

SOUTH GEORGIA ADVOCATE – JANUARY 24 EDITION

VSU Wesley Foundation offers hope one shoe at a time

By Ashtyn Ray, Student, Valdosta State University

“Choose Hope. Take Action. Change Lives.” That’s the motto the Valdosta State University Wesley Foundation recently chose to embody through its partnership with Sole Hope, an organization that works in Ugandan villages.

Students from the VSU Wesley Foundation recently worked with Sole Hope to transform one of their worship services into a night of shoe-making. Altogether, they were able to make 50 pairs of shoes for the vulnerable populations of Uganda.

“Mission is one of our five core values at Wesley,” said Rev. CJ Harp, Director of the VSU Wesley Foundation. “By mission, we mean helping students understand the story of God and their place in that story. We bear witness as the children of God by meeting the needs of others and alleviating suffering. I can preach that message countless times but allowing the students to do it during the message brings it to life like nothing else.”

VSU Wesley’s Bless the Blazers team, a group of student leaders whose goal is to bless other organizations on their college campus, worked to help plan the special night.

“Bless the Blazers is a team filled with spirit led students,” said Stephanie Lopez, student at VSU and Bless the Blazer team member. “Matthew 7:15-20 says that we should be people with a purpose who produce fruit and that people will know us by that fruit. In our case, that is by showing others the love of Christ. By helping others on our campus and even worldwide, we are living out that scripture.”

The Bless the Blazer team collected denim and prepared the templates that would be needed. After worship and some time in prayer, team members presented educational material about the needs in Uganda to attendants of Wesley. They then used the “message” portion of the service to trace and cut out the shapes that will later make each pair of shoes. This experience gave all of the students involved in Wesley the opportunity to take part in a global mission that will make a difference in countless lives.

“I thought that it was such a beautiful thing,” said Erin Griner, VSU student who participated in this special evening. “It was so much more than just cutting up jeans. It was really serving the Lord. It was fun, and knowing that it will make a big impact on other people's lives made it even better.”

Sole Hope is an organization that works to provide healthcare, education, and shoes to those in Uganda affected by a parasite called Jiggers. Jiggers infest the feet making it hard to provide for their families, go to school, and even to walk. Sole Hope sends teams into these communities, provides needed medical care, and then sets up long-term solutions. They do so by providing clean water, shoes, education, and wound care kits to the people of the villages. They give the people hope that puts families and communities back together again.

VSU Wesley was excited to have the opportunity to help aid in this life-changing work. To find out more about Sole Hope, visit <https://solehope.org/>. To learn more about the ministry of VSU Wesley and partner with them, visit <https://vsuwesley.com/>.

Ashtyn Ray is a Junior at Valdosta State University majoring in Communication Sciences and Disorders. She is from Glennville, Ga. and is part of the VSU Wesley LEAD team.

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Service for Bishop Graves celebrates his return to South Georgia

By Kelly Roberson

In one of the oldest Methodist churches in Georgia, on Sunday, January 8, 2023, Bishop David Graves and his wife, Nancy, were officially welcomed to the South Georgia Conference as the conference celebrated and gave thanks for his assignment to South Georgia.

Bishop Graves was assigned as interim episcopal leader in September 2021 following the retirement of Bishop Lawson Bryan. During the Southeastern Jurisdictional Conference in November 2022 it was announced that Bishop Graves would return to South Georgia as its episcopal leader for the next two years.

Mulberry Street United Methodist Church’s historic sanctuary was filled with clergy and laity from around the conference who came to celebrate the episcopal couple, worship together, and offer warm hospitality.

The service was a joyous occasion featuring majestic music, a moving presentation of signs of episcopal ministry, and an inspiring sermon preached by Bishop Graves.

After a welcome from the Rev. Dr. Ted Goshorn, senior pastor of Mulberry Street UMC, and a greeting and prayer from the Rev. Dr. Paula Lewis, Dean of the Cabinet and Superintendent of the South Central District, Rev. Melissa Traver, chair of the Episcopacy Committee, introduced the Bishop and announced his official assignment to South Georgia. The Rev. Dr. Scott Hagan, senior pastor of Statesboro First UMC, then led those gathered in the Covenant Service.

A highlight of the service included the presentation of the eight signs for episcopal ministry. The presenters were laity and clergy from across the conference. Each read a statement and gave a symbol to the bishop, representing shepherding, the prophetic Word, baptism, communion, service, teaching, supervision and appointments. The Bible used in the service belonged to Bishop Arthur J. Moore and dates back to 1927.

Other conference leaders offered prayers and read various scripture passages.

Bishop Graves’ message was personal and full of gratitude.

“Nancy and I are so blessed to be in the South Georgia Conference of The United Methodist Church,” he said, speaking fondly of his time in South Georgia. “There is such a sweet spirit in South Georgia, a spirit that comes from God, and I just want to commend you for that.”

He spoke passionately about purpose and joining God in His kingdom work.

“Everyone in the life of our church and in the life of our culture and society is just as important as everyone else,” said Bishop Graves, recalling his days as a janitor in the local church that led him to his call in ministry. “The person who cleans is just as important as the person who preaches because we are all in this ministry of building God's kingdom together here on Earth as it is in heaven.”

Preaching from the first 22 verses of Acts 4 where Peter and John are in conflict with the religious leaders of the day, Bishop Graves recounted how Jesus is making a difference in people.

“They are turning to the Way because Jesus said, ‘I am the way and I am the truth and I am the life,’” said Bishop Graves. “Friends, people still need to hear that today. They need to hear that there is hope amongst the hopelessness. There's light amongst the darkness. And when we hear statistics like 58% of people in America feel like they have no hope, the church needs to rise above and be the proclaimer of the good news of Jesus.”

In the scripture passage, Peter and John spoke with great boldness because they had followed Jesus and were empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Bishop Graves concluded by calling on everyone to pray boldly and share Christ and to acknowledge that it is time to turn the page.

“It’s time to turn the page and fully get back to the business of sharing Christ to a broken and hurting world,” he said. “I’m asking us to put all of our energies there.

“When was the last time that you prayed for boldness? We follow a God that not only shows up but shows out. It's time to turn the page to be filled with the Holy Spirit and go forth in boldness.”

