brother’s and sister’s keeper. We can ensure that when we are asked “Where is your brother?” we will know exactly where they are in life. We can know the joy of being one of their “keepers.”

*Can you recall a time when you have, through neglect or action, deeply hurt another? How did you feel afterward? Did you try to avoid the pain, or face it? Can you remember things said or thought that temporarily deflected the pain? What was the result of such deflection? Can you articulate the consequences of which you are aware after hurting another? What can be your*
response after failing to care for one or more God has placed in your path? What have you learned from past experiences of guilt and violation of conscience? How has God redeemed such moments in your life, allowing you to become your better self?

**Question 3: What have you done?**

On the surface it appears this question adds insult to injury. However, this is a teaching question. Such moments can either riddle us with guilt and shame, rendering us lifeless in our service to God and others, or educate and inspire us. These moments can teach us the value of another. Often, after hurting another, we grow to understand their feelings and pain. We feel sorrow for what they feel and experience. This moment can awaken new compassion in the soul. Compassion is often born in the soul when we are awakened to the pain of another, even if we caused it. What have I done? I have hurt another! What have I learned? I never want to hurt another!

Few dealt with the above question any more than the Apostle Paul. He had been a participant in the persecution of Christians. He had even held the cloaks of others so they could hurl the stones at Stephen with greater force, ending his life. It is obvious from reading the book of Acts that his moment with Stephen greatly bothered Paul. One of the reasons Jesus confronts Paul immediately afterward on the Damascus Road is because Paul’s heart is broken and fertile. He is ready to deal with the question, “What have you done?” Paul could not bring Stephen back to life or undo the persecutions he ordered. He doesn’t forget them. He mentions them in Philippians 3, calling himself most unworthy to be an apostle. Paul understands consequence. However, he is a new man. Dealing with the question, “What have you done?” has given Paul a desire to love and redeem. Once he hunted Christians to persecute them, now he hunts men and women to win them to Christ. Though he cannot undo his past, he has learned from it. What he has learned has empowered him to become the Paul we meet in the New Testament.

“Cain, what have you done?” Cain cannot escape the question. His feeble attempt to deflect the question is of no value. The consequences of his behavior will continue. However, God’s mercy ensures his life will continue to have value and meaning. A mark of protection is placed upon Cain, giving him a degree of serenity and hope that he will not suffer the same fate and his brother. In the Old Testament world, being given the opportunity to live was a gift. Remember, this was “an eye for an eye” world. Cain at least knows that God has not forsaken him. Cain went into the land of Nod and married. In the early Old Testament world, that was a great gift.

*How often do we stop and prayerfully consider our actions? How often do we consider, not just what we have done in service to God, but what we have failed to do? What value do you see in dealing with the question, “What have you done?” Can you recall a time in which pain you caused another birthed a great compassion within you? Can you recall developing a new determination to love and care after hurting another? How has your prayer life enriched such self-examination?*
Prayer

Almighty God, thank you for the beauty of creation. Thank you for every man, woman, and child. Thank you for the opportunity to love and be loved. Teach me wisdom that I might cause no harm. Teach me wisdom that I might create good. Forgive me when I fail another. Forgive me for failing to be true to your love in Christ. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Dr. D. Craig Rikard is a South Georgia pastor. Email him at craigrikard169@yahoo.com.

A sufficient Christmas

PATHWAY TO HIS PRESENCE

B.J. FUNK

Before my mother-in-law left for heaven, she was trapped in her limited body by a debilitating stroke. For four-and-a-half years, she lay motionless in the bed, unable to speak or communicate.

Christmas came. Roy and I traveled from sunny South Georgia to the snow laden streets of Burlington, Michigan, our first time to see his mother after her stroke. Mr. Funk greeted us with a huge hug before we walked into the living room of the old farmhouse, the dark walls mirroring the wood stove’s orange glow. This living room always held family memories, but on this night, it held medicinal memories. Rubbing alcohol, herbal supplements, vapor rub and others. It had been transformed into a hospital room where Roy’s mother lay. Low lights and complete silence called us to want to turn the darkness to light. But, how? It seemed impossible How are you? sounded cruel. Merry Christmas sounded inappropriate.

