

Interactive lesson



picture from Google maps street view, accessed on 12/17/2021

What do you see here? <Let them respond>

What makes a house a home? <Let them respond>

What defines your home for you? <Let them respond>

Would you call those things that define your home blessings? <Let them respond>

Does everybody have the same blessings?

<Let them respond>

Just as each person is a unique individual, God blesses us individually, while simultaneously blessing each of us with the fullness of His love. All of us were blessed when Jesus came as an infant into this world, just as all of us were once infants.

We had the same basic needs - food, clothing, shelter - and we must somehow have received enough of them to have survived. We all have known love in one form or another. These are blessings God has given us.

Are we healthiest when we keep our blessings all for ourselves? <Let them respond>

God calls us to share our blessings with others, that those blessing may multiply and all involved may be better off for it. Let the Holy Spirit guide you in showing God's love to all as we get into celebrating Jesus's birthday.

Gospel lesson

This week we turn to when Elizabeth recognizes the impending arrival of the Messiah in Mary.



picture from <https://www.freebibleimages.org/photos/mary-elizabeth/>

Luke 1:39-45

(NRSV)

³⁹In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country,

⁴⁰where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.

⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit

⁴²and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.

⁴³And why has this happened to me, that the mother

of my Lord comes to me?

⁴⁴For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.

⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

The word of God for the people of God

<Hymn "Tell Out, My Soul" UMH #200>

Message: The Blessing of Home



picture from

<https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/come-home-for-christmas/fourth-sunday-of-advent-year-c-lectionary-planning-notes/fourth-sunday-of-advent-year-c-graphics>

Please pray with me?

Generous provider of all blessings,
as we take time now to further consider today's
scriptures, please

- speak Your words through my mouth,
- open our ears to hear Your message, and
- abide in our hearts,

That we may learn better to abide in and share your
love. Amen.



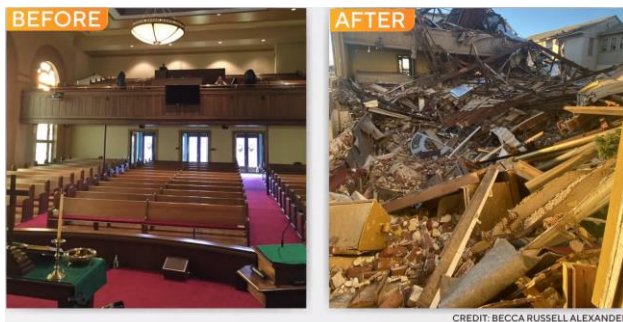
picture from

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This week in our Advent worship series is “The Blessings of Home.” To summarize:

“The story takes over this week. Let’s just admit it. The story that we’ve learned and told and retold, the story that we’ve sentimentalized and Disney-fied, the story that has produced songs and dramas, movies and poems.

And yet through it all, the story persists. The story draws. It defies explanation.”



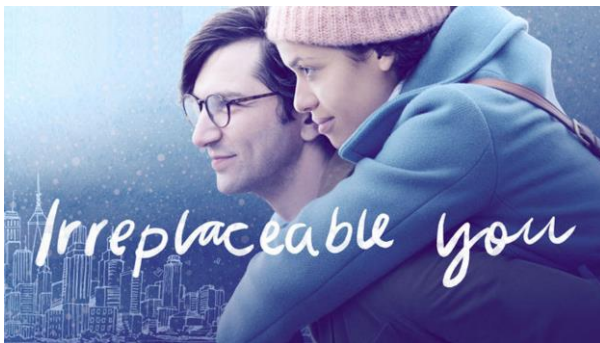
picture screencaptured from CBS news interview of UMC Pastor Joey Reed found at <https://www.cbsnews.com/video/minister-in-mayfield-kentucky-says-he-took-shelter-in-basement-closet-to-survive-catastrophic-tornado/#x>

We have heard how, two weeks before Christmas this year, a large swath of the Midwest suffered devastation from tornadoes in severe storms blowing through. Pictured here is the Mayfield United Methodist Church.

The pastor, Joey Reed, was interviewed by CBS Mornings. In the interview, even while overwhelmed by

the property damage, he talked about being grateful because his wife and children were OK. The interviewer noted that the Mayfield people she had spoken with felt blessed to be alive. In the midst of the devastation, it seemed to defy explanation.

Yet God knows, and tragedies often remind us, replaceable property matters far less than our irreplaceable loved ones. It does not matter if we are forewarned of the trouble, as the prophet Micah forewarned the Israelites about the consequences of their sin, or if it comes upon us suddenly.



picture from Netflix ad at <https://neiuindependent.org/13173/arts-life/irreplaceable-you-review/>

We can replace stuff, but our loved ones have a bond with us that is irreplaceable. In large part, they define home for us because we can let down our guard and just be ourselves with them. They are a blessing in our lives that lets us know our place in this world. Because we love them, we often make efforts to please them - on our own terms, growing as people.

Our loved ones shape us as people, and we shape them in turn. And since our loved ones shape us, it follows that to be the best we can be, the healthiest

and most loving, then we need to love the source of all life and love.



picture from personal design

As Kristen Feola put it, "You love others best when you love God most." We already know that God loves us.

