

June 17. Read Jeremiah 29:11-13. *“Plans” by Rev. John McCullough.* We have a picture of our kids, Katie and Ryan, as preschooler and toddler, facing each other across a small table, touching hands. We added verse 11 as caption, a constant, and often needed, reminder as they grew up that they were never out of God’s sight and mind, no matter what. To be sure, like their parents, life has not always been as planned. At least not as they or we planned. It was 1985 when a job transfer relocated our family to Dothan. As we searched for a church home a couple of my work colleagues invited us to visit Covenant. So these lifelong Baptists gave it a shot. Thus began a 30 year journey with the United Methodist Church. So many Covenant people touched our lives as we discovered God’s plans. I’ll mention only three but there are so many more. We felt instantly welcomed and loved the first time we stepped into the trailer in the parking lot which was Sammy Prim’s Sunday School room. And we were, and still are, blessed by both his witness and his friendship. And there was a hometown preacher who was building a church from the ground up, inspiring and challenging us and many others with his Godly messages and gifted leadership. Mike Watson not only welcomed us into the fellowship of Covenant and the United Methodist Church, He later convinced the SPR committee to hire this reformed Baptist bank trust officer as Director of Evangelism and Missions. God had plans for me and God used Mike to show them to me. Just as we did by adding it to that picture, many folks cling to verse 11 and its hopeful message. But over the years I have come to understand, it is just as important to cling to verses 12 and 13. And it is important to understand the context for all three. Jeremiah is writing to a people in exile. In verse 10 we read ***“¹⁰ The Lord proclaims: When Babylon’s seventy years are up, I will come and fulfill my gracious promise to bring you back to this place.”*** God had plans for the people, but in the meantime there would be 70 more years of challenge and there would be the need for prayer, for searching, for surrender. As I heard and answered a call to embark on a path of ministry, something definitely not in my plans, I found myself searching, and I prayed, a lot! But that surrender part didn’t come easily. When I encountered challenging times there was one person I came to rely on for wisdom and understanding. That third saintly soul I must mention was Walter Moreland. He not only encouraged me, but perhaps more importantly he challenged me to surrender to the often confusing eternal plans not of my own making. One of my favorite quotes is from Julian of Norwich, a fourteenth century Christian mystic. Her life was difficult. In her 30s she survived a debilitating and almost fatal illness. She witnessed the horrors of the Black Death of 1348-50. She lived through turbulent uprisings. Yet she was still able to write, “And all shall be well. And all shall be well. And all manner of things shall be exceeding well.” She didn’t say easy. She didn’t say pleasant. She didn’t say successful. She said well. Indeed for those who truly surrender to the one who has plans for us, if we will pray, and search and call, all will indeed be well. In the words of that hometown preacher, “Dear God, let it be.”

June 18. Read Mark 2:1-2. “Carried” by Rev. Gillian Lisenby Walters. I am thankful that God’s covenant promise for me was first realized and lived out at the baptismal font at Covenant United Methodist church when I was just an infant. I have many fond memories of children’s choir and Sunday morning worship at Covenant UMC.

One particular memory that I have is playing the paralytic man in a skit. I was young and the details are fuzzy in my mind, but the story is not. I think I was probably somewhere around 5 or 6 years old. Being a little girl, I was not thrilled at the prospect of playing the part of an old man. I guess I was hoping for a little more typecasting. But after my mom convinced me it was an honor to play the role, I agreed. The leaders told me they needed me to play the part because I was the youngest or at least the smallest one participating. So that made me the easiest to carry in on the mat! All these years later I still remember it. I remember it was fun to be carried. I think I also felt a bit of what it was like to be surrounded by a community determined to get me to Jesus however they could (Of course I wouldn’t have said it like that as a 5 year old). Although I did not begin to discern my call to ministry until the end of my time at Huntingdon College, growing up in the United Methodist church at Covenant and FUMC Dothan had a significant impact on my faith journey and growth. I am now entering into my ninth year of ministry in our conference and I am serving as an associate pastor at FUMC Montgomery. One of my favorite responsibilities at the church is taking a turn among the staff to lead children’s chapel story time on Wednesdays. When the sign-up sheet went around this last time there was no hesitation from me about which story on the list I would pick. Can you guess what it was? The story of the paralytic man was on the list, and you better bet that is the one I chose. And of course I had the kids act it out! Because I wanted these kids to get to hear and experience this same story I did, the story of a man brought to new life because his friends were determined to get him to Jesus. I wanted them to hear of Jesus’ transformational love and power. Because when the paralytic man encounters the living Christ, he is transformed from one who is carried to one who carries, as Jesus says “get up and carry your mat.”

I am thankful that as an infant you carried me to the waters of baptism before I could carry myself. My prayer for Covenant is that you continue to carry people to Jesus so that he might transform their lives.

