

Welcome to *Genesis Generations*, the NC Synod's 2023 Summer Bible Reading Plan.

This study features writers—both clergy and lay—from across this synod. We give thanks for their contributions to this summer's journey into Genesis!

Begin each reading by first exploring the text of Genesis noted in the graphic image at the top of each page. Next read the thought-provoking devotional and sit for a while with the questions. Discuss with your family, friends, or small group. Close your reading with the prayer.

Please consider also participating in an additional option for this year's reading plan: a creative response. God has given human beings the ability to create. How does your reading and reflection lead you to respond? Color, paint, sculpt, build, sketch—any medium; every ability! Visit <https://nclutheran.org/congregations/engage-the-bible/> to learn more about it. And, remember: it's a creation, not a competition!

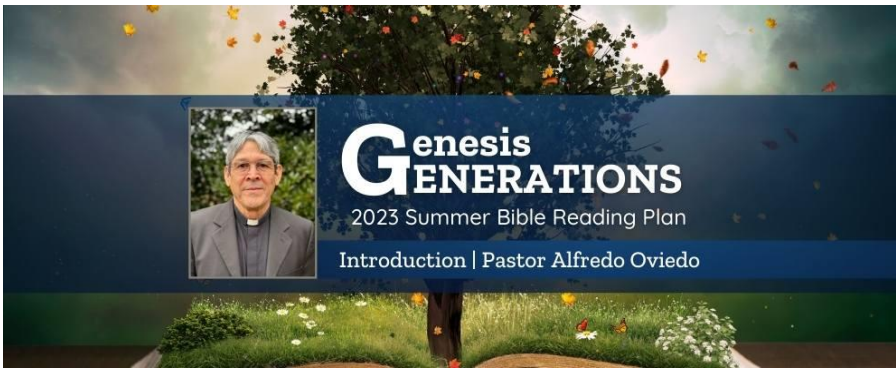
In the introduction to *Genesis Generations*, the Rev. Dr. Alfredo Oviedo writes that there is a pattern to the stories of Genesis:

- (1) God's creative Word calling something to exist, be, become,*
- (2) the struggle of what God created to live fully according to its own nature, and (3)*
- God's faithfulness for restoring life and order out of chaos.*

As you read, consider this pattern in the stories—and in your own life.

This Summer Bible Reading Plan is brought to you by the synod's Engage the Bible Task Group—a Book of Faith ministry.

We pray that your engagement with these ancient texts will bring new life and a deepening of your faith this summer.



Introduction

As an introduction let us be clear: the book of Genesis is a sacred story or narrative grounded on faith; it is not history in the scientific sense in academic disciplines. Nonetheless, sacred stories are not less truthful than positive knowledge in the matters they proclaim, which are

religious in nature.

Genesis is the Bible book of beginnings. Beginnings are organized in *toledoth*, a Hebrew word for generations. For some scholars, the book of Genesis is structured in ten *toledoth*, these could be short genealogies, large narratives, or a combination of both. The ten *toledoth* are: Heaven and Earth, Adam, Noah, Noah's sons, Shem, Terah (Abraham), Ishmael, Isaac, Esau, and Jacob (theopolisinstitute.com).

There is a pattern in the *toledoth's* narratives: (1) God's creative Word calling something to exist, be, become, (2) the struggle of what God created to live fully according to its own nature, and (3) God's faithfulness for restoring life and order out of chaos.

The main religious confession of the ten *toledoth* is that the whole universe, including heaven and earth, the natural world, humankind, nations (cultures), and Israel (God's chosen people), have been intentionally created and are sustained by God's mercy. This paradigm has functioned for Jewish-Christian religious traditions and adopted for Western civilization for the last two millennia.

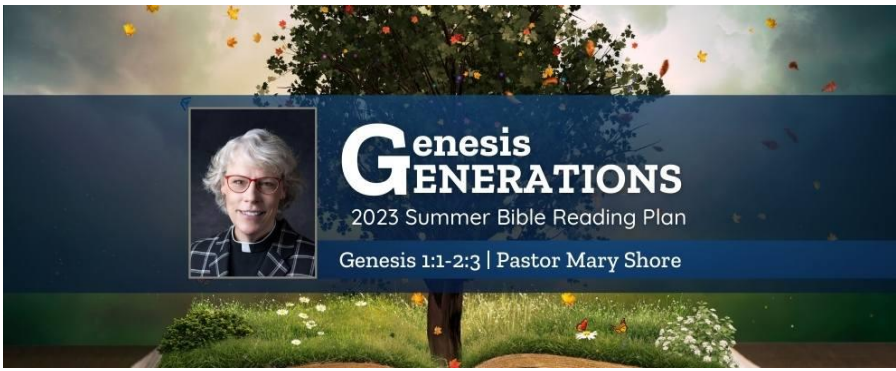
In the context of "God's chosen people" a question for debate is to what degree God, as confessed in Genesis' *toledoth*, is just an anthropomorphism—a distorted image of God. In other words, who is making who? Is God creating/choosing Israel? Or are Israelites creating a god? Reading the story of Genesis' *toledoth* shows that even by what we know of ancient near eastern cultures, God's ethics in some narratives is questionable. Our answer to this question has implications in the way we read and interpret all sacred Scriptures.

Reflect:

1. Does the "God's chosen people" concept imply by necessity that there are also "God's non-chosen people?" Isn't this the path to rationalize the dehumanization, oppression, and destruction of other human beings in the name of God?

Gracious God, let the Holy Spirit that inspired these sacred texts be our guide to a clear reading and honest interpretation of the Scriptures. We ask this in the name of Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Alfredo Oviedo is an immigrant from Mexico. He values genuine devotion to God, compassion, respect for all people, and living in community. Church life includes being Roman Catholic until age 12, time in the Baptist tradition, and being an ELCA rostered minister since 2014. Alfredo's family are Alejandrina (wife for 48 years), children (Amparo, Miriam, Freddy, and Ana Alexandra-RIP), seven grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren. He has had a professional career in mental health, college religion instruction, and chaplaincy, as well as being a 17-year associate pastor at Grace, Hendersonville. He currently serves as Assistant to the Bishop in the NC Synod. His hobbies are reading, computers, and soccer. He is passionate about ethnic integration in local congregations and Christian ethics.



In the Beginning Was the Word

When I was in the 8th grade, my dear confirmation pastor spent a lot of time one Saturday morning explaining to us how evolution could not have happened. His argument had to do with a horse and a donkey

breeding to produce a mule, and the mule being sterile. I was puzzled as I headed home. I asked my dad what he thought. Dad said, “I believe God created everything. I don’t know exactly how he did it.” In this way, Dad side-stepped the creation/evolution controversy. I’ve always been grateful for his answer.

I had the best confirmation pastor anyone could hope for, but my pastor was likely interested in a question that the book of Genesis was not written to answer. The creation stories current in the Ancient Near East when Genesis was being composed were often battles between opposing gods, or they featured two gods creating the world by means of sexual union. Genesis 1 does not have violence or sex at its center, but rather a God who speaks creation into existence and declares it very good.

In Genesis 1, God begins with the earth as a formless, dark void, and God says, “Let there be light.” God creates with a Word. By speaking, God brings order, light, and life to the chaos and darkness. This insight is important for much of our theology: we speak of Jesus as the Word made flesh. We believe that sins can be forgiven with a word that is spoken by Christ’s authority. We trust the promises God speaks in words like, “Behold I am with you,” and “This is my body, given for you.” God’s Word creates and sustains all that is.

If things were formless and void at the start, they are ordered and filled as a result of God’s Word. In the first three days, God creates the major domains of creation: light; sky and the division of the waters; land and plants. God spends the next three days populating the creation with heavenly bodies; water animals and sky animals; and land animals, including humans.

