

# bible<sup>+</sup>study: december 2019

**Belton Joyner, Jr.**

*Based on the scripture lessons of Cokesbury's Adult Bible Study Series*

## December 1, 2019 Text: Genesis 12:1-9 “Trusting with Hope”

In a passage as rich as this one, there are multiple handles for picking up revelation and truth. Let’s zero in on just one verse: Genesis 12:9: “And Abram journeyed on by stages toward the Negeb.”

By stages.

For the twenty-first century, that is a strange way of doing things. Our view is more like “Let’s get it done and get it done now!” Why else would companies implement drone service to get a package delivered the same day it is ordered? Why else would fans expect “one-and-done” players to bring immediate championships? Why else would we get exasperated because airport security delays us ten minutes?

By stages.

Abram understood that some things take time. He had not failed simply because he was not at the Negeb desert as soon as he walked out the door. The Common English Bible says he was “making and breaking camp as he went.” Wouldn’t he have gotten there faster if he had kept moving without all those nightly stops? You know the answer: Without that rest at night, he never would have gotten there.

By stages.

## December 8, 2019 Text: Hebrews 11:1, 6-16 “Faith and Hope”

The sixteenth chapter of Hebrews notes a number of persons who showed faith: Abel, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Esau, Joseph, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Sampson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and lots of unnamed believers.

What an interesting array! How about Noah, naked and rip-roaring drunk (Genesis 9:21)? How about Rahab, well-established as a prostitute (Joshua 2:1)? How about Jephthah, willing to let his daughter be killed and the son of a prostitute (Judges 11:1, 39)? How about David who had another man killed so he could have that man’s wife (2 Samuel 11: 14-26)? How about David who left eight concubines to be raped (2 Samuel 16:21-22)? How about Abraham pretending his wife was his sister (Genesis 12:13)? How about Sarah who laughed at the promises of God (Genesis 18:12-13)?

Well, you get the idea. These great figures of faith were not always paragons of virtue. This is not an invitation to “go and sin boldly because these saints did,” but it is an assurance that God’s gifts of faith, love, and hope are given “in spite of.” Those gifts are indeed signals of a new beginning, a fresh start, a good tomorrow.

I love the way God’s attitude is described in Hebrews 11:16: “...God is not ashamed to be called their God...” My pastor often ends her ser-

Abram stops at Shechem (Genesis 12:6), Bethel (Genesis 12:8), and Hebron (Genesis 13:18). These were the major urban centers in Canaan. It is as if Abram wants to touch all the bases on his way to home plate. When I am facing a difficult theological or moral journey, I am more likely to want to run from first to third and skip second base, and maybe even settle for being on third base. Impatience is not in Abram’s repertoire.

By stages.

Even though Abram is willing to move gradually toward his goal, he does indeed move toward that goal. What does that mean for me?

### What Someone Else Has Said:

In the Charles P. Frank novel *Digging for Beauty* (iUniverse), one character was described: “Waiting was difficult. Mags breathed deeply, her nerves on edge.”

### Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Make me patient, Lord...”

mons with some word of grace and then says “And that’s the good news for this day.” That’s what I see in this text! Good news! None of the sins of these people mentioned in Hebrews 11 is hidden from God. None of the sin in our own lives is hidden from God. And yet! And yet! “God is not ashamed to be called their (our) God.”

No wonder we can have hope! When we see how God has used these imperfect people and how God has employed these people to be carriers of the faith and how God is a God of possibilities. Faith looks beyond our failures and sees a God who delivers. What more can we say other than “Thanks be to God!”

### What Someone Else Has Said:

Richard Rohr (*The Universal Christ*, Convergent Books) has written: “Faith at its essential core is accepting that you are accepted! We cannot deeply know ourselves without also knowing the One who made us, and we cannot fully accept ourselves without accepting God’s radical acceptance of every part of us. And God’s impossible acceptance of ourselves is easier to grasp if we first recognize it in the perfect unity of the human Jesus with the divine Christ.”

### Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin : “Grace-giving God, You give new beginnings and in faith I claim that now...”

## December 15, 2019 Text: Isaiah 42:1-9 “Hope for New Things”

Okay, it is a small matter, but I have a pet peeve. Don’t you remember seeing those real estate signs that say “Home for Sale”? That bugs me. One might sell a house, but one cannot sell a home. A house is a building, but a home is relationships. One can be bought and sold; the other cannot. How something is worded does make a difference! There---I feel better for having gotten that off my chest!

But a similar problem occurs in this week’s study text. How are we to translate mishpât (Isaiah 42:1, 3)? The King James says it means “judgment.” The New Revision Standard Version says it means “justice.” Robert Culver indicates that it should be rendered “ordinance or law.” It makes a difference as to which translation choice is made.

Is God’s Servant (Isaiah 42:1) coming to make sure all of God’s laws are obeyed—legal judgment? Is God’s servant coming to make things fair and equal for all of God’s children---justice? That’s not exactly a

dead issue in today’s United Methodist Church.

No matter which way one goes in translating these verses, one thing is clear: God is about new things. Isaiah 42:9 reminds us that “See, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare...” It is as if the prophet Isaiah is cautioning us: “Just because you understand what God said ‘back in the day,’ have you checked your e-mail lately to see if there is a new gift from God?” Or, maybe, “When was the last time you prayed about this?”