As we walked to her bedside, her limited eye contact was startling as was her inability to welcome us. We weren’t prepared for a silent Eleanor Funk. Nor that her left arm would not reach up to welcome us as she lay under the covers. It seemed we had nothing to give her but our stares of unbelief and grief. We felt helpless and overwhelmed.

The next morning, Roy and his dad went outside to repair some farm equipment. I pulled up a chair by my mother-in-law’s left side, gently stroking her soft face. Suddenly, as if guided by an unseen hand, I opened my Bible and began reading the Christmas story from the book of Luke. Likely, my words would fall on unreceptive ears. Even as powerful as these words would be, my heart just wasn’t in it.

“In that region there were shepherds living in the field keeping watch over their flocks by night.” Luke 2:8
Eleanor moved her head toward mine. *Wait a minute! Eleanor moved her head! She looked straight at me!* I continued reading.

“But the angel said unto them, ‘Do not be afraid. I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people. To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord.’” Luke 2:11

Eleanor locked eyes with me. *Wait a minute! Eleanor locked eyes with me!* Her stare never wavered as I continued reading through verse 40, my head bobbing up and down from her eyes to the Bible and back again.

“The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom, and the favor of God was upon Him.” Luke 2:40.

I could not hold back the tears. Suddenly, the beauty of the Christmas story fell all over me, and it was as if I were hearing this Scripture for the first time. I drank in the truth that God loved me enough to send a Savior.

She still watched as I grabbed a tissue. We were now sitting – not in a room of medicinal odors – but in the very presence of God. Eleanor and I had suddenly stepped off of earth and onto Holy Ground.

Then, the real miracle happened.

I heard the sheet rustling as Eleanor slowly moved her left arm out from the covers and reached for my hand. We sat there, caught in a divine moment. Our eyes were locked and our hands warmed in the other’s embrace. I didn’t say anything. She couldn’t say anything.

It was the most beautiful conversation I ever had with my mother-in-law.

Every day we were there, I read the Bible to her.

Other family members took their turn. For those of us gathered around her bedside, we learned anew the true meaning of Christmas. It was not in the Christmas tree. There wasn’t one. Nor in cookies. There weren’t any. Nor in presents or lights.

The essence of Christmas, however, shone around her bedside, its brilliance warming our hearts and causing us to reevaluate, even to rededicate, our lives in those short hours with Eleanor. Christmas was everything it needed to be. Jesus was everything He needed to be. He was and is all the world to mankind.

As He was to Eleanor. As He is to you. As He is to me.

*Jesus is all the world to me,*

*My life, my joy, my all;*
He is my strength from day to day,  
*Without Him I would fall.* (Will Thompson)

It was a sufficient Christmas indeed!

In fact, more than sufficient.

*The Rev. B.J. Funk is associate pastor of Central UMC in Fitzgerald. Email her at bifunk@bellsouth.net.*

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**What about the camels?**

**WHAT’S OLD IS NEW AGAIN**  
**ANNE PACKARD**

*And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.* (Luke 2:8-11)

Sometimes, without any warning, God drops a surprise in your lap which will bring “good tidings of great joy” but He doesn’t seem to check with you first. What if you’re really busy or there isn’t enough room? What if it’s just not a convenient time for “good tidings of great joy?”

What’s Old Is New Again!

What do you do when a 13-foot camel is dropped in your proverbial lap? Recently, a Methodist artist living in north Georgia contacted the Moore Methodist Museum asking to donate her life-sized, papier mâché nativity. She had initially created it for her church’s Christmas parade and had continued to add pieces to the collection throughout the years. The exhibit, entitled “O Holy Night,” had been displayed in north Georgia several times and is currently on display at their local cultural arts center. However, she was ready to give the nativity to a worthwhile ministry and was interested in the Moore Methodist Museum.

My first response was to absolutely accept this donation. The exhibit will be amazing and people will love it. I could visualize all of the good press and almost hear the accolades. The next step, however, brought me back to reality. Just where would we put a 13-foot camel? After measuring our ceiling heights, I can accurately say that they range from 8.5 feet to 9.5 feet, but they are nowhere near tall enough for “O Holy Night.” This fact narrowed down the location of the new collection to the Rotunda, but, if I remember correctly, we already have a rather tall display in that room, namely the chocolate statue of John Wesley. He simply cannot be moved.
The next decision to be made involved transporting these rather large pieces from north Georgia to St. Simons Island where they would now reside. This, we thought, could be done easily by hiring a moving company to bring them south but, after getting estimates, the next best idea was to have Cindy and me drive rented U-Haul trucks full of papier mâché through Atlanta after Christmas but before New Year’s Day. Now, that’s an image that will be hard to forget.