Following the service, a reception was held in Mulberry Street UMC’s fellowship hall.

Photos

[Click here to view photos from the service taken by Cameron Bishop.](#)

Video of the Service

[Click here to view a recording of the service.](#)



United Women in Faith enjoy ‘family reunion’

By Tara Jones, South Georgia Conference UWF President

The gracious hostesses at Baxley First United Methodist Church in Baxley welcomed United Women in Faith members from across South Georgia October 15, 2022, for quite the celebration. After two years of virtual annual meetings, the women enjoyed a “family reunion” greeting sisters in person.

After beautiful opening music by Sandra Smith and an offering of prayer by Laurie Jo Upchurch, attendees were inspired by Dee Dee Salgado’s lovely solo. Miriam Johnson and Rev. Steve Meguiar greeted and welcomed the group who enjoyed a wonderful day in the church’s beautiful sanctuary.

Conference President Tara Jones presided over the meeting. Conference officers participated in the time of celebrating United Women in Faith, which included a virtual message by General Secretary/CEO Harriet Jane Olsen. Rev. Steve Mequiar, Dr. Paula Lewis, Rev. Craig Hutto, and Rev. Jimmy Cason served as Communion Celebrants.

A special highlight of the day was the keynote message on the theme “Healing and Joy on Our Journey to God” given virtually by Sally Vonner, Transformation Officer at the UWF National Office.

Vonner began by thanking the women of South Georgia for all they have done and are doing to make mission possible. She then challenged the group: we must refresh to welcome the future God is calling us to.

Vonner shared that materials for local units on the need to embrace change are available on the United Women in Faith website.

“God is calling us to be bold, to show up, to make a difference,” said Vonner.

She shared that her prayer is that we keep creating and evolving as we say ‘yes’ to God’s calling for us today to ensure that women, children and youth can thrive.

“We will inspire and influence the church as we model unity through our sisterhood and our continuation of being focused on organizing and mobilizing for mission,” said Vonner.

She then implored the group not to let “weariness, fear, or brittleness weigh us down. Lean into each other. We don’t have to be wishing things were different. We are the generation with more tools than any other to reach new women, new supporters. We can work together to add to our legacy.”

Conference Treasurer Diane James led the pledge service and accepted the offering, which was designated to Ian-impacted National Mission Institutions. Diane also presented newly consecrated deaconess Linda Laye with a Special Mission Recognition. The Conference pledge to United Women in Faith was set at \$100,000.

Committee on Nominations chairperson Cheryl King presented the committee’s nominee for Spiritual Growth Coordinator - Sarah Faulkner - whom the attendees elected and who then was installed by former Conference President Carol Banks. Love and appreciation were expressed to Nancy Hudson who was recognized as an outgoing member of the Conference Leadership Team.

Appreciation is expressed to the Baxley First United Methodist Church, their members of United Women in Faith, pastor Rev. Steve Meguiar, Administrative Assistant MaRandy Mincey, and local arrangements chairperson Laurie Jo Upchurch for a wonderful day in Baxley.



January storms: South Georgia helps neighbors, early response teams needed

On Thursday, January 12, 2023, severe storms and multiple tornadoes stretched across the Alabama-West Florida and North Georgia Conferences. The South Georgia Conference stands in solidarity with our neighboring conferences, offering prayer and support.

At the request of the North Georgia Conference, the South Georgia Conference has been asked to assist and coordinate the UMC response in Meriwether County. Rev. Glenn Martin, Northwest District Disaster Response coordinator, is taking the lead and is working with the emergency manager and other leaders in the area.

Rev. Martin led a team from the Northwest District to Greenville, Ga. on Monday, January 16. The fourteen volunteers were from Wynnton UMC, Pierce Chapel UMC, and Midland UMC. In addition, Dan Henderson, member of Fitzgerald UMC, took a skid steer to assist in moving and collecting debris. They did

chainsaw work all day, cutting down and cutting up pine trees and cleaning up debris. Martin took another team later in the week. Additional teams are still needed.

The South Georgia Conference shower trailer is being used by the Red Cross shelter in Locust Grove. Blankets were collected by churches in the North Central District, and Luis Morales, Conference Disaster Response Coordinator, delivered to affected areas on Friday, January 20.

Early Response Teams

If you have an ERT who can deploy to an affected area either in Alabama or North Georgia, contact one of the district coordinators or contact Rev. Martin directly. Please do not self-deploy. Our coordinators will help find an area for your team to serve. The primary need right now is debris cleanup and chainsaw work. Even if you are not a chainsaw operator, deploying teams need able bodies to help move/haul rubbish so it can be collected.

District Coordinators

Kelly Crane, Coastal District Coordinator
kelcrane@gmail.com or 731-499-0491

Glenn Martin, Northwest District Coordinator
gmartin0704@gmail.com or 912-312-6341

Susan Hughes, South Central District Coordinator
susanjhughes17@gmail.com or 229-423-9381

Thomas Smith, Southwest District Coordinator
tldsmith@icloud.com or 229-686-4046

ERT & Chainsaw Operator Safety Training

An ERT & Chainsaw Operator Safety training is set for March 25 at Pierce Chapel UMC (5122 Pierce Chapel Road, Midland GA 31820) beginning at 8am. This training is a collaborative effort of the United Methodist Committee on Relief and United Methodist Volunteers in Mission. Mac Woodridge from Pierce Chapel will serve as the host. [Click here to register](#). For more information, contact Mac Woodridge at macdaddy1977@gmail.com.

Financial Gifts

Other ways you can help in addition to your prayers for the survivors and volunteers is with your financial donations.

You can donate through your church to our Conference Advance Special #6796 - South Georgia Storm Relief (Disaster Response). Address: PO Box 7227, Macon, GA 31209

Online donations:

[Click here to donate online to the South Georgia Conference Storm Relief effort](#)

[Click here to donate to UMCOR US Disaster Response & Recovery](#)

Thank you for giving! Financial gifts will make a significant impact on any current and future relief and long-term recovery efforts.

For any questions, contact Luis Morales, Conference Disaster Response Coordinator, at morhilll@gmail.com or 478-216-7729.