June 19. Happy 40th Anniversary, Covenant United Methodist Church! My name is David Coe, and I serve as assistant professor of theology and philosophy at Concordia University in Seward, Nebraska. Growing up in Dothan, Alabama, I never dreamed I'd be living as far away as Nebraska one day. A favorite Bible verse of mine is 1 Corinthians 15:10: "By the grace of God, I am what I am," and I would not be serving the Lord in Nebraska today without the grace He showed to me through Covenant United Methodist Church growing up. In the early 80s we were privileged to attend Covenant when the church first gathered at Wesley Manor with Dr. Watson preaching and Steve Mashburn singing. I remember the first Sunday at the new church on West Main; my brother Chandler was the first acolyte. I loved coming to Covenant not only for Church and Sunday School but also for Family Night Suppers with Bill Slavin's Southern cooking and Dr. Prim's Pig Pickins. I still look up to John McCullough and Dr. Jack Jackson, who was kind enough to mentor, play guitar, and sing in Covenant's first youth band with Curtis Cundith and me; John and Dr. Jackson's missionary service in Africa influenced me to do the same after college, which Covenant financially and prayerfully supported. Growing up, a special anchor for me was the Sunday evening services with the brown little Cokesbury Hymnals and altar prayer, followed by the best Youth Group in town: "UMYF"! I can't thank God enough in my prayers and tears for the Christian influence I received from my awesome big brother Chandler, our Covenant friends Jay and Rob Pongonis (my best and closest friend growing up), their parents Col. Jim and Sandy Pongonis (whose home was my second home), and our Covenant youth directors in the late 80s and early 90s: Allen Newton, Lois McClean, and Scott Schumpert -- all hallowed people in my book. Chandler and I got to reconnect with Allen a few years back, and I remember Chandler asking Allen, "How were you so good at what you did?" Allen answered, "When I was at seminary, I learned that all young people need a significant Christian adult in their lives other than their parents to help them make the hard transition to Christian adulthood, and I knew I needed to be that for y'all." Allen WAS that for us! Today, my wife Joanna and I serve high school youth at our church in Nebraska to be similar Christian mentors to them and to say "thank you" to God for the grace He showed me growing up at Covenant. 1 Corinthians 15:10: "By the grace of God, I am what I am." Thank you, Covenant, for raising me in the love and grace of God!

June 20. Read John 4:7-12. A few months back, I was on the rowing machine at the YMCA in Pensacola. Yes, I was trying to be healthy. Pastors need to exercise too. As I was working up a sweat, the TV in my line of sight had the show, “The Bachelor,” playing with subtitles. I must confess I don’t watch, “The Bachelor,” but for some reason, I could not turn my eyes away from the screen. If you have not watched, “The Bachelor,” with subtitles, you are missing out. The show was down to the final two young ladies, and the bachelor had to decide on one of them. So he took each of them on the last date. Maybe you watched that season and saw that he chose one girl to be his soulmate. Then in a specular turn of events, the bachelor dumped her after the show for the other girl. Needless to say, “The Bachelor” is not a place a person should look to understand love. You can watch it for fun, but know that the show is not really about love at all. What is love? One of my favorite scriptures is 1 John 4:7-12, where you will find the real meaning of love. John says, “For God is love...and if you love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.” You must understand that love is not God. God is love. You and I tend to love things that God doesn’t love. God doesn’t love money, but some people love money. Maybe that is why Jesus talks about money so much in the Gospels. Only God is love, and love comes to us from God. John tells us that if you love God, you will love one another. I tell you all of this because my family and I experienced the love of God during our time at Covenant. The first time we worshipped at Covenant, Jessica and I knew we found our church home. We had just moved to Dothan after I was honorably discharged from the Navy. You took us in and loved us. We didn’t have a lot of money at the time. I was going to college full-time and working part-time. Jessica worked full-time. You showed us the love of God. At that time, Jessica had never been baptized. I remember Hays took us in the sanctuary after the new member dinner and baptized her. It was through my involvement with the Stephen Ministry and cooking for the local soup kitchen that I heard the affirming words of God calling me into the ministry. By connecting with people in small groups, my family felt the love of God. Through the witness and love of Hays and Kyle, God used them to further the calling on my life. As you can see, I am eternally grateful for the impact Covenant had on me. I cannot believe that it has been almost eight years and three churches as a pastor since you all sent us into the ministry. John reminds us that God is love. The love of God is not a feeling but an action. God’s love was in operation through Jesus Christ. The love of Jesus was so great that he went to the cross for us. By doing so, God showed the whole world the real meaning of love. In turn, you and I are called to a love that is demonstrated through action. Thank you, Covenant, for showing the love of God to my family and me.