We also know that we cannot restore those we love on our own, any more than we can redeem ourselves before God with burnt offerings. Only God can restore people. Paul wrote to the Hebrews that through the cross, Jesus abolished the ways in which people used to try to redeem themselves: burnt offerings and sin offerings. Instead, Christ enables us to be restored to healthy relationship with God, offering ourselves in love for God's service.

- † Micah faithfully foretold that God would bring restoration and recovery to His people.
- † Mary trusted that God would take care of her, and found her place in God's home singing the Lord's praises.
- † Elizabeth and her unborn son John both recognized God at work in Mary, and so Elizabeth welcomed the unwed mother-to-be with unrestrained joy, blessing Mary in her (E's) home.

Sanctification through Christ frees us to focus our efforts on loving God and loving one another. God welcomes repentant sinners, helps us, and renews us for sharing grace with one another.



pictures from personal collection

There's something about home – a belonging, a familiarity, a place to be who you are, a place to be loved as yourself – with which most people identify. In God's house, all people seeking to love God are welcomed into a home full of blessings with Jesus. And, if we are willing, the Holy Spirit works through us to show God's love to all people, because all are invited into our holy home.

One of the things we expect in a healthy home is that members help one another; support is there when needed. In the CBS Mornings news interview, Reverend Reed went on to describe worship the Sunday after the storm, supported through connection with other Methodists in his district and conference. He explained how he was able to talk about Advent Joy in the midst of the devastation.

On the back of the only bulletin salvaged by their administrative assistant, there was sermon synopsis: “Joy is often mistaken for happiness, but happiness can change by a turn of events. Joy is something that abides.” He went from that into describing how United Methodist Disaster Relief was already at work in the community to help people recover.

Reverend Reed said that in counseling people after meeting their immediate needs, local pastors have tried to help people understand that “Discipleship is forged in a crucible of suffering...[A]fter that suffering is acknowledged...after we’ve mourned our losses...and started to let go...we can move into a bright future where we’re helping our neighbors.”

Truly, in this tragedy we see the grace of God building resilience and community.



picture from personal photo

The mission statement of the Neighborhood Center in Utica is, “To enrich the lives of individuals and families through cooperative opportunities, resources, and advocacy which embrace diversity, promote empowerment, and foster responsible

citizenship.” When there, I heard how the grace of God was shown in building up community through enabling people to become both self-sufficient and invested in their local area.

God’s grace restores people, creates homes, strengthens relationships, and builds communities. If we want to be part of God’s home, we need to share God’s grace with others and to be the agent of the Holy Spirit where we can, to help establish that holy home where we live.

Jesus came to us as an infant; someone had to nurture that child. When He grew enough, He in turn shared the vastness of God’s love with us in a way that makes us feel safe, supported, and of value. Now it is our turn to nurture others and our community.



picture from personal creation

As you prepare for the holidays this week, reach out to people around you and affirm them for who they are. Point out something positive and unique to persons that you encounter. Let them know that you are glad they are in your life.

Because, in the end, all the things prepared are just stuff. It is our loved ones that fill our homes with blessing – God being the greatest among them.

<Confession and Pardon

BOW #475>

Let us pray:

Have mercy upon us, O God, according to your
loving kindness.

According to the multitude of your tender mercies,
blot out our transgressions.

Wash us thoroughly from our iniquities, and cleanse
us from our sins.

For we acknowledge our transgressions, and our sin is
ever before us.

Create in us clean hearts, O God, and renew a right
spirit within us;

through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen. (W.E. Orchard, England, 20th Cent., Alt.)

The Lord God is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

May the almighty and merciful Lord grant us remission
of all our sins, true repentance, amendment of life,
and the grace and consolation of the Holy Spirit.

Amen. (The Book of Common Prayer, U.S.A.)

<Doxology>

<Offertory / Pastoral Prayer>

Let us pray:

Magnificent God, as we focus on Mary, the mother of Jesus, we are reminded that you do great wonders and signs through the most humble and obedient of your children.

As we give our gifts to you this day,

† give us ears to hear the whispers of the angels speaking to us;

† give us eyes to see the needy and the unloved all around us;

† and give us faith to offer our lives to your plan of saving love.

- Lord, please help {these whom we lift up} with healing touch and comfort:
 - **Kathy Walrod** - heart surgery upcoming (valve issues)
 - -
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 - -
- Thanks for
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 - -
- Hold those who cannot be with us in Your loving embrace until we see them again.
 - Family far off
 - Travelers
- Send Your Spirit to address world/social problems

- end bigotry, dismantle racism, reform systems persist
- bring world peace
- Guide our Leaders – local, state, federal, international, and especially of Your church.

All these things we pray in as You taught us to pray:
<Lord's Prayer>

<Hymn "O Little Town of Bethlehem" UMH #230>

<Benediction>



background picture from
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As you gather with loved ones this Christmas season,
give your fears to God,
celebrate the joy of your relationships, and
cherish blessings (new and rediscovered).

Welcome Christ into your home,
rest in the grace of the Holy Spirit, and
let the light of God's love shine through you.

Amen.