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2023 prayer emphasis: February focus

In a focused effort, the South Georgia Conference is centering itself around prayer in 2023. Each month a prayer guide will be developed that contains a specific focus, including a weekly scripture, a breath prayer, and a prayer prompt.

February's prayer guide, written by the Revs. Michael Culbreth, Michelle Dailey, Cedric Jackson, and Precious Hawkins, is now available at www.sgaumc.org/year-of-prayer. Bulletin inserts are also available for local churches to use.

Throughout the year, four book studies centered on prayer and hosted by Connectional Ministries, will expand our minds, challenge our hearts and encourage our prayer walks. [Click here for a synopsis and links to register for these fruit-filled conversations](#). "Prayer Changes Us," written by the Rev. Dr. Ted Goshorn, pastor of Mulberry Street UMC, will be the first book. A book talk, hosted by the author, is set for Monday, February 27 from noon-1pm. Register at <https://sgaumc-reg.brtapp.com/BookTalkFEB>.

More information will be available and updates will be posted on the conference website at www.sgaumc.org/year-of-prayer.

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FROM THE BISHOP BISHOP DAVID GRAVES

Dear Friends of the South Georgia Conference,

Earlier this week, I wrote an article reminding you about our process and timeline around disaffiliation and departures. The decisions and policies our Conference leadership and Trustees have made are meant to help those who wish to wait and see what happens at General Conference 2024. If you have not reviewed that information, [please do so here](#). In that spirit, I would like to elaborate on some personal reflections about why churches in the South Georgia Conference should, in fact, wait until 2024 before making any final decisions.

Over the last several months, I have heard it said time and time again that a local United Methodist Church needs to disaffiliate from The United Methodist denomination because it is a good business deal. In fact, someone recently shared a social media post written by a person who said their local UM church decision was purely business and that because of the property value it made good business sense and would provide control and autonomy. In the post, the person went on to say that they did not know about the trust clause. They got one thing correct, this business dealing is about power, money, and control. These comments are not Methodist. Methodism is about a movement inspired by the Holy Spirit.

Regarding the trust clause, our founder John Wesley instituted the trust clause in the mid-18th century when he secured property for meeting spaces and ministry sites for Methodist Societies. Wesley had several lawyers work on the trust clause, and it has been an important part of our polity helping to preserve our historic faith since our beginning 238 years ago. We are not a congregational church and have never been. The trust clause reminds us that we are a connectional church. As United Methodists, we ask first what is best for the whole, not what is best for me and my local church. As Christians and as Methodists, we are in the faith business; we are not in the business of making deals.

If this is a business deal for you, then I ask you to please do some soul searching and reflect on your motivations. I have taken a lot of criticism for allowing previous churches in the South Georgia Conference to disaffiliate under paragraph 2553 in *The Book of Discipline*. Paragraph 2553 is about human sexuality, and many are trying to use it to say it is about liberal theology, abortion, or the erroneous notion that Bishops want to change the Bible, and the list goes on. Now, people want to misuse paragraph 2553 for their own business deal.

There has been traditional and liberal theology since the beginning of time. No one is rewriting the Bible. People will interpret the Bible in their own way and have since it came into written form.

On the issue of abortion, we have a wonderful statement on abortion in our Book of Discipline. Our social principles have spoken to the issue of abortion since 1972 and in the General Conferences that followed. Our stance has only become more focused on making decisions that value life.

Only the General Conference of The United Methodist Church can change the *Book of Discipline* or speak for The United Methodist Church. Many will give their opinions and that is simply it: their opinion. With any divisive topic there are leaders, including a few bishops in The United Methodist Church, that have expressed opinions or actions with which I disagree or find hurtful to the body of the Church. To be honest, there have been things I have said and actions I have done that have been hurtful to others as well. Bishops do not all think alike, any more than clergy or members of a local church think alike. We are connected to people who think differently than we do, which strengthens us more rather than hurts us.

Are we going to throw away the very connection - the South Georgia Annual Conference - that has given every clergy and laity in the annual conference the opportunities you enjoy today? You may have heard me say that I have remained a United Methodist bishop to be a part of the solution. The Gospel message of Jesus calls us to be in the middle of all people's lives and not those who are just like us.

People use this business deal mindset to place fear mongering into the system. The church and our institutions have been filled with so much fear around financial sustainability and vitality. Those encouraging disaffiliation emphasize that the clock is ticking regarding the use of paragraph 2553 for disaffiliation, which sunsets on December 31, 2023. This December 31, 2023, date reminds me of the panic around Y2K. Will the computers handle the roll over from the 1990's to 2000? Some predicted that our world would be spun into turmoil. Some even prepared for and used words like Armageddon. I see some similarities in the Y2K panic and The United Methodist Church. We are people of faith, not fear!

Several churches have faithfully discerned that disaffiliation is what God was leading them to do. For their faithful discernment, I give thanks. However, if this is primarily a business deal for you, you need to prayerfully discern how you can continue to push your church towards disaffiliation in good conscience. How can any church request to disaffiliate under the disguise of these actions? I have said since the day that I began my assignment in the Alabama-West Florida Conference and now the South Georgia Conference that I will follow the leading of God's Word, the Holy Spirit, and the Book of Discipline as I faithfully serve these areas.

What has disheartened me in recent weeks is that I asked this annual conference to not have disaffiliation discussions from November 20th through the rest of 2022. I asked everyone to focus on Advent and sharing the Good News of the Christ Child. This was an ask, not a mandate. Our world, our communities, and, frankly, all of us need good news and, simply put, we need a word of hope. Many of you did just that, and I thank you for your efforts in sharing Jesus. Yet others held disaffiliation meetings in groups or in the church; others had official leadership board meetings or congregational meetings; and some congregations circulated petitions or made phone calls urging people to support a particular position. Just think what might have

happened if those efforts were focused on sharing Jesus. As I had one church member tell me recently, “The only contact that I have gotten from my church in years was a phone call asking would I sign a petition about disaffiliation.” What if people had instead made phone calls to invite people to Advent and Christmas services? As my former Bishop, Bishop Ray Chamberlain, said to me one time, “David, as much as your heart hurts over this, you can’t even imagine how the heart of God hurts.” That was 25 years ago, but I have been reminded of this time and time again as I have encountered hurtful times in my life and ministry.