Half of the people we’ve polled regarding “O Holy Night” have stated that it is just too much: too big, too many pieces, too much time, too much effort, not enough Methodism. These sentiments are all quite understandable and reasonable. The other half we’ve polled have said, yes, it’s too much, but how often is a life-sized, papier mâché nativity given freely with faith, hope, and love? Is this a blessing from God which is worth the time, effort, and energy?

This leads me back beautifully to the season of Advent, a time to prepare. Prepare for good tidings of great joy. Prepare for the Messiah, the Savior, Emmanuel. It must have been a bit inconvenient for the shepherds to leave their flocks in the field to find a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and laying in a manger. The kings who traveled so far with only a star to guide them may have thought twice about whether it was worth the trip. Oh, was it worth the trip!

I cannot yet tell you if a life-sized, papier mâché nativity will reside in the Moore Methodist Museum, but I pray that God brings you “good tidings of great joy” this holiday season and that you have enough time, enough room, and enough sense to accept them.

Merry Christmas.

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 – December 2021

12/01 – Virginia Connelly: 11130 Springfield Pike, Apt. B 131; Cincinnati, OH 45246
12/06 – Charles Adams: 301 Island St.; Lake Park, GA 31636
12/09 – Mollie Danner: 1415 Sunrise Ave.; Moultrie, GA 31768
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 – Cephas Williamson: 4815 Tirol Pass; Ft. Wayne, IN 46835
12/12 – Alan Miller: 2099 Corsica Way SW; Marietta, GA 30008
12/13 – Sonny Moon: 1315 Girard Ave.; Sardis, GA 30456
12/15 – Paula Lytle: PO Box 2905; Statesboro, GA 30459
12/16 – Pat Holbert: PO Box 1004; Louisville, GA 30434
12/19 – Ed Eschmann: 520 N. Spring Creek Cir.; Cobb, GA 31735
12/19 – Morgan Johnson: 5000 Fairbanks Ave. #148; Alexandria, VA 22311-1227
12/22 – Larry Giles: 214 Jasmine St.; Sandersville, GA 31082
12/22 – Lenton Powell: PO Box 42986; Atlanta, GA 30311
12/22 – 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 – Bill Daniel: 2450 N. Oceanshore Blvd., C215; Flagler Beach, FL 32136
12/31 – William A. Smith: 102 Pierce Rd.; Reynolds, GA 31076

OBITUARIES

Mrs. Carole Mitchell
After a life of deep faith, love, and service, Carole Moore Mitchell passed peacefully into the presence of her Lord on Dec. 13, 2021, 12 days past her 82nd birthday. She was a faithful member of the St. Mark United Methodist Church in Columbus, Ga. at the time of her death. She had previously been active in many different United Methodist churches through the years, having been the wife of a United Methodist pastor. She was an inspiration and mentor to many persons through the years. She was loved dearly by all who knew her, and touched the lives of many with her prayers, love, and service.

Mrs. Mitchell is survived by her children, Richard T. (Rick) Mitchell, Jr. (Deb), Dennis W. Mitchell, Rebecca G. (Becky) Mitchell; grandchildren, Ashtyn Hutchins (Stephan), Gillis Davis (Nathan), Tyndal Mitchell, and Kaitlyn Mitchell; great grandchildren, Makenzie Davis, Bailey Hutchins, Kennedy Hutchins, and one due in January; and by several nieces and nephews. She was preceded in death by her husband, the Rev. Richard T. Mitchell, Sr., her mother, Louise H. Moore, and her brother, J. Michel Moore.

A Service of Death and Resurrection, celebrating her life, was held Saturday, Dec. 18, in the chapel of Purvis Funeral Home, in Adel, Ga. Rev. Ronnie Howell officiated. Interment followed at Deep Bottom Cemetery. Serving as pallbearers were Nathan Davis, Stephan Hutchins, Doug Mays, Roger Mays, Thomas Mays, and Gene Mitchell.