Six times, the author tells us that God judged creation “good,” and a seventh time God calls it, “very good.” We are not sure what it means that humans are created in the image of God, though Christian scholars sometimes see in this a reference to the communal (three-in-one) nature of the Trinity and humankind being created also for community with each other and with God.

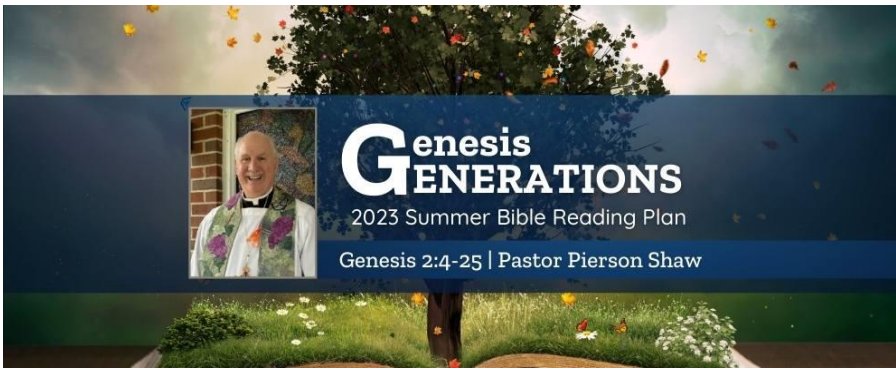
On the seventh day, God rests and so hallows a sabbath day not just for God, but also for creation. (You might not think you need a day off every week, but if it’s good enough for God, it’s probably good enough for you!) Genesis 1 shows us a generous, creative God, blessing all that God makes and having time left over to rest.

Reflect:

1. Where do you see the goodness of creation? What does it mean for humanity to care for a good creation?
2. What would you need to rest from in order to rest as God did?

Thank you, God, for all that you have made. Help us to see your goodness reflected in the beauty of creation. Bless us that we may be good stewards of the earth and its fullness. Amen.

Mary Hinkle Shore lives in Brevard, NC, with her husband, Hank, and their pets, Riley and Leslie, who were surely created very good. She teaches in the Synod Authorized Ministers program and writes for *Working Preacher* and *Enter the Bible*, among other publications.



Garden Helpmates

This time of year, many enjoy the fresh produce of gardens and farms. In winter, “fresh tomatoes” taste artificial like Styrofoam with flavoring injected.

Our text is part of ancient oral tradition, shared first in ancient times,

then written after Israel had come out of Egypt and settled in Cana. We recount the creation by the Master Gardener. The image of the Fertile Crescent of Genesis is an image used to great effectiveness by J.R.R. Tolkien in his allegorical tales of “Middle Earth,” and of Hobbits, and a ring.

Eden perfectly under God’s care and protection receives God’s perfect irrigation through mist from the ground. The human creature is taken from the *humus*, or Adam from the *adama*. The human creature is given limits to what can be eaten. Adam is told that “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.” The instruction is as the twentieth-century theologian, Karl Barth had said, not to be seen as the warning of some primeval “apple poisoning.” Instead, God as Divine Creator has established limits to maintain the right relationship between the creature and the Creator. In God’s wisdom, all things have been created by God, but this is a wisdom that is “too wonderful” for mortals (Job 42.3; Psalm 139.6).

U.S. Surgeon General, Vice Admiral Vivek H. Murthy, in May 2023 released an advisory on the “Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation.” In our story, God provides amid such reality. “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner.” The Hebrew word used here is *etzer* (helper). Throughout the Hebrew Bible, the word *etzer* is used to describe God. In this most ancient of the two creation stories, Adam is an *etzer* to Eve, and Eve is a helpmate to Adam. This mutual role of the two being *etzer* to the other, sharing in one flesh, becomes the basis of the marital relationship in which the “two become one flesh.”

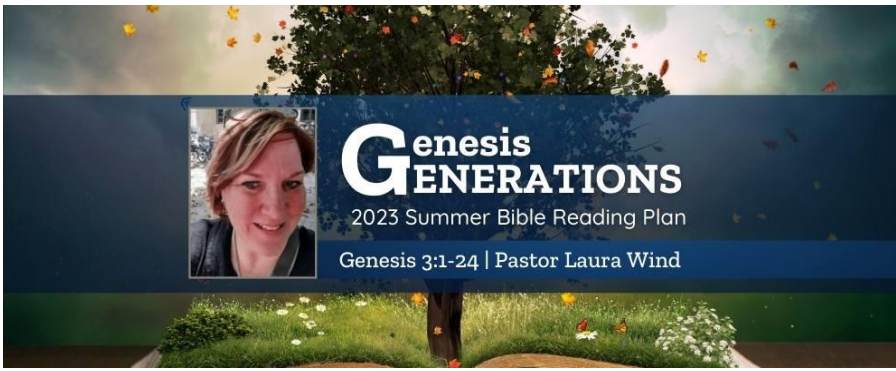
Unlike our salvation, all human relationships—including the intimacy of the marital relationship—require work on our part. Yet, God as our *etzer*, and Master Gardener cultivates, nurtures, and assists continually in all human relationships. Without God’s nurture, relationships soon become the artificial tomatoes of those Styrofoam-tasting tomatoes of winter.

Reflect:

1. Amid the current “Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation,” how has the fruit of human relationships become as poor quality as the “fresh tomatoes” of winter?
2. For many, because of human sinfulness and brokenness, living as God’s creation after the “Fall,” human relationships of all kinds can become a burden, often challenging or even unbearable. How does seeing God as the Master Gardener, and seeing ourselves being *etzer* to each other as foundational to marriage—and all human relationships—help us to see a restoration of joy in all our relationships?

God, we give thanks for the gift of relationship and the example of seeing ourselves as helpmates to one another in all of our relationships. Restore our joy in relationships. Amen.

The Rev. Dr. C. Pierson Shaw, Jr. has 29 years in ordained ministry and holds a Master’s in Sacred Theology in Church History and Theology (LTSS), and a PhD in Systematic Theology from the University of St. Michael’s College in the University of Toronto. He is married to Karen Russ Shaw and together they are the parents of two adult daughters, Sarah and Taylor Russ.



Back to the Garden

And at the east of the garden of Eden, God placed the cherubim, and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life. Gen. 3:24

One of my vivid memories about going to my childhood dentist's office was the blue illustrated children's

Bible he had. In this Bible was the story of Adam and Eve and the garden of Eden. The picture that most captured my child's imagination was the one of the cherubim with the flaming sword. This angel stood watch and kept Adam and Eve out of the garden after they ate of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the one that God told them not to eat. That angel reminds us that sometimes in life, there is no going back to where we have been. The way is barred to us.

In one sense, Genesis 3 is a story about Adam and Eve, and a story about disobedience. It is also a story about God who reaches out with grace, compassion, mercy, and love. It is a story about God who comes looking for Adam and Eve in the cool of the evening and lovingly fashions clothing out of animal skin for them so they will be protected, clothing Adam and Eve in grace.

As a child, the flaming sword seemed like a punishment for disobeying God, but when I think about the angel barring the way to the Tree of Life, it is a grace. Eating the fruit brought disharmony and strife into relationships and humans learned what it meant to suffer. Knowing us, God did not want us to suffer forever, and so God kept us from eating the fruit of the Tree of Life. When Adam and Eve ate of the fruit of the tree, they did become like God. Instead of remaining in a blissful state of happiness, Adam and Eve learned wisdom. However, with that wisdom came sorrow and suffering. No longer could humans remain in the garden. Innocence was lost, and humans were forced to make their way into the world.