I have repeatedly asked all our churches to wait until after the 2024 General Conference, which will take place April 23-May 3, 2024, to discern next steps for their local church. After General Conference, we will have more accurate information so that our Annual Conference and our local churches can make strategic, Holy Spirit-led decisions and not business deals.

I know that I open myself to criticism with this article. I have been given many labels as a bishop and some have even questioned my salvation. I am not alone in what I endure on a daily basis. Unfortunately, this just helps me empathize with so many of our United Methodist clergy and laity who have experienced overwhelming verbal and emotional abuse. That should not happen in our churches. Jesus was characterized as a radical, and church people back in the day cut a business deal with the Roman Government to put Jesus to death. Over my 40 years of ministry, I have seen a lot of church business deals. It pains me to even think about many of them.

For me, I am going to keep preaching Jesus and hope you will join me in our [2023 year of prayer](#). At our upcoming June 2023 Annual Conference, this scripture will guide our time together:

“And now, O Lord, hear their threats, and give us your word. Stretch out your hand with healing power; may miraculous signs and wonders be done through the name of your holy servant Jesus. After this prayer, the meeting place shook, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit. Then they preached the word of God with boldness.” -Acts 4:29-31

When was the last time you prayed for boldness?

In Christ,

Bishop David Graves

This is the second of four articles that Bishop Graves will be sharing over the next few weeks.



Camps & Retreats Happenings

Confirmation Retreat: Registration for the 22nd annual South Georgia Conference Confirmation Retreat opened December 1st for South Georgia churches and January 1st for all other churches. The 2023 retreat will take place March 3-5 at Epworth By The Sea. Designed for students in the fifth grade and above, the “Join the Journey” Confirmation Retreat will provide churches of ALL sizes an opportunity to connect with others through worship, study, and fellowship. Bishop Graves will be joining us to kick off the event! For more information, [click here](#).

Summer Camp: Registration opens up January 1st for Camp Connect - the South Georgia Conference Camping Ministry at Epworth By The Sea. These week-long residential camps are offered for elementary, middle and high school students in June and July. For more information, [click here](#).

Camp Connect Leadership Team: Now hiring college students for summer staff at Camp Connect! Do you know of a college student who loves Jesus and desires a summer of ministry in a beautiful location? As a camp counselor, college students will be able to minister to hundreds of youth and children throughout the summer, while making Christian friendships with other staff that last a lifetime. As a paid position, the Leadership Team will commit to nine weeks of service which will include serving at high school, middle school, and elementary camps, as well as closing the summer serving at a camp for foster children. For more information, [click here](#).

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God Promises His Presence

Winter Quarter 2022-2023: From Darkness to Light
Unit 2: God's Promises

Sunday School Lesson for the week of January 29, 2023
By Jay Harris

Lesson Scripture: Joel 2:21-27

Key Verse

You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel and that I, the LORD, am your God and there is no other. And my people shall never again be put to shame. (Joel 2:27)

Lesson Aims

- To focus on how we experience God's presence in our lives
- To become acquainted with the scriptural context for the scripture passage we are studying
- To explore the seriousness of locust swarms and how that could get translated into judgment
- To hear God's call to action to return to the Lord
- To learn the meaning of rending one's heart
- To contemplate God's nature which is to be gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love
- To understand how God relents and the implications of this
- To look at the return to life that unfolds and seeing how God was present from the beginning
- To review all the ways we can look for God's presence and connect this with the ministry of the Holy Spirit

God Promises His Presence

This lesson brings the January Unit to a fitting conclusion. We have been exploring God's promises throughout this unit. We have looked at God's promises to hear and forgive, to restore, to guide, and to give light. It is fitting to culminate this unit with a focus on God's abiding presence. We can and should talk about all that God *does* for us, for sure. God's *abiding presence*, however, goes beyond God's gracious *actions*. God just *being* with us is a part of God's ministry to us. In this lesson, through the prophecy of Joel, we are going to lean into God's promise to be in the midst of his people.

What are your initial reflections about God's presence? How have you felt God's promise to be with us? What was going on in your life at the time?

The Concern that Forms the Context for Our Scripture Passage

Scholars are divided on whether Joel's ministry occurred before, during, or after the exile. The very fact that the exile is not mentioned in any kind of detail, suggests that Joel addressed God's people when the exile and the return had already occurred.

The concern at the outset of Joel's message is a series of locust swarms. Joel described the devastation caused by the locusts, saying: "*What the cutting locust left, the swarming locust has eaten; what the swarming locust left, the hopping locust has eaten; and what the hopping locust left, the destroying locust has eaten.*" (Joel 1:4) In other words, there were successive waves of locusts, swarming together and eating everything in sight. Joel was vividly describing a natural agricultural disaster. (Be sure to read the first chapter of Joel and the verses in chapter two leading up to the scripture lesson in Joel 2:21-27.) One locust doesn't seem very threatening, but when you're talking about billions of locusts, then you're looking at an economic and humanitarian catastrophe. When you see the swaths of destruction left by locust plagues that have been captured in photographs, it defies belief. Imagine every cultivated and wild plant being torn to the ground and the bark on trees being ripped off. Imagine starving cattle, flocks, and even wild animals.

Joel not only described the destruction and resulting famine, he also described the mourning of the people that accompanied it: "*surely joy withers away among the people.*" (Joel 1:12) Everyone and everything seemed to mourn, from the land to the priests, from the farmers and the vinedressers to the ministers of the altar, from the herds of cattle and flocks of sheep to the animals out in the wild. Joel did not try to quell the mourning. In fact, he seems intent on stirring up more mourning. It is as if Joel is calling people to let out their mourning—to let their tears and moaning flow so that everyone's show of emotion might mingle together in a great expression of lamentation.

To Joel, the locusts comprised an invading army from God, pronouncing judgment upon God's people: "*The LORD utters his voice at the head of his army; how vast is his host! Numberless are those who obey his command. Truly the day of the LORD is great, terrible indeed—who can endure it?*" (Joel 2:11) The phrase, "the day of the Lord" is code for God's judgment.