Memorials may be made to St. Mark United Methodist Church, 6795 Whitesville Road, Columbus, GA 31904 or to the Rev. Richard T. Mitchell, Sr. Memorial Scholarship Fund at Asbury Theological Seminary, 204 N. Lexington Avenue, Wilmore, KY 40390.

Scripture Readings – Dec. 21 edition

December 24
Christmas Eve
Isaiah 9:2-7
Psalm 96 (UMH 815)
December 25
Christmas Day
Isaiah 52:7-10
Psalm 98 (UMH 818)
Hebrews 1:1-4 (5-12)
John 1:1-14

December 26
First Sunday after Christmas
1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26
Psalm 148 (UMH 861)
Colossians 3:12-17
Luke 2:41-52

December 31
Watch Night / New Year’s Eve
Ecclesiastes 3:1-13
Psalm 8 (UMH 743)
Revelation 21:1-6a
Matthew 25:31-46

January 2
Epiphany Sunday / Second Sunday after Christmas
Jeremiah 31:7-14
Psalm 147:12-20
Ephesians 1:3-14
John 1:(1-9), 10-18

Events in the South Georgia Conference – 12/21/2021 edition

In this six-session course, held at The Chapel in Brunswick, participants will develop a team of leaders and supporters within their current congregation who will encourage them throughout the course and beyond. Through the classes, they’ll build relationships with other South Georgia lay leaders and learn, practice, implement, share, and be inspired to take what they’ve learned and put it into action. The coursework includes holistic ministry training covering the following topics: worship, discipleship, preaching and teaching, congregational care, communication, organizational and personal leadership, and the United Methodist connection. The cost for the class is $300 per person, which includes lunch, snacks, and curriculum materials for the entire...
Youth Worker Winter Retreat – Jan. 20-21, 2022
Registration is now open for the South Georgia Conference's Youth Worker Winter Retreat, Jan. 20-21, 2022, at Little Ocmulgee State Park. This retreat is a time for youth workers to remember their calling, their why. The last 18 months have been the hardest times to navigate in ministry; youth ministry has changed and youth workers need the tools, the relationships and reliance on God (and God alone) to continue. This one-day retreat will give youth workers time together to worship, to reset, to learn, to encourage, and to dream, again. For more information, contact Suzanne Akins, Associate Director, Connectional Ministries at suzanne@sgaumc.com or call (912) 638-8626 ext 107. More information / Register

Basic Lay Servant Training, Macon – Jan. 21-22, 2022
Lay Servant training is designed to educate those persons interested in stretching their faith to participate more fully in the ministries of the church. They have three main areas of focus: Leading, Caring, and Communicating. The basic class is based on Cokesbury’s book, “Lay Servant Ministries Basic Course,” which teaches a basic understanding of ministry in the United Methodist Tradition. Included in the course is the following: Wesleyan Tradition and Foundations, Spiritual Gifts, Servant Leadership, Caring Ministries, Communicating, and Sharing Your Faith. You must complete all of the scheduled dates to complete your training. Basic LSM Training includes a basic foundation of the faith and an introduction to leadership. The class is a Friday night AND Saturday session. The Friday evening session is from 6:30-9 p.m. and the Saturday session is from 9 a.m.-4 p.m. at Forest Hills UMC. If you’ve not had training within the last three years (or ever), sign up for this Basic Training; otherwise, sign up for an Advanced Training. You must complete all of the scheduled dates above to complete your training. Registration fee for the class is $40. This cost covers all training materials and lunch on Saturday. (Note: Basic Lay Servant class must be completed before taking Advanced Class.) For more information contact Anne Bosarge, anne@thechapelministries.com. Register

In this six-session course, held at The Pointe in Leesburg, participants will develop a team of leaders and supporters within their current congregation who will encourage them throughout the course and beyond. Through the classes, they’ll build relationships with other South Georgia lay leaders and learn, practice, implement, share, and be inspired to take what they’ve learned and put it into action. The coursework includes holistic ministry training covering the following topics: worship, discipleship, preaching and teaching, congregational care, communication, organizational and personal leadership, and the United Methodist connection. The cost for the class is $300 per person, which includes lunch, snacks, and curriculum materials for the entire course. If you have questions or need more information, please contact Anne Bosarge at anne@thechapelministries.com. Register