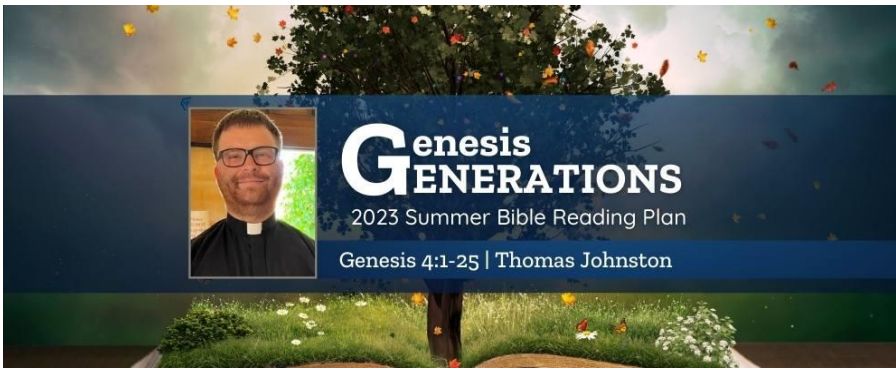
Since that time, we have been longing to return to the garden. The only way back to the garden is forward through the Tree of Life, where God is making all things new through Christ Jesus.

Reflect:

1. What does this passage tell you about the nature of God?
2. Where in your life is God making all things new?

Gracious God, You search for us when we hide from you, and you clothe us in grace. Even our disobedience is not stronger than your everlasting love for us. Help us to walk in your love this day and every day of our lives. Amen.

Pastor Laura Wind lives in Winston-Salem with her husband, Heath, where she serves Shiloh Lutheran Church. In addition to keeping bees, she and Heath enjoy gardening, aquascaping, and traveling. Laura also works as a freelance writer, musician, and fiber artist.



A Tale of Two Brothers

Cain and Abel are arguably one of the more well-known Bible stories, or at least the conflict between two brothers. John Steinbeck borrowed themes from the biblical story to craft *East of Eden*, whose title implies the location of the story. Cain and Abel were the first children of Adam

and Eve following their expulsion from Eden for disobeying God's commandment not to eat from the knowledge of good and evil.

As the story goes, Abel presents the first fruits of his offering, while Cain brought an offering. There is no explanation as to why God chose Abel's over Cain's, yet Cain's jealousy led to Abel's death. Cain expresses remorse, and God marks him so that no one will kill him.

What the story highlights is the significance of sin on the rest of humanity. Violence. Murder. Jealousy. These arose out of the fallen human nature emanating from the Cain and Abel story. In our world today, jealousy remains. We are jealous of someone else's status, possessions, life, and their relationship to others. The 9th and 10th Commandments warn against getting jealous of our neighbors' lives and possessions (Exod. 20:17-18), and Jesus even amplifies that commandment during his Sermon on the Mount that jealousy, or hating our brother, leads to murder (Matt. 5:21-26).

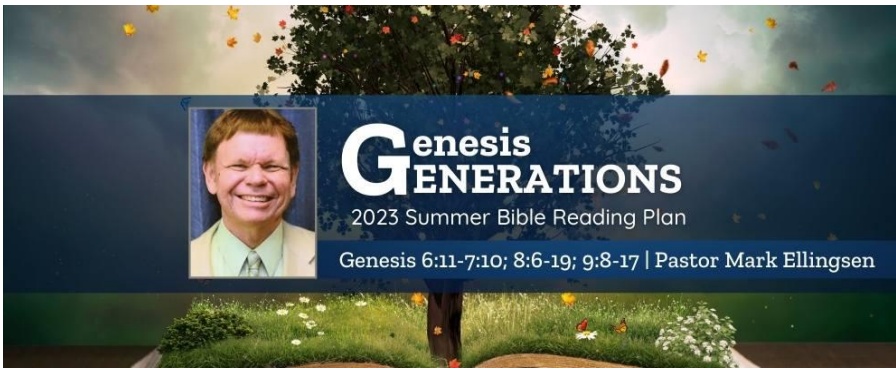
How does the cycle of violence end? The quick answer is: until Jesus comes again. While that may be so, the other answer is love. While there is no happy resolution for Cain because his line descended and amplified the violence, there is a promise—that Jesus came not to condemn the world but to save the world through his death and resurrection. Christ's love for us and his command for us to love one another provides that end to the cycle of violence.

Reflect:

1. What are some initial thoughts and feelings you have pertaining to the story?
2. How might you view the story differently through the lens of cross?

Let us pray: Good and Gracious God, we come before you knowing that sometimes our jealousy gets the better of us. Guide us along the way towards living who you call us to be. Through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Thomas Johnston, a third-year seminarian serving his internship at Calvary, Richland Hills, TX, is a candidate for ministry through the NC Synod at Trinity Seminary in Columbus, Ohio. He enjoys exploring the Dallas/Ft. Worth area, his cats, and digging into the nitty gritty of the Bible to share it with others.



Rainbows in Life

Two Columbia University Geologists, William Ryan and Walter Pitman, in *Noah's Flood* (Simon & Schuster), have postulated that in an ancient warming period, glaciers retreated, and melted water from the European glaciers existing at the time began to flow north into the North Sea,

depriving the Black Sea of its main source of replenishment. Parts of what is oceanic today in that region became dry land, but as the Mediterranean Ocean overflowed, it poured water back into the Black Sea basin. Apparently, the phenomenon of ocean basins flooding catastrophically during periods of rising sea levels was not unique to this particular event. There seems to be some factual basis, then, for concluding that the offspring of Abraham and Sarah, including Methuselah and his grandchildren like Moses may have encountered something like the great flood reported in this text.

In any case, the story of a catastrophic flood is not just recounted in ancient Hebraic literature. There are other, perhaps older accounts in literature of the Ancient Near East about catastrophic floods. Comparing the biblical version with these other accounts provides insights into the meaning of the biblical text for us today. Both a 22nd-century BC Sumerian Myth on the Flood in Mesopotamia as well as the Mesopotamian *Epic of Gilgamesh* of a century later, report on great floods from which gods delivered heroic figures. But unlike the biblical account, there is no report of God promising to preserve God's creation in the future (9:8-17). True enough, in the *Gilgamesh* epic, an ancestor of the main character, Utnapishtim, does relate to Gilgamesh in how he had followed instructions of the gods to build an ark to save mankind and been rewarded with eternal life (xi.2-7). But the account makes clear that Utnapishtim's experience with the flood is unique, that Gilgamesh cannot hope to find immortality in that path.

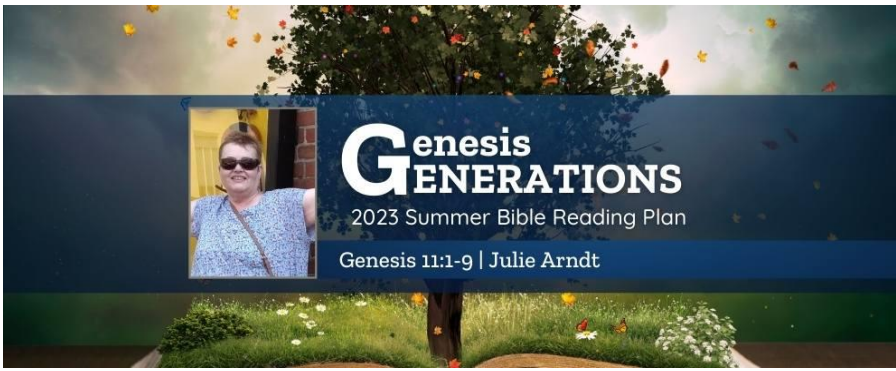
The biblical account by contrast (likely the weaving together of the ancient Eastern oral tradition with the Priestly tradition) has God offering deliverance and hope, not just to Noah but to us all. Martin Luther claimed that this a story about God's compassion, in which God delights "like a mother who is caressing and petting her child..." (*Luther's Works, Vol.2*, p.145). The reformer's description of the meaning of the rainbow which our loving God now uses as an emblem of God's promise never to destroy the earth and all creatures (9:12-17) is also profound. He claims that the mixture of colors in the rainbow reminds us that its inner color is like water, but its outer rim is the color of fire, indicating that wrath has limits (*Ibid.*, p.149). When we consider our text, when we see rainbows, we are reminded that "whatever misfortunes there are, of which this life surely has countless numbers...—all this will be turned into salvation and joy if you are in the ark, that is, if you ... lay hold of the promises made in Christ..." (*Ibid.*, p.155).