God wanted to bring everyone into the act of mourning not just their physical condition, but their moral and spiritual condition. Joel does not seem to list the sins of God's people to the degree that other prophets do. Naming the sins of God's people does not seem to be on Joel's agenda. Humans sin—period. We all sin and fall short of the glory of God, according to Romans 3:23. Our failures, mistakes, compromises, betrayals, hates, aggressions, arrogant and overbearing actions, our apathy, complacency, and lack of compassion are a part of our human condition. Perhaps Joel was using this time to allow and encourage God's people to do their own searching moral inventory.

I have to admit that I am reluctant to pronounce after every natural disaster that God was punishing people for their sin. In the case of destructive and deadly weather events, could it not be the collision of air pressure, winds, temperatures, and moisture levels? Just as car collisions can occur where no one is really at fault, collisions occur on the cellular, bacteriological, and viral level occur in human bodies that cause people to suffer. When it comes to insects, such as locusts, something has most likely happened to the ecological balance. Whether human beings are responsible for that balance being disturbed, it would be hard to pinpoint just how. As I said, I am hesitant to say that every disaster is caused directly by God to punish people.

Having said this, I believe that Joel was on point to call people to look inward and take a moral inventory. When disaster strikes it often exposes how far we may have moved away from God. When tragedies occur, we pray reflexively. This is a good thing. Just crying out to God is a prayer that God hears. At the same time,

people who find themselves praying in response to hard times may realize how strange prayer feels when it has been a long time since they prayed. Haven't we all come to times in our lives when we have felt this way. "Sorry, God, for taking so long to get back with you." When we have neglected our spiritual lives for a while (perhaps because times were relatively good), returning to God out of our desperation make us realize that it took this kind of desperation to get back to God. Entering again into prayer and other means of communing with God may seem like using muscles that we haven't used in a long time. We realize we are out of shape spiritually. This may have caused us to slip into sinful patterns in our life. This is why it is common to feel judgment when disaster strikes. For Joel to encourage this is entirely on point.

Think about when a tragedy occurs that grabs the attention of the nation. The news services that carry the reports of the events will also report on prayer vigils being held. It feels as if people treat one another better for a while. Unfortunately, when the emotion of the event passes, we often return to normal life and forget what was said about praying more or improving our collective life.

There is saying that we should never waste a good crisis. In other words, when a crisis comes upon us, we are going to experience a lot of negative emotions and repercussions. It does not have to all be bad however. We can use the moment to bring good out of it. What can we learn? What can we improve? How can we call people back to what is important? Perhaps Joel is reminding us that God does not want to waste a good crisis either.

All of this makes us want to lean into the words of Joel to see what he leads us to do next. We also want to lean in to continue learning more about the presence of God and God's promise to be with us. It is not as if God has checked out before this tragedy occurred or while this tragedy was in progress.

Although God never moves away from us, can you think of times when you moved away from God? How did it feel to lose touch with God?

The Call to Action

Joel issued a call to action: "put on sackcloth and lament," "consecrate a fast, call a solemn assembly," and "cry out to the LORD." (Joel 1:13, 14) He believed that if God's people return to the Lord with all their heart, "with fasting, with weeping, and with mourning," if they rend their hearts and not their clothing, then God, who is "gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and relents from punishing," may indeed turn and relent, and leave a blessing. (Joel 2:12-14)

In last week's lesson, we learned about calling solemn assemblies and fasts and putting on sackcloth (Isaiah 58:6-10). We learned how important it is not to just go through the motions. These means of grace are designed to lead us in truly humbling ourselves before God, and that means rooting out the tendency to be arrogant or dominating in our daily interactions with our fellow human beings.

Joel emphasizes the same thing when he talks about rending our hearts and not our clothing. Tearing one's clothing was an action people performed in biblical times to symbolize both mourning and contrition. Joel was making the point that a person should not go through the motions of tearing one's clothing without being willing to rend one's heart. To rend one's heart means to enter into contrition. It means feeling true remorse and regret. There is a resolve to tear from one's self the harmful and sinful patterns that have become a part of life. There is a resolve to replace these sinful patterns with new behavior that honors and pleases God.

Joel affirms that the Lord God is "gracious and merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and relenting from punishment." (Joel 2:13) Unpacking these words, we are being made to understand that God has the ability to relent or change his course of action. Imagine that. We do not live in a universe where

everything is already predetermined. God is unchanging in terms of God's nature. God's unchanging nature however is that God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love. Since these attributes are a part of God's immutable nature, God can and does change his course. God is able to change his course because something changed in the context in which God works. God's people repented and returned to him. God changes his course in accordance with his unchangeable nature which is to be gracious and merciful and abounding in steadfast love.

Knowing this is a part of God's nature, Joel held out an audacious hope that he expressed in the form of a question. I am paraphrasing: "Who knows whether the Lord will not turn (if God's people return to him), and the Lord relent and leave a blessing in the Lord's wake in the form of fertile lands, new grain for a grain offering, and new grapes for a drink offering that God's people can return to the Lord?" (Joel 2:14) In other words, a sign of God changing the course of events, from famine to fertile lands, will be God's people being able to offer grain offerings and drink offerings again to God.

When is a time in your life when you underwent a rending of the heart? How have you experienced the grace and mercy of God in a way that presented a definite change in the direction of your life and your relationship with God? If "prevenient grace" is the grace that comes before our salvation, how do you think you experienced prevenient grace before you said "yes" to God? In other words, how was God present in your life before you were even aware of God?

The Return to Life Begins

God's people must have begun to show repentance, because Joel reports that "then the LORD became jealous for his land, and had pity on his people." (Joel 2:18) Is this not amazing? God was seen as the one who allowed the locusts to tear up the land and render it infertile. It was God's presence in the midst of that situation that caused God's people to take in God's judgment of their poor spiritual condition. Then, it was this same God who became jealous for the land belonging to God's people. God did not want his people to be disparaged and made a mockery among the nations because of the torn and barren land they inhabited. God also had pity on his people, and that pity had been moving the heart of God all the while.

