

GIFT OF CREATION (WEEK 5 OF LENT)

STUDY GUIDE FOR SECTION FIVE

- Pray a centering prayer for guidance for the discussion of the “Gift of Creation” section.
- *“We are not alone, we live in God’s world. We believe in God: who has created and is creating, who has come in Jesus, the Word made flesh, to reconcile and make new, who works in us and others by the Spirit.” (From The Statement of Faith of the United Church of Canada)*

The first words of Holy Scripture (Genesis 1.1) declare God as creator, and the cycle of creation and re-creation continues through the promise of The Revelation: “See, I am making all things new.” (Revelation 21.5a) As we are about God’s reconciling work in the world, through our support of AU, we are joining in God’s creative process, offering the promise of new life and new hope to both the students and those their lives will touch.

1. In Shirley Levels’ devotional, she remarks that even the browns and oranges of late winter in Africa were a wonderful sight, testifying to God’s good creation. Do you recall times when you beheld special beauty in what might seem to be a barren place? Did any of these lead to a time of fruitfulness, a “promised land”?
 2. Carrie Johnson describes the power of worshiping and professing her faith in the Shona language and the gift of praising God in a new way. What experiences can you recall in which you were able to have a fresh, new opportunity to worship God? How did it affect your view of the world and those whose experiences differ from your own?
 3. Larry George shares how the light of God’s love shone through the dark moments when he and his wife Mickey were forced from their African home. Consider some times when brothers and sisters in Christ were a beacon for you in a time of distress and how you have been able to overcome that distress to be a beacon for others.
 4. Educator Thalia Matherson declared that educating the mind is a way of uplifting persons. How is the gift of education part of God’s ongoing creative process?
- Close the session with prayer, remembering the students and faculty at AU and all of those sharing in this Lenten challenge. **ASK FOR GOD’S GUIDANCE ALONG THE WAY.**

DAY 23, MARCH 3, 2008

*Your love, O Lord, reaches to the heavens, your faithfulness to the skies.
Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains, your justice like the great deep.
O Lord, you preserve both man and beast. How priceless is your unfailing love!*

— PSALM 36:5-7

As we traveled through Africa, I thought to myself that God had created this land of man and beast. I basked in the beauty of God's creation. *In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Genesis 1:1.* Our trip was during end of winter, so much of the land was washed in browns and oranges.

All that he made was very good. My eyes were constantly drawn to the mighty mountains. In his poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," Langston Hughes writes, "I've known rivers, Ancient dusky rivers. My soul has grown deep like the rivers." My soul felt full and overflowing when I experienced the view of the mountains of Africa.

All that he made was very good. Each time that I saw a view of the mountains it sucked the very air from my nostrils, held me transfixed.

All that he made was very good. I focused my camera numerous times, but the images were so inadequate when compared to the splendor of the real thing. God's handiwork could not be perfectly captured. I took the photographs, knowing that those pictures would be all that I had to remind me of the glorious mountains. Because of my visit to Africa, I have known mountains, mighty mountains.

Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke about his mountaintop experience. I had a mountaintop experience in Africa. I believe that we can help AU and the investment will go beyond our life.

PRAYER: God, it is my prayer that Africa University will flourish through your unfailing love. I thank you for your preservation, creations, faithfulness, and your priceless unfailing love. Lord, let me not fail in extending my love to Africa University. Amen.

CHALLENGE: I am gratefully counting my blessings, putting money in my blessing jar. I will ask friends and family to consider their blessings and add their contributions.

Shirley Levels, St. Luke "Community" UMC Dallas

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DAY 24, MARCH 4, 2008

O magnify the Lord with me, and let us exalt His name together.

— PSALM 34:3

For a year, we'd prepared and anticipated the trip — for some, a return visit, for others a maiden voyage to the Motherland. All the vaccinations had been taken, all the negative side effects had worn off, the passports had finally arrived, and it was time to travel to South Africa. We read the papers, we saw the news reports—there was political unrest. Talk of political upheaval created concern for our safety. But scripture teaches that the prayers of the righteous avail much. For an entire week leading up to our departure, the redeemed of the Lord prayed collectively and individually and God is faithful. He heard and answered our prayers. We traveled safely to and from Zimbabwe.

African and African-American prayed to the same God as we worked together, side by side, at Africa University. We spoke different languages as we worked at Old Mutare Mission, but together we worshiped and prayed to the same God.

We stood in awe and viewed God's majestic handiwork at Victoria Falls.

All along the trail, we overheard the tearful, sometimes whispered, always heartfelt testimony: **"O LORD, MY GOD ... HOW GREAT THOU ART!"**

We marveled at God's mighty works in the birthplace of civilization. We experienced first-hand what it must have been like for the people on the day of Pentecost as we worshiped and professed together the Apostle's Creed, in the Shona language and in English.

We returned to America **CHANGED**. No longer could we take for granted God's many blessings. No longer could we waste God's bounty.