Reflect:

1. What's new about the Bible's version of The Flood? Have Jews and Christians just borrowed early traditions of great flood stories, or is there something special about our account?
2. What is the purpose of the specific details about the ark recorded in Scripture (vs. 14-16)? Is Luther correct in claiming that the details are there to remind us that God often commands and works through ordinary, seemingly unimportant, even comical things? Does God really operate that way?
3. Can we really count on God always and forever to deliver us? Given the realities of life's disappointments and death, in what sense is God still remembering His "rainbow promise?"
4. Where are the rainbows in your life?

Lord God, heavenly Father, who hast no pleasure in the death of poor sinners and wouldst not willingly let them perish, but dost desire that they should return from their ways and live: We heartily pray to You graciously to avert the well-deserved punishment of our sins and tenderly to grant us Your mercy for our future amendment; for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Luther's Works, Vol.53, p.140).

The Rev. Dr. Mark Ellingsen has served three decades on the faculty of the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, the largest accredited historic African-American seminary in the U.S. Named for his accomplishments and numerous media appearances to Marquis' *Who's Who in America*, this former parish pastor in NC and ELCA seminary professor (Luther Seminary) also served six years at the Lutheran World Federation's Institute for Ecumenical Research based in Strasbourg, France. He is the author of over 400 articles and 27 books (one of his latest is *Wired For Racism? How Evolution and Faith Move Us to Challenge Racial Idolatry* [New City Press]. You can check out the rest of his articles and books just by Googling him.



Universal Language

Sometimes when I write or work, I like to have the television or music playing in the background. The background noise helps me focus on the work I am doing. It really does help me concentrate. Scientists say that the presence of background noise means your brain must listen to

your thoughts to help make sense of the task at hand as well as the background noise. When the noise contains words, you may have an even harder time focusing because it disrupts your inner dialogue. Some students will ask if they can listen to music while they work on a project in class. I usually cave and let them have their background noise.

I think silence is hard for people. In silence, our own inner voice can go nuts and confuse our thinking. Rather, an absence of noise is hard for people. Because, let's face it, the world is a noisy place. The world is full of distractions, most of them man-made. People talking at each other. At certain times in many places, there are conversations going on in several languages at one time. There is the ubiquitous presence of social media to distract us with images, people wanting approval, demanding attention and fame, even for a moment. How do we make sense of it all?

In Genesis chapter 11, we read the story of the Tower of Babel. Language—rather, the cacophony of languages being used at once—is the problem here. There are countless languages spoken all over the globe. They evolved as people moved around and encountered other people and concepts. Language became part of how we humans define ourselves. The problem is that we are so easily distracted from the only truly universal language.

That language is the love of God, spoken through Jesus.

In the Star Trek universe, they solve the problem of multiple languages with a universal translator. Turn it on and suddenly, everyone understands Klingon. Or Vulcan. Or whatever. Pretty cool, huh?

The love of God is our universal translator.

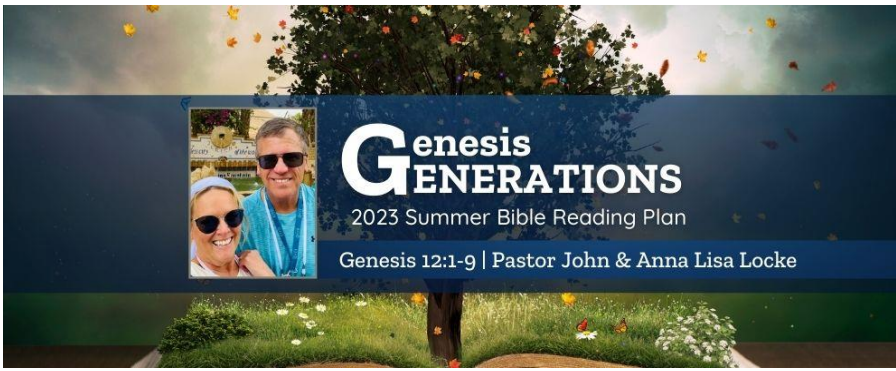
In the noisy, distracted world we live in...that truth is often drowned out. But it remains constant. Consistent. Unchanged. It does not seek fame or glory. It does not ask for validation. It does not need approval. It simply is.

Reflect:

1. What are some of the “background noises” that distract you from hearing God’s voice?

Enable us, oh God, to hear your language of love and truth amid the distractions of daily living, our own fear and uncertainty, our own desires. Speak to us clearly, that we may know your voice. Amen.

Julie Arndt is a newly-retired middle school teacher who is looking forward to resting her brain from the constant distractions associated with eighth graders by reading, working on some writing projects, and figuring out her next challenges. Julie is a member of St. Mark's, Lumberton where she edits the weekly newsletter and is a member of the congregational council. She serves the NC Synod as a member of the Indigenous Learning Team.



The Call of Abram

Today's text is the Lord's call to Abram. Like any journey, the traveler must remember some important points:

GPS INSTRUCTIONS? (communication between the Lord & Abram)

WHERE TO PITCH THE TENT? (where to stay)

WHICH WAY TO GO? (which direction).

Consider the three legs of this journey.

To Schechem in Canaan. The Lord "spoke" to Abram. Although we don't know whether it's with his ears or heart, Abram "hears" Canaan. Abram leads the entourage to Schechem and sets up camp. Schechem will become an important place for the Hebrew people (for instance, Jacob will be buried there; and later as the capital of the Northern Kingdom). At the tree of Moreh, the Lord appears to Abram and promises that Abram's ancestors will one day own the land. Abram builds an altar and offers worship.

Abram's next stop is the hill country of Canaan. Abram decides to stay in this valley where Bethel is to the west and Ai is to the east. A look at the Hebrew language is valuable. *Bethel* means the house of God; and *Ai* means ruin, destruction. Is Abram asking the Lord for protection and guidance for the next leg of the journey? Abram builds another altar, but this time Abram initiates the conversation with the Lord. Does he head East or West? Heading East might lead to danger and ruin, as Ai suggests. Bethel sounds very safe, with its sense of being the house of God. But in Hebrew thought, time flows from East to West (like the written language on the page). Ur—where they originally began—lies toward the east. It was also thought that God moves from East to West, and while he might meet the Lord on his journey, Abram would not be traveling with the Lord. [See Matt's Bibleblog. Also, search "DIRECTIONS IN THE BIBLE."] What does Abram discern as he kneels at the altar facing east? Perhaps the Lord indicates that Abram should follow his right hand, which would indicate a southern direction.

Final Leg of the Journey. Abram sets out southward toward the Negev, an area very opposite Harran. It was a dry, arid desert. Sparsely populated, it had none of the fine social aspects of Harran. The Lord's call was continuing to lead them into the unknown, into places where dependence on God's provision and mercy would be paramount.