This is not unlike the way it is for parents. Our children can act out, and make us angry, disappointed, and even disgusted. Almost immediately it seems, the guilt and the shame that registers on their faces, in their tears, and in their body language begin to move us to pity. The remorse they express is met at once with our grace and mercy. Of course, our love for them never went away. It even grew through the experience. What is true about us is even more so with God.

Can you relate your own love for your children with God's love for you?

Out of God's pity, grace and mercy, and heart that is jealous for his people, God was already acting. The first thing God did was bring an end to the locust swarms: "*I will remove the northern army far from you and drive it into a parched and desolate land, its front into the eastern sea and its rear into the western sea; its stench and foul smell will rise up.*" (Joel 2:20) With the locusts removed, then we start to see the land being restored.

- ²¹ **Do not fear, O soil;
be glad and rejoice,
for the LORD has done great things!**
- ²² **Do not fear, you animals of the field,
for the pastures of the wilderness are green;**

**the tree bears its fruit;
the fig tree and vine give their full yield.**

Joel's first word is to remove fear. How does the soil sense fear? How do the animals of the field register fear? Perhaps the fear Joel was speaking to was the fear God's people felt as they contemplated the condition of the soil and the animals, which painted for them a picture of famine, starvation, hopelessness, despair, and fear. When Joel commands the soil and the animals not to fear, it is because the Lord had been doing great things below the surface before the effects could be seen. Then, it was just a matter of time before the flocks, the cattle, and wild animals were eating again from green pastures. Fig trees, fruit trees, and vines were once again producing a full yield.

**²³ O children of Zion, be glad,
and rejoice in the LORD your God,
for he has given the early rain for your vindication;
he has poured down for you abundant rain,
the early and the later rain, as before.
²⁴ The threshing floors shall be full of grain;
the vats shall overflow with wine and oil.**

A sure sign that life was returning to normal would be the coming of the early rains and the later rains. Both rainy seasons were crucial to planting and harvest, both the spring and fall harvests. We often overlook the ways that God sustains life—that is, until there happens to be a momentary break in that ongoing activity of God. God is both the Creator and the Sustainer of life and his creation.

The result of the sustaining activity of God is that the threshing floors shall be full of grain. The threshing floors are where the good grain and the shell casings are separated so that the good grain can be gathered and made into bread. The wine and oil vats, or presses, are overflowing with wine and olive oil. These represent the staples of life. There are many places in scripture that praise God the Sustainer and for good reason. Take a moment and read Psalm 104 which provides a great example. Here is a sampling:

“You make springs gush forth in the valleys; they flow between the hills, giving drink to every wild animal; the wild asses quench their thirst. By the streams the birds of the air have their habitation; they sing among the branches. From your lofty abode you water the mountains; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of your work. You cause the grass to grow for the cattle and plants for people to cultivate, to bring forth food from the earth and wine to gladden the human heart, oil to make the face shine and bread to strengthen the human heart. The trees of the field are watered abundantly, the cedars of Lebanon that he planted. In them the birds build their nests; the stork has its home in the fir trees. The high mountains are for the wild goats; the rocks are a refuge for the coney. You have made the moon to mark the seasons; the sun knows its time for setting. You make darkness, and it is night, when all the animals of the forest come creeping out. The young lions roar for their prey, seeking their food from God. When the sun rises, they withdraw and lie down in their dens. People go out to their work and to their labor until the evening.”
(Psalm 104:10-23)

In our daily worship of God, it is always appropriate to imagine the ongoing work of God to sustain life, and to praise God the Creator and Sustainer. Along with the physical ways that God creates and sustains life, we also praise God for the ways God is creating relationship and sustaining relationship. In John 10:10, Jesus said, “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.” We understand that abundant life to be physical, emotional, relational, and spiritual.

Sometimes Christians substitute Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer for Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. While we can make a case for these connections, it is also important that we see the Father, the Son, and the Holy

Spirit sharing in the work of creating, redeeming, and sustaining. I find that doing this in my reading of scripture opens my understanding of the amazing interdependence living within the divine mystery of our Triune God. The point for this lesson is to emphasize and celebrate the sustaining activity of God and the beautiful and manifold ways that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are involved.

How do you know God as your Sustainer? How is that different from the way you have experienced God as your Creator and Redeemer? How might you grow in your appreciation of the sustaining work of God as God sustains you physically, emotionally, relationally, and spiritually?

**²⁵ I will repay you for the years
that the swarming locust has eaten,
the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter,
my great army that I sent against you.
²⁶ You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied
and praise the name of the LORD your God,
who has dealt wondrously with you.
And my people shall never again be put to shame.**

I will never forget when a dear friend texted to our friend group a picture of where he and his wife had recently moved. It was an absolutely beautiful scene. He included the caption, "I will repay you for the years that the swarming locust as eaten." I knew that line came from scripture and recalled the background of the scripture. That scripture came alive for me at that moment, because I knew the back story of my friend and why he would claim that verse. He had just come from a work situation that was difficult because of the way his former boss treated him and other people. He could not freely utilize his gifts with joy because of the daily discord in the exercise of his work. I met his former boss in a meeting with him and a few other people, and I sensed right away what my friend had to endure. Eventually, my friend was able to leave that difficult situation and start a new job. His new residence was in a gorgeous setting, and I knew his new work situation was just as ideal. He felt he was being repaid for the years he felt he had lost in his former job. I will never forget receiving his text with the photograph and the scripture verse.

The only thing better than being repaid for lost years due to hardship, and eating in plenty, and being satisfied, is the ability to recognize it and acknowledge the Lord's role in it. To praise the Lord for dealing wondrously with you adds to and completes the blessing. Just as we should never waste a good crisis, we should never waste a good blessing and the opportunity to give witness to it. When we have lost something, getting it back makes us appreciate it all the more.

Can you point to a time in your life when something you felt you had lost was completely restored to you? How did you appreciate it more?

The part about God's people never again being put to shame makes us think about the importance of our self-esteem. God thinks our self-esteem is vital. A term I discovered some years ago is the term grace-esteem. The idea is that our self-esteem can be grounded in the way God esteems us. God the Creator esteems us in that we were created in God's image. God the Redeemer esteems us in that Christ died for us. God the Sustainer esteems us in that the Holy Spirit is pleased to dwell in us.