These “servant songs” are often said to be precursors of Jesus Christ. Others say that these texts point to God’s expectation of Israel returning from captivity. Either way one approaches these verses, one finds the hope of light shining in the darkness (Isaiah 42:6). Either way one approaches this prophetic word, one sees that God has not let go (Isaiah 42:6). Either way one approaches the text, one is given hope because

**December 15**    *continued from page 1*

God is not through doing new things (Isaiah 42:9).

**What Someone Else Has Said:**

Jürgen Moltman has written (*The Experiment Hope*, Fortress): “For a Christian theology of hope, this hope is not a modern phenomenon which must be interpreted religiously...It is not grounded in optimism, but in faith.”

**December 22, 2019 Text: Matthew 1:18-25 “Hope Fulfilled”**

For the past two years, I have spent Christmas with my son and his family in Grand Haven, Michigan. Christmas Eve Communion at Church of the Dunes United Methodist in Grand Haven is a strong and moving service. During the first part of the service, a woman dressed as Mother Mary walks up and down the aisles, holding the babe wrapped in swaddling cloths. All we can see of the infant is the bundle of fabric that warms him as his mother holds him close.

After Mary has strolled among the congregation she goes to the Table and places the baby there. The service continues and when it is time for the Lord’s Supper, Pastor Lou Grettenberger reaches for that package on the Table. He unfolds the clothes that have surrounded the young one. He folds back that cloth and reveals the Bread that will be used for Communion. This Christ Child that Mary has carried around is the bread of life! It is a powerful moment.

Go through this week’s study text (Matthew 1:18-25) and pick out the four or five most important words in this Scripture. Birth? Jesus? Messiah? Mary? Holy Spirit? Joseph? Virgin? Emmanuel? Wow! That is not easy to do! However we read it, this account is a pivot point in human history. There is a before and an after and this is the turning from the one to the other.

The title of this lesson is “Hope Fulfilled.” I think that only tells part

**December 29, 2019 Text: Acts 1:1-9 “Hope for Spirit-Filled Living”**

When you were growing up, did you dream of going to visit far-off places? For me, in my early school days in Fairmont and in Siler City, “far-off” meant the rural community of Moore’s Chapel, just out in the country between Charlotte and Belmont. That’s where most of my mother’s family still lived. The longest trip I remember taking as a child was all the way down to Cherry Grove, South Carolina. Wow! It was even in another state!

I wonder if that kind of excitement raced through the apostles as they contemplated God’s restoring the kingdom to Israel (Acts 1:6). They must have thought, “The whole world is going to be God’s territory, so it will be our territory!” They even asked Jesus about it: “Is this the time? Is this the time?” They may even have had their Samsonites packed and ready for airport security. Well, maybe! At any rate, they were ready to go.

And Jesus ordered them not to leave Jerusalem (Acts 1:4).

It was this cart and horse thing and the apostles evidently had it in the wrong order. There was something that needed to come before these men scattered throughout the world. Jesus said, “Wait” (Acts 1:4). Have you ever been told to wait when you were ready to go on with it? Grrrr!

**Prayer:**

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “God of Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow, touch us now with the assurance of Your gift of hope...”

faith

of what is happening here. Yes, the promise of God has come true (Matthew 1:22) and is fulfilled, but there is also another dimension: Hope is planted for tomorrow (Matthew 1:21).

As I write this (in April), I don’t know if I’ll be at Church of the Dunes this week, but I do know this: Whether it be the surprise of the babe who is the Bread, the Christ will come in unexpected ways. Maybe as a loaf of bread. Maybe as a homeless visitor. Maybe as a smile from a stranger. Maybe as acceptance even though I am different. Maybe as a fresh start from a sin that captured me. Maybe as...maybe as...maybe as... The possibilities are endless, so let me be on the lookout for the unexpected presence of Christ

**What Someone Else Has Said:**

Cal and Rose Samra (*More Holy Humor*, Guideposts) quote John L. Wallace: “The message of Christmas is that we should never give up on God. He’s raised drunks from the gutter and opened doors for the frustrated. Look for Him anywhere, but especially in your worst times. God’s message at Christmas is that help is on the way.”

**Prayer:**

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Lord Jesus, we celebrate Your coming and pray that You surprise us again...”

Question: Why did Jesus tell them to hold off going out into the world? Answer: They needed the Holy Spirit. He had said earlier (John 14:26) “But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you.”

“Once that Holy Spirit has come,” Jesus said, “you will go to Jerusalem, all of Judea, all of Samaria, to Moore’s Chapel, to Cherry Grove, and to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). In the context of our study over the past few weeks, the Holy Spirit brings the hope for a good tomorrow. As we move toward a new year—it will take a while to get used to writing 2020---we do well to wait for the Holy Spirit; that is, wait for the continuing presence of the Christ. It will, literally, make all the difference in the world.

**What Someone Else Has Said:**

In *Baptist Questions, Baptist Answers* (Westminster John Knox), Bill J. Leonard writes: “The Spirit blows where it will, and we do not know where it begins or ends. It is the eternal mystery with us, and beyond us, God’s unseen presence in the world.””

**Prayer:**

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Come, Holy Spirit, lead us into the new year and call us to new life...”