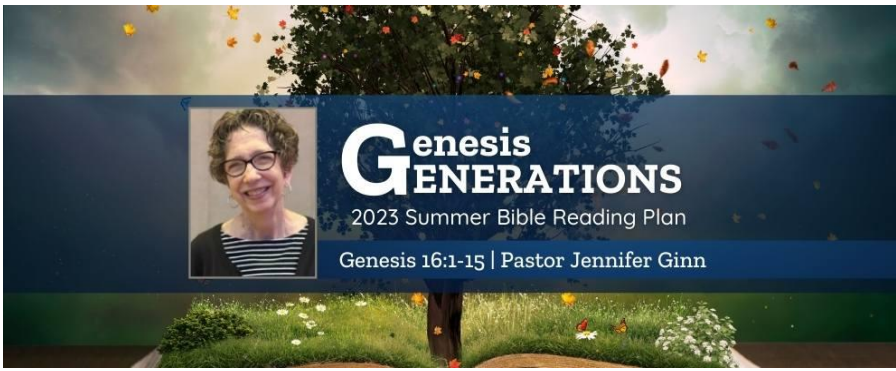
The promises of nation, recognition, and progeny will begin in the unknown—with God alone.

Reflect:

1. Reflect on times when you have felt called (motivated, encouraged, urged) to a new place or job or decision with no clear directions or understanding of what the new "place" would be like. How did you feel? What were your prayers with God like?
2. The unknown—whether it be neighborhood, school, job, or church—can be frightening and anxiety-filled. What are some of the ways we cope and manage those stressful situations?

Guiding Lord, you led Abram and Sarai in their journey and you taught them to receive and be your blessing. So guide and teach us, so that we might focus more on how you provide blessings to us and how we can be blessings to others. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.

Pastor John Locke lives in Fayetteville, NC where he is pastor of St. James Lutheran Church. He and Anna Lisa have been married almost fifteen years. She is active in church life, writing and teaching adult Sunday School programs and bringing artistic beauty to worship life.



The God Who Won't Let Go

How could this story be any messier? Abram's wife Sarai, way beyond child-bearing age yet desperate to produce an heir, grabs onto the chance for surrogate birth, a practice of her time. She gives her Egyptian servant Hagar to Abram in hopes of

a pregnancy, and Hagar soon conceives. But things between Sarai and Hagar immediately go bad. Hagar shuns Sarai, and in anger Sarai blames Abram, who hands the problem right back to Sarai, saying, "Your slave-girl is in your power, do to her as you please." And Sarai does just that!

Who is to blame here? Sarai, who chooses the only option she sees for bringing to life God's promise of offspring? Hagar, for resenting her mistress' claim to her child? Abram, who refuses to take a stand on the matter?

The one constant presence throughout this tangled story is the God who loves all of them fiercely: Sarai and Abram, Hagar, and her child. At least three times in the surrounding chapters we are reminded of that love as Abram is repeatedly promised descendants too numerous to count. Some scholars attribute this repetition to the differing perspectives of various writers, whose versions were later folded into a colorful, if confusing, narrative. Together these differing accounts continually support God's promise: from the mess these humans have made, God is determined to build a life-giving future.

Hagar, too, receives this promise. But abused by her mistress and cast out with no rights, how can she trust the God who gives it? As her fear melts into thanksgiving, she dares to call this one who speaks to her *El-roi*, which can be understood as, "the god who sees me." Hagar is seen and valued by God, as is her son Ishmael, who will indeed father a multitude of offspring.

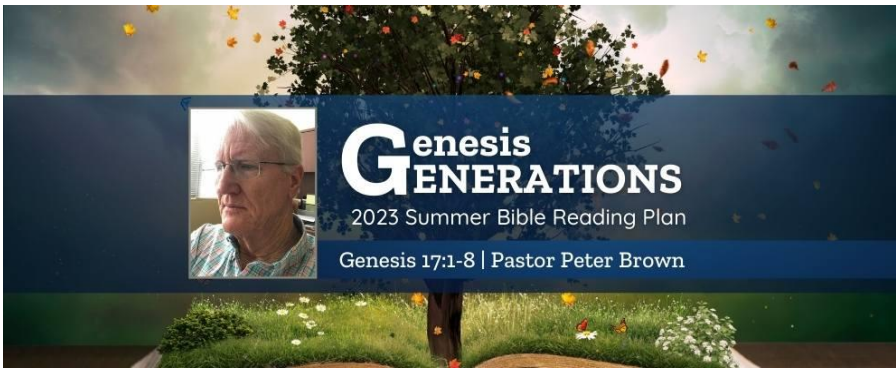
Human plans can go so very wrong, can't they? Years before seminary, I worked toward an advanced academic degree and the career of my dreams. But a series of financial and personal roadblocks caused me to step away. Though the pain of that decision is still sharp, looking back I see that God's plan was at work all along, to equip me with skills for a new path, the path of Gospel ministry. Throughout our own tangled stories, we can trust the same promise Abram, Sarai, and Hagar were given, that the God who sees us and knows us fully will never let us go.

Reflect:

1. Recall a time in your life when a plan you made didn't turn out well. Looking back, how can you recognize God at work in that plan?
2. When have you been an outsider and felt alone, without friends and separated from God? How does God's attention to Hagar, also an outsider, make you feel?
3. What new insights about God does this story bring you?

Holy One, your ways and your will are often confusing. Teach me to trust you as you correct my path or send me in new directions. Make of my messes a life-giving future. Thank you for your promise never to let me go. Amen.

Pastor Jennifer Ginn, having served in parish ministry for 22 years, is now living into the ministries of coaching, biblical storytelling, and writing stories in which God always shows up. She lives in a household of four, with her pastor-husband, an ornery cat and the sweetest Jack Russell Terrier on the planet.



Claimed for Eternity

It goes without saying that God is a creator. God is a creator of all things, seen and unseen, in the physical world and in the world that goes deep into the human heart. It should come as no surprise that in the Genesis text, God is the creator of the unbreakable relationship referred to

as a covenant. God's covenant with us will never be broken by God.

Unfortunately, *unbreakable* is not a word with which we are familiar when it comes to covenants or agreements. That's why we have prenups, divorce attorneys, loopholes, and fine print in documents. We humans are too prone to the vagaries of the heart and emotions. Too often we are looking for an *out*. But this is not the way that God operates.

Once we accept God's covenant, we find that God is all-in. God is so invested in us that the Almighty infuses and infects us with change—change of name, change of circumstances, change of life trajectory. When God's covenant is implemented, we should expect that our whole world will turn upside down.

This is what happened to Abram/Abraham. The old tribal chieftain went from being Abram, *exalted father*, to Abraham, *father of many nations*. It also happened to Jacob who went from *follower*, to Israel, *he who wrestled with God and lived to tell about it*. It happened to Saul, which means *asked for*, who became Paul, which means *humbled*. (Was he ever!) Each of these men had the entire scope of their lives changed because God said, "I will make a covenant between me and you..."

Now, let's note that none of these guys were very good at keeping covenants on their ends and none of them were folks you would want as a buddy, at least not before God got hold of them. Abram was a liar and a conniver, Jacob was a cheat and a trickster, and Saul held the coats of those who murdered Stephen. But as we've come to know, every saint has a past and every sinner has a future. And once God claims and renames sinners—establishes a covenant with them—the future is amazing.