**²⁷ You shall know that I am in the midst of Israel
and that I, the LORD, am your God and there is no other.
And my people shall never again be put to shame.**

In this whole saga, beginning with the coming of the locust swarms, God never left his people. In all of it, the Lord was in the midst of Israel. God was there to observe the trouble his people were in. God was present in

the call to return to God. God was present in the people's recognition that they had fallen short. God was present in the fasting and the rending of people's hearts. God was present when the locusts were removed and the land was restored. God was present in the time of plenty.

To understand the promise of God's presence, it is important to understand all the ways God is present. We know God's presence through his gracious actions. When we recall these actions, and we read what how others have come to know God, we are also led to dwell on God's attributes—who God is. Knowing that God is present with us every moment coupled together with who we know God to be makes us look with great anticipation for ways God will show up. We should make it our aim to grow in our understanding and appreciation of God's presence and what God reveals about himself in these moments. This is why prayer, reflection, meditation, and contemplation are so important if we seek to grow in the life of faith.

Do you feel that you take the time to contemplate the presence of God in your life? Do you have anyone you can share “glory sightings” with?

We cannot end this lesson without looking at the next two verses:

²⁸ Then afterward

*I will pour out my spirit on all flesh;
your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
your old men shall dream dreams,
and your young men shall see visions.*

*²⁹ Even on the male and female slaves,
in those days I will pour out my spirit.*

Christians believe that this scripture was fulfilled most fully and decisively on the Day of Pentecost as recorded in the second chapter of Acts. Jesus had promised that after he ascended into heaven that he would send the Holy Spirit to be with his disciples. We see a noticeable difference in the disciples after the outpouring of the Spirit on that day. Their boldness from that point forward gave proof that the living Christ, who reigned in heaven, was also dwelling in them through the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit was not “born” on that Pentecost Day. The Holy Spirit has reigned with the Father and the Son from eternity past. After the death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus, however, the Holy Spirit bears witness to the presence of God in Christ in a powerful way.

Next time you have the opportunity to share in the Lord's Supper, recall that one of the reasons we take part in this sacrament is to recognize and celebrate the presence of Christ beneath, above, around, in, and through the bread and the cup and in our hearts. Pay attention to the liturgy, the physical movements, the breaking of the bread, and the smell of the bread and grape juice or wine. Reflect on the words being spoken. Reflect on the name many give this moment—Holy Communion.

What about this sacrament, the Lord's Supper, is Holy Communion for you? If the Lord's Supper has not been a time of holy communion with God for you, how might you make a change in order for that to happen?

As we conclude this January unit, we have explored God's promises to hear and forgive, to restore, to guide, and to give light. To cap it off, we have explored God's promise of his presence. We can say that in our journey from darkness to light, God is our ever-present companion—hearing, forgiving, restoring, guiding, and giving us light.

What are your main take-aways from this lesson? How have you grown in your understanding of the presence of God?

Prayer

Gracious Father, you have been with us all of our lives. Help us count the ways you have been present, that we may have a greater understanding that we are never alone, through Christ, our Lord, who reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever, Amen.

Dr. Jay Harris serves as the Assistant to the Bishop for Ministerial Services for the South Georgia Conference. Email him at jharris@sgaumc.com. Find his plot-driven guide to reading the Bible, the "Layered Bible Journey," at www.layeredbiblejourney.com.

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When Disagreements Come

By Hal Brady

Whenever I do pre-marital counseling, I usually include the following: role expectation, a good theology of marriage, what the psychologists say about the experience, the importance of communication, the necessity of commitment, and how to deal with conflict or disagreements.

Unless one of the marriage partners is a non-thinking robot every marriage has disagreements. The only question is how we handle those disagreements.

Whether it's in marriage, business, sports, politics, medicine, church or personal relationships, every life situation has disagreements. Again, the important issue is our handling of those disagreements.

First, we can seek to understand the other person's point of view. There can be no reconciliation if we do not seek to understand the other person's point of view, and this always begins with listening. In being open to another person's point of view, Chuck Swindoll says that there are] three necessary qualities that don't come easily: honesty, objectivity, and humility. And none of that comes naturally. It comes as by-products of the Spirit-filled life.

Second, we can disagree without being disagreeable. Methodism's founder, John Wesley, urged all Methodists to have a "catholic" or universal spirit toward one another. Despite differences of opinion, we are to listen to one another and treat each other with respect, patience, and kindness. That is what our best-known Methodist slogan is all about: "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity." Samuel Johnson gave us one of the most liberating sentences ever when he said, "Kindness is in our power, fondness is not."

Third, we can look carefully for a way of compromise. Some people look at compromise as a weak and cowardly thing. They mistakenly think it has something to do with a lack of backbone. To be sure, there is a time to hold the line. We should never compromise biblical truth, principles, or convictions. But simply to be unbending is another thing altogether. The possibility of compromise is when we seek God's will and not our own. At any rate, compromise is a good way to deal with disagreements and move forward.

Finally, we can trust that God can use everything, even our disagreements for His purposes! The apostle Paul says to the Romans and to us, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to His purpose" (Romans 8:28). In the narthex of the Cathedral of Belmont Abby near Charlotte, North Carolina, there is a baptismal font mounted on a big rock. The inscription reads, "From this

stone, on which persons were sold into slavery, they now are baptized into freedom.” Only God can do that! And God can also transform any dead-end situation into a powerful force for good!

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 through Hal Brady Ministries (halbradyministries.com)

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Drawing Near to God

WHAT’S OLD IS NEW AGAIN ANNE PACKARD

As the South Georgia Conference begins 2023, Bishop Graves is focusing our energies to be prayerful people, and the Ministry of Memory will honor this mighty request for the New Year by showcasing how prayer has supported the Methodist movement for hundreds of years.

Prayer...what’s old is new again!