PRAYER: Let us see and praise God in a new way for the amazing things He has done. Amen.

CHALLENGE: Count your blessings each day of Lent and make a contribution for each one.

Carrie Johnson, St. Luke "Community" UMC Dallas

DAY 25, MARCH 5, 2008

We also rejoice in our suffering, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character, and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us.

— ROMANS 5:3-4

AFRICA is a word that conjures up vivid mental pictures for most of us. My generation was “educated” about Africa by great movies out of Hollywood, *African Queen*, *Snows of Kilimanjaro*, and *Out of Africa*. It has created in many of our minds a vast expansive land of magnificent beauty with an incredible array of mysterious people and exotic wild animals. It is a land that we all, in years past, had on our list of dream trips. However, recent years have really changed many of our perceptions – certainly mine. It seems that all we have heard about is drought, war, AIDS epidemics, genocide, children soldiers and starvation. These news stories had created for me a feeling of total helplessness. We are asked to pray for Africa, and although I believe in the power of prayer, I just think we, as Christians, need to do more. But what? This just continues to add to our frustration. So the normal inclination, since our efforts will not make a difference, is to try to close out the whole situation. Ignore the problem. My confession is that is how I have felt – I had given up on Africa.

That has all changed since an official of Africa University spoke at the Laity Dinner prior to Annual Conference in 2006. I heard for the first time about this oasis, Africa University, in the midst of all the strife that was making a difference – and it is a United Methodist institution. I believe that we can easily raise the \$1,000,000 for the health center and scholarships if we just share with the members of the North Texas Conference the inspiring story of Africa University and how graduates are changing the face of Africa at a great sacrifice.

PRAYER: Lord, keep us mindful of all those that desperately need our help and that we are “our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers.” In Christ’s holy name. Amen.

CHALLENGE: I am committing to fast one day per week during Lent and donate the money I would have spent on lunch to Africa University, and I will pray daily for Africa and Africa University.

— Richard Hearne, University Park UMC Dallas

DAY 26, MARCH 6, 2008

You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid. Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a bushel, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house.

— MATTHEW 5:14-15

THE LIGHT IS IRREPRESSIBLE; THE PROMISE OF NEW LIFE, NOT TO BE DENIED ... EVEN IN LENT.

It was a Lenten evening when I accompanied our local church pastor from our mission station in Mrewa, Zimbabwe, to a Bible study in a small village a few miles away. There were no street lights, no ambient urban light. But in the darkness, the light of faith guided us. First, I heard them; their voices were lifted in praise. We walked a little farther, and then I saw them, the faithful Christian disciples gathered in that isolated village.

I remembered that night when our residence permits were cancelled, and Mickey and I were forced to leave our by-then African home. Our hearts were filled with heaviness and darkness ... until we beheld the light again. Not being allowed inside the airport terminal due to policies of apartheid, our African sisters and brothers had gathered on the observation platform and were singing "Onward, Christian Soldiers." In that moment, we knew that the light of God's love was irrepressible, that the promise of new life was not to be denied.

Africa University now shines as a beacon, set not under a bushel but on a stand, as it educates leaders for the whole continent and gives light "to the whole house" of God's people.

PRAYER: God of grace and God of glory, on thy people pour thy power. Amen.

CHALLENGE: Count the lamps in your home, and make a gift in gratitude for the Light.

Larry George, Dallas Denton District



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DAY 27, MARCH 7, 2008

So let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have the opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.

— GALATIANS 6:9-10

My faith tells me that as one is blessed, it is the responsibility of that person to share with others in some way so that the fruit of the blessing is passed on to be a blessing to others. I also believe that educating the mind is a way for a person to uplift themselves. It provides something to the individual that cannot be taken away, but something that can be built upon and developed so that it becomes a way of sustaining and uplifting the family, and ultimately the community and the nation

We live in a global world, and what affects one part of the world affects us all. It becomes our responsibility to endeavor to embrace our brothers and sisters across the universe. We, then, help to fulfill the law of Christ in whatever ways we can in order to reap the spiritual blessings promised. You and I have the opportunity to work for the good of all.

My connection with Africa University began at the General Conference where the university was voted into existence, and I had the privilege of being a delegate and voting affirmatively. Then in 2000, I became a Charter Member of the Africa University Alumni Association. I believe in this institution that has thrived and stands as a remarkable jewel and testimony of the United Methodist Church family of faith. I am supporting this initiative because I believe it is the right thing to do.

PRAYER: Gracious and most merciful God, accept my prayer of thanksgiving for all of the blessings you have bestowed upon me. Help me to understand how my blessings can benefit others, and help me to act on your word and pass along a portion of my blessings for the benefit of others. Amen.

CHALLENGE: My pledge is a sum that will be significant to our family, and I will also give the equivalent of a lunch meal for each day of Lent.

Thalia F. Matherson, Warren UMC Dallas

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