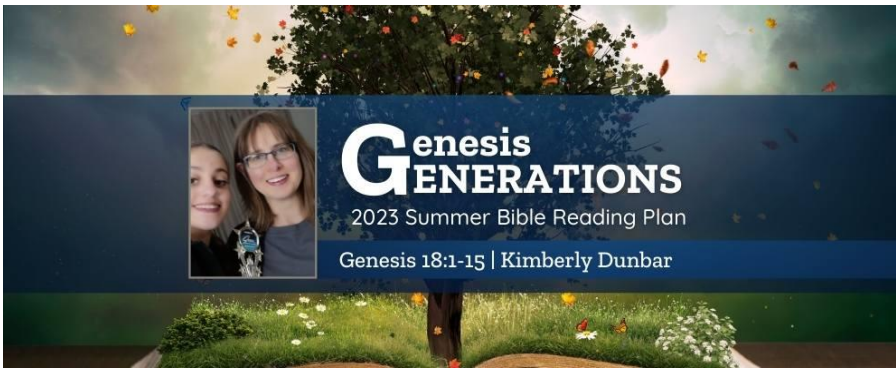
In the cross and in Baptism, God's covenant claims us and offers us unlimited spiritual potential. God renames us as daughter and son, children of grace. That's our future and that's forever.

Reflect:

1. How has being claimed by God's eternal covenant changed you?

Almighty God, may I ever live in your unchanging grace, captured by your love for eternity. Change me as you will and direct and guide my days forever. Amen.

Pastor Peter Brown of Raleigh is a full-time husband, father, grandpa, gardener, guitarist, and lover of coffee. Barbecue and long walks figure into his days.



In Due Season

I'm impressed with Abraham's hospitality in this story. There he is, sitting in the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. He unexpectedly sees three strangers and springs into action. He runs to them, bows down, refers to them as LORD, and to himself as their servant. Abraham

offers to bring them water and a little bread while they rest in the shade of the tree, and they agree. But Abraham does more. After telling Sarah to make bread using the finest flour, he has a servant prepare a choice calf. He adds curds and milk and brings it to them, standing by as they eat.

Then, something truly unexpected happens—one of the men says that Sarah will have a son. Abraham's impressive hospitality pales in comparison. Sarah and Abraham are old, and this announcement strikes Sarah as absurd. She laughs to herself. Abraham and Sarah had wanted a child for so long that they'd stopped hoping for one. They'd assumed it was too late. But the LORD knows what Sarah was thinking. He asks Abraham, "Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?" He reiterates that soon, "in due season," Sarah will have a son. Disbelief met with the gracious truth of an unexpected and abundant blessing.

Have you ever hoped for something so long that you'd lost hope? I imagine many of us have. While we know that all things are possible with God, we also know that it can be hard to wait without clear reassurance or results. How do we hold onto hope, yet live in the imperfect present? How do we accept what is now, and trust and be open toward God?

These questions brought to mind some familiar verses:

*For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts. (Isaiah 55:8-9)*

For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the LORD, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. (Jeremiah 29:11)

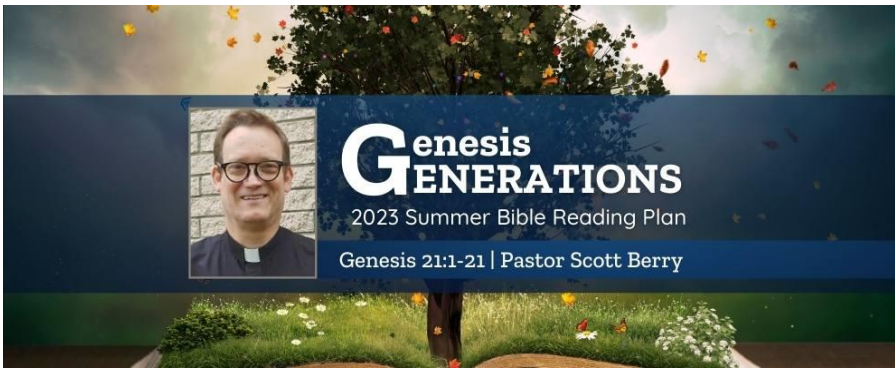
No, the unexpected and abundant blessings that God showers on us don't always arrive according to our timetable. Nonetheless, God is with us. May we hold onto the gracious truth that nothing is "too wonderful" for the LORD.

Reflect:

1. What are some of the blessings you've received from God that arrived when you didn't expect them?
2. What helps you hold onto hope while living in an imperfect world?

Gracious God, thank you for your presence in my life and the many ways you love and care for me. Help me to trust you as I wait for your plans to unfold. Amen.

Kimberly Dunbar is the Outreach Ministry Coordinator at Good Shepherd, Brevard, and is an approved Candidate for Minister of Word and Service through the NC Synod. She feels abundantly blessed to be the mother of 14-year-old Sophie.



Conflict and Promise

We've all seen how family dynamics can get messy, and Abraham has found himself in quite a mess! His wife, Sarah, being unable to bear a child, urges Abraham to conceive with Hagar, which he does and has a son, Ishmael. Later, God promises Sarah her own child by Abraham and

Isaac is born. And as you can imagine, things start to go south very quickly. Before long, Sarah and Abraham have banished Ishmael and Hagar to the wilderness.

Jealousy, intrigue, a squabble over an inheritance, and sibling rivalry; all the elements of one whopper of a family conflict!

For the Israelites, they would later see this Hagar/Ishmael story play out in parallel when they themselves are living in slavery and conflict in Egypt and are led out by Moses into the wilderness. Despite being freed from slavery, conflict continues unabated for the Israelites in the wilderness.

Conflict occurs when we are in an invested relationship with each other. That relationship can take the form of a biological family, but it can also occur within our family of faith, i.e., the Body of Christ. Indeed, the hallmark of Christians from the very beginning has been marked by conflict (see the book of Acts, any chapter). Christians today experience conflict with not just other faiths but within ourselves over things big and small; both important and insignificant. Sometimes, it can feel a bit overwhelming at how much strife we see going on in the world, in our nation, and within our own doors.

But there is a common thread that runs through our long history of conflict—God's promise.

In the wilderness, God promises that Hagar and Ishmael are not forgotten, and that Ishmael will be the father of a great nation, just like his half-brother Isaac. God delivers the Israelites from slavery and the wilderness to the promised land. For us, we have the promises of Christ, that we are not forsaken and have been given the Holy Spirit to teach, guide, and advocate for us.

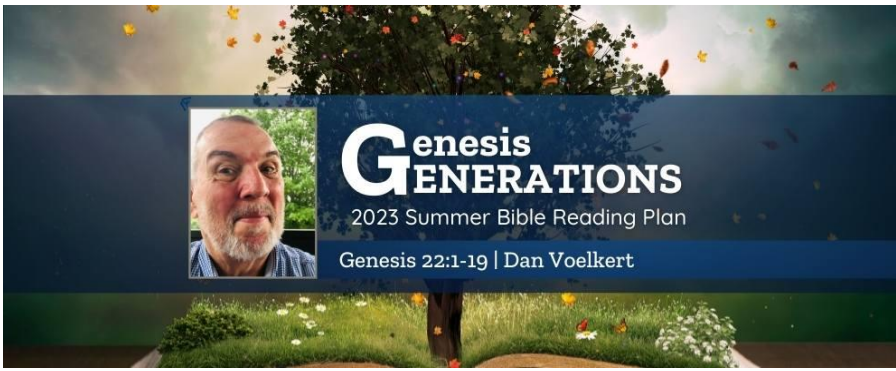
We remember God's promise to Abraham and Sarah, but we often fail to remember that God made a promise to Hagar and Ishmael too and they were not forgotten. What must have felt like the end to Hagar and Ishmael was, in God's eyes, only the beginning of something even bigger and better.