To begin a year of prayer, we must begin at the beginning and move forward in a methodical way if Susanna Wesley is to support our work. Therefore, we will begin with John Wesley and his strong beliefs in prayer, many of which were taught to him by his parents Samuel and Susanna. Both parents came from strong Christian backgrounds and families of nonconformists and, yet, each rejected their families’ beliefs in Puritanism to rejoin the Church of England. However, these early Puritan teachings can be seen in Samuel’s and Susanna’s parenting and in the newly formed Methodist movement. In fact, the Wesley Covenant Prayer that we still honor today was first used by John Wesley in 1753 when he published A Christian Library. He received it from Richard Alleine, a Puritan, who published it in Vindiciae Pietatis: or, A Vindication of Godliness in the Greater Strictness and Spirituality of It in 1663.

Wesley described the first covenant service in his journal as occurring on Monday, August 11, 1755, at the French church at Spitalfields in London with 1,800 people in attendance. The words used at this first service are lost to time but The United Methodist Church holds true to Wesley’s teachings with the following prayer:

“I am no longer my own, but thine.
Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt.
Put me to doing, put me to suffering.
Let me be employed by thee or laid aside for thee,
exalted for thee or brought low for thee.
Let me be full, let me be empty.
Let me have all things, let me have nothing.
I freely and heartily yield all things
to thy pleasure and disposal.
And now, O glorious and blessed God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
thou art mine, and I am thine. So be it.
And the covenant which I have made on earth,
let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.”

In NT Notes, 1 Thes. 5:16, John Wesley states that prayer is “the breath of our spiritual life” and “thanksgiving is inseparable from true prayer; it is almost essentially connected with it.” In his sermon, “The

Wilderness State,” Wesley writes that “neglect of private prayer” is the most cited means by which members lose their faith. And, lastly, in a letter written to Miss March dated March 29, 1760, Wesley advises that prayer “is the grand means of drawing near to God.”

So as we begin this New Year, may we be grateful for our blessings and diligent in our private prayer understanding that it is “the breath of our spiritual life” and the “grand means of drawing near to God.”



Resource Roundup – January 2023

Leadership Training Videos Available for Local Church Leaders

A series of training videos for local church leaders is available on the conference website. Laity who are stepping into new roles or who are continuing to serve in key leadership positions can take advantage of these video resources. In the videos, leaders will receive tools, training, and encouragement that will equip and empower them as they begin the year in their roles. [Click here to find the videos, resources documents, and to see the full listing of Leadership Training topics](#). Need something you don't see? Your connectional ministries staff is here to help! Email kelly@sguamc.com.

2023 Worship Planning Calendar

This resource is the full music and worship planning calendar for each Sunday in 2023, as well as special days and times throughout the year. Designed to help pastors, worship leaders, Sunday School teachers, and more. [Download today](#)

Human Relations Day is January 15

Resources are now available to help churches celebrate Human Relations Day on January 15, 2023. This special offering benefits neighborhood ministries through community developers, community advocacy through United Methodist Voluntary Services and works with at-risk teens through the Youth Offender Rehabilitation Program. [Find resources here](#).

10 free services for local churches

United Methodist Communications has a menu of services and tools as extensive as the menu of dishes at The Cheesecake Factory. Greg Petree has assembled a list of the top-10 services United Methodist Communications offers for free to help local congregations reach out to their communities.

[Read list](#)

Get that video on your website

When exporting videos for the web, the trick is to reduce the file size without compromising the quality. On this MyCom Tutorial, Kathryn lets us know the best way to optimize videos that you can upload to your website and make them play in the most efficient way possible.

<https://www.resourceumc.org/en/content/how-to-export-videos-for-the-web>



Retired Clergy Birthdays – January 2023

- 1/01 – Cindy H. Autry: 2958 Roswell Lane; Columbus, GA 31906
- 1/01 – James Hancock: 4360 Manor Millwood Rd. S; Manor, GA 31550
- 1/01 – Larry Roberts: 12 Foxfire Estates Circle; Waynesville, NC 28785
- 1/01 – Dan Robinson: 15 Kent Rd.; Tifton, GA 31794

1/02 – Sharon Loyley: 1544 Harris Ridge Rd.; Young Harris, GA 30582
1/03 – Marcus Tripp: 3791 Overlook Dr.; Macon, GA 31204
1/06 – Joyce Harris: 111 Ingham St.; St. Simons Island, GA 31522
1/07 – Darrell Carter: 2450 Odum Screven Rd.; Screven, GA 31560
1/07 – Tommy Martin, III: 606 Chastain Place; Macon, GA 31210
1/07 – Jerry Sharpe: 192 McElmurray Rd.; Waynesboro, GA 30830
1/08 – Annette Brooks: 114 Sunset Dr.; Fitzgerald, GA 31750
1/08 – Ernie Rogers: 1803 Pineknoll Lane; Albany, GA 31707
1/08 – Gary Starrett: PO Box 113; Bolingbroke, GA 31004
1/12 – Eddie Braswell: 1110 Moore Dr.; Americus, GA 31709
1/12 – Grady Vance: 127-B Nina Dr.; Eatonton, GA 31024
1/15 – Gary Morris: 2445 Jacqueline Circle; Moultrie, GA 31768
1/17 – Ed Ellington: 675 Arthur Wolfe Rd.; Dublin, GA 31021
1/21 – Billy Wicker, Jr.: 400 Ridgecrest Rd.; E. Dublin, GA 31021
1/22 – Tom Davis, Jr.: 155 Twin Creek Ct.; Athens, GA 30605
1/24 – Joe Dunagan: 130 Commercial Ave.; East Palatka, FL 32131
1/27 – Bill Jones: 106 Hilldale Circle; Vidalia, GA 30474
1/30 – Harold Feightner: 107 Harvest Point; Warner Robins, GA 31088
1/30 – Holland Morgan: 2 E. 62nd Street; Savannah, GA 31405



Scripture Readings – January 24 edition

January 29

Fourth Sunday After the Epiphany, Year A

- [Micah 6:1-8](#)
- [Psalm 15](#)
- [1 Corinthians 1:18-31](#)
- [Matthew 5:1-12](#)

February 5

Fifth Sunday After the Epiphany, Year A

- [Isaiah 58:1-12](#)
- [Psalm 112:1-10](#)
- [1 Corinthians 2:1-16](#)
- [Matthew 5:13-20](#)