Reflect:

1. Can you think of a time when you experienced conflict, and came out the other side with a deepened faith in God?
2. Are there times when you have felt abandoned by God? How did you handle it? How do you feel God handled it?
3. What conflicts in your own faith community were a bit overblown in hindsight? What conflicts perhaps needed more attention? Where was God in all that conflict?

Loving God, you do not cause conflict. You do not desire strife. But in your great wisdom, you take our conflicts and can use them to further your kingdom according to the promises of Christ. Help us to resolve our conflicts faithfully, with mercy and justice. Amen.

The Rev. Scott Berry is pastor at the Lutheran Church of Our Father in Greensboro. He and his wife Emily have two smart and independent daughters, and Scott loves to play pinball and read up on all things science.



What Kind of God Is This?

What kind of God calls you away from the comfort of your father's home and promises you and your descendants a new land...that is already occupied?

What kind of God promises you will be the father of a great nation but delays giving you a child until you

and your wife are old and withered? What kind of God will still fulfill the promise of a child after you have seen fit to take matters into your own hands (Ishmael)? What kind of God gives you the long-promised son and then demands you offer him as a human sacrifice by your own hand?

The story of the sacrifice of Isaac—or to be fair the *near* sacrifice of Isaac—is a strange and troubling story, especially to our modern ears. What kind of God can demand such a thing? And even if it is *just* a test, what kind of God can be so seemingly cruel? How do we reconcile this account with the loving God we worship?

Abraham's response is the core of this story. The writer of the story does not let us have psychological insight into what Abraham must have been thinking and feeling. It is just a matter-of-fact account of how Abraham carried out this gut-wrenching command to sacrifice his only son. Abraham's faith was such that even if he had to carry out such a horrible deed, he knew God would still keep God's promises.

But he also knew something else about God. He knew God's grace. Why, out of all the people in the world did God select him for this great promise? How, when all hope was lost of bearing children, did he and Sarah receive the miracle of Isaac? You can see that, in his trust, he knew that God would be true to God's promise in his response to Isaac's question about not having a lamb for the sacrifice. "God will provide one," he said hopefully.

In Romans, St. Paul, in his great discourse on the centrality of God's grace in Christ, holds up Abraham as an example of faith. Paul cites all the seeming obstacles in the way of God's promise coming to fruition but adds, "Hoping against hope...he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God being fully convinced that God was able to do what he promised. Therefore, his faith was reckoned to him as righteousness" (4:18;20b-22)

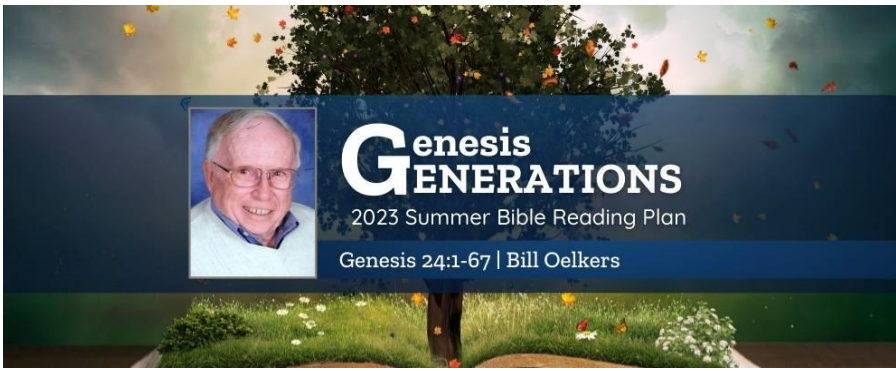
What kind of God is this? It is the kind of God that is constant in his love though that may not always seem readily apparent. As we listen for God's voice in our own faith journeys we can be called to travel by a way as yet untrod. We may wonder why God would be leading us there. May the example of Abraham's faith guide us. And let us take comfort that this very faith is a gift of the Holy Spirit who continues to work in and through us to face the unknown with the hope we all share in Christ.

Reflect:

1. Have you ever felt called to step outside your comfort zone in faith? How did you respond?
2. Does Abraham's example of faithfulness inspire you?

Heavenly Father, your grace is sufficient for all our needs. You are always faithful in your love of us. Keep us faithful in all you call us to do. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Dan Voelkert of Holy Trinity, Hickory is a retired federal employee who has discovered, after years of guitar playing, that his true musical love is the ukulele. (It's not the toy you think it is.) He enjoys volunteering and spending time with his two adult children and their families.



Our God Is Leading Us

These 67 verses contain a number of interesting characters in a story that seems somewhat out of touch with our current views of courtship and marriage, at least in the Western world. I met my wife at church (which a former pastor once told me was one of the best places to meet your

spouse!). Many readers, I suspect, can also relate to how they met and married their spouses.

Here we find Abraham, old and anticipating his death, worried that his son, Isaac, would take a wife from among the Canaanites, who had a reputation for not living up to God's expectations as well as to Abraham's expectations. So, he asks his most trusted servant to swear an oath, carry lots of treasures, and travel over many miles to his home country to find a bride from among his family.

From the beginning Abraham was led by God—his elderly wife Sarah had borne a son and he had God's promise that Isaac would have children. He was quite sure that God would work out the particulars in some way. So, if the servant's journey was not successful, he told the servant he would be released from his oath if no bride could be found. The servant was also being led by God as he traveled and when he reached the well, he prayed that the Lord would show him a suitable bride-to-be. It is interesting to note that the meeting took place at a well similar to the meeting place of Jacob and Rachel, and later in the New Testament, that of Jesus and the Samaritan woman.

God became the matchmaker for Isaac and Rebekah. But what if Isaac had married a Canaanite woman? How different the course of history might have been.

Over the many years since the time of Christ, Christians have believed that God would be their guide along life's pathways. Abraham, his servant, Isaac and Rebekah, and many others, believed in that spirit-filled guidance.

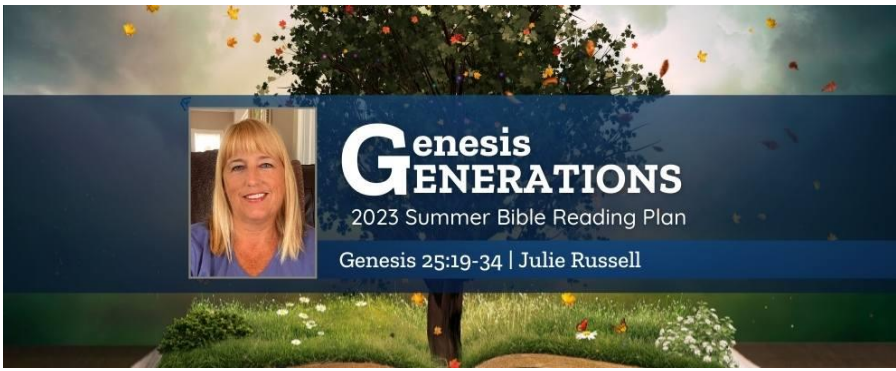
It is that same guidance that travels with us in our life's journey. God is leading us and showing us *The Way*.

Reflect:

1. Are there times when you have called on God to guide you?
2. How did you know that it was God's voice that was answering?

Lead us, dear Lord, where you would have us go, and help us do all things in Your name. Amen.

Bill Oelkers, (Mt. Pisgah, Hickory) grew up on a small farm in Pennsylvania and was active in Lutheran Student Ministry at Penn State where he majored in accounting. He worked for the federal government in Washington, D.C. for 35 years before retiring to Hickory with his late wife. A member of the NC Synod's Campus Ministry Committee, and long-time (now-retired!) church treasurer, he has a daughter and two adult granddaughters.



The Heir and the Spare

Don't we love it when God does something radical and unexpected? Well, yes and no. We love it when that *something* affirms our feelings, beliefs, or worldview. We get uncomfortable when that *something* seems in opposition to those things.

Since The Beginning, human beings have tried to bring order to a chaotic world by setting up rules, institutions, and other social constructs. These are neither good nor bad, but they are of human design, which makes them imperfect: tribes, borders, governments, church hierarchies, traditions, family obligations... The list is endless! God, who created us, knows that we sometimes need these structures, but God also loves to shake us up and show us that God is way bigger than any plan or tradition we may come up with on our own.

The story of Jacob and Esau upends one of those human-made traditions: birthright inheritance. Jacob convinces his older twin brother, Esau, to surrender his birthright (money, lands, titles, blessings) in exchange for a bowl of stew. This may seem ridiculous to us, but apparently, Esau's stomach overrides his brain, and he agrees to the deal. These two have been wrestling since the womb, jockeying for position, scrambling to be the first one out; Esau wins their first race with baby Jacob clinging to his heel! They MUST be the undisputed champs of sibling rivalry in Genesis!

They are also as un-alike as twins can be. Jacob is clever; Esau is impulsive.

Jacob is forward-thinking; Esau is concerned with immediate needs.

Jacob sees the forest; Esau sees one tree.

Jacob is devious; Esau is easily duped. (Spoiler alert!)

This list gets longer and more uncomfortable in later chapters where we can use words like *trickster*, *liar*, and *thief* to describe God's choice to be the father of a nation! What?

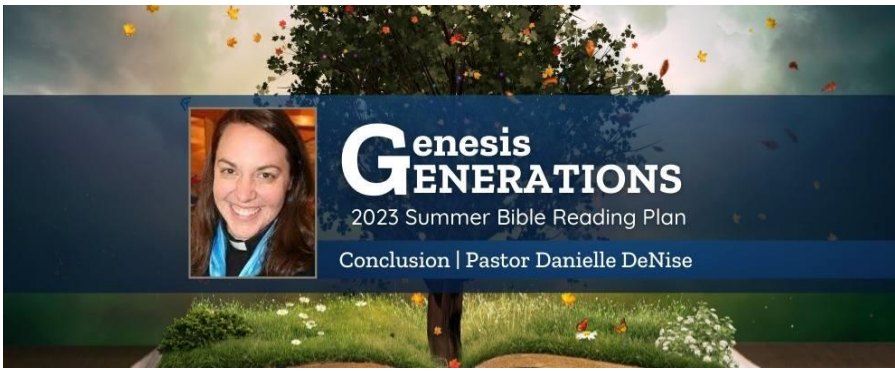
Our modern sense of fairness gets challenged by this story. Why is the younger trickster the one who wins God's favor? Maybe God knows that Jacob's value is not determined by the luck of his birth order. Maybe birthright inheritance causes more problems than it solves (ask Princes William and Harry about "heir and a spare" family tension!). Maybe God makes unexpected choices as God moves with us through human history, running after us, reminding us that God's with us and for us in surprising ways! We are valuable because God says so, not because of what we do, or where, when, and to whom we are born. That's Good News!

Reflect:

1. What about this story surprises you? Does it comfort you or make you uncomfortable? Why?
2. On what social constructs or traditions do you rely? Can you set them aside if God has a different plan for you?

Thank you for loving us and choosing us and surprising us every day! Help us to see our value and that of our neighbors through your eyes and not with our eyes. Teach us to set aside the worldly ways we cling to in order to follow your ways. Amen.

Julie Russell, from Macedonia, Burlington, is a newly-adjusted empty nester whose two children are enjoying their time at NC State. The Tar Heel grad forgives them for joining the Wolfpack and even wears red from time to time! She enjoys reading, gardening, jigsaw puzzles, and long walks with her crazy dog, Charlie and her husband, Chris.



Conclusion

When I was 25 years old, I was diagnosed with cancer. My mom and dad gathered with me in the hospital room as I prepared for surgery. We were breathing deep and then heard a noise in the hall—my seminary classmates! Seven of them! The nurses saw this group of women

armed with their five semesters of seminary and quickly ignored the two-person-with-you rule. They filled the room with their presence and began to pray. My dear friend Laura bowed her head and offered these words, “God in the beginning there was chaos and there was light and life. Bring light and life again.”

In those early days of treatment, I clung to the dailyness of the creation story—that in each day God said, “It was good,” and believing that God was making that same proclamation over me and my scars. As you have experienced the beginning of Genesis, I pray too that you know the God who, in the midst of chaos, speaks and creates, and who says, “It is good.”

And then you keep reading Genesis and think, “Is it really good?” By chapter three, we humans have screwed it up. We have been tempted to be like God hoping to be in control and opting for our own knowledge instead of a way of trust in our Creator.

The life that God spoke into being is complicated. Sinful, flawed, broken. We see this as Cain takes the life of Abel; as the world is flooded; as the tower of Babel is built and languages confused. And even Abraham, who is revered, is broken, scheming, and cheating.

And yet, God is not done creating or speaking life. God takes Abraham and begins a covenant that cannot be broken—God will bring redemption for all God’s people. A spark of hope.

A spark that quickly is in question—how will Sarah and Abraham have a baby? How can God possibly accomplish a people without an heir? In true human fashion, Abraham and Sarah try to solve their covenant problem on their own, exploiting and abusing others like Hagar. And yet, still God is faithful even to Hagar—who is the first to give God a name in Scripture calling God *El Roi*, the God who sees.

And yet, God is not done creating or speaking life. God gives Sarah’s barren womb the gift of Isaac. They begin to sense the spark of hope again. Abraham and Sarah will have an heir, but will they have land? A home? At this point, the only thing that is theirs is Sarah’s burial plot. God persists. Isaac joins Rebekah in life and they grow their family with Jacob & Esau.

Will this family finally choose the way of trusting God? Will they believe the covenant that God made knowing that God is the only one who can fulfill it? Will they opt for the all-too-human posture of securing their status and safety? Will they live the gift that God proclaimed over creation—the proclamation of their goodness?

Stay tuned! Discover more of the family of God’s story next summer in *Genesis Generations II*.

Reflect:

1. Which reading from this summer’s Bible reading plan will stay with you? Why?
2. Do you see yourself in any of the faithful, flawed family members we’ve read about? What can you take from their stories into your daily walk as one of God’s beloved in the world?

Creator God, you give us all we need. You speak life into being and redeem the world with your love. Give us compassion for all people and wisdom to trust you as we go about our lives, living for you. Help us to share your love with the world. In Christ's name, Amen.

Pastor Danielle DeNise serves as the ELCA Director for Evangelical Mission in the North Carolina Synod. She is an Ohio girl (Go Buckeyes!) who moved south as quickly as she could to enjoy the sunshine. She is a graduate of American University and Duke Divinity School. She is married to Michael, and they have two small kiddos—Moses and Olive. She and her family love the beach and baking. Danielle enjoys reading and loves chai lattes.



How will you respond?

Create!

New this year, come along on an artistic journey of response by creating your own *visio divina* of one or more of the daily devotions.

God the Creator has made us beings with the capacity for creation. How do your reading and reflection lead you to respond? Color, paint, sculpt, build, sketch—any medium; every ability.

Share in your congregation. Gather and showcase artistic responses from all ages: perhaps as a narthex display or bulletin board!

Share with the synod. You may submit a photo of your creation so that it can be shared widely across the synod. Complete the form on this page: nclutheran.org/congregations/engage-the-bible/

Share with the world. Post your creative response on Facebook or Instagram.

#2023GenesisCreations @ncsynod

Complete your creation and share by July 31. Remember: it's a creation, not a competition!