



THE UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
HARRISBURG AREA – SUSQUEHANNA CONFERENCE

303 Mulberry Drive, Suite 100 • Mechanicsburg, PA 17050-3198
Phone (717) 766-7871 • Fax (717) 766-3210 • Email: bishoppark@susumc.org

Bishop Jeremiah J. Park

Christy Mackey
Executive Admin. Asst.
cmackey@susumc.org

Rev. Gregory C. Myers
Clergy Assistant
gmyers@susumc.org

Rev. Dr. Thomas Salsgiver
Clergy Assistant
tsalsgiver@susumc.org

Sarah Filizzi
Admin. Assistant
sfilizzi@susumc.org

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*The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom...
They shall see the glory of the Lord,
The majesty of our God.
(Isaiah 35:1, 2b)*

*... And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.
Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings,
because we know that suffering produces perseverance;
perseverance, character; and character, hope.
And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out God's love
into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom God has given us.
(Romans 5:2b -6)*

My Beloved Sisters and Brothers,

Grace to you in the name of Jesus Christ, Prince of Peace, Healer of our Brokenness, and Hope of the World!

Isaiah's words speak to a people who were in the wilderness of their lives. They were cut off from what they knew and what they loved. They were living in a strange time and a foreign land. Their future was unknown. Even the Psalmist proclaimed, "How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" (137:4)

You and I, God's faithful people, are living in a wilderness that we call the COVID pandemic. Few of us have experienced anything as devastating and as long-lasting as these past nine months. We hear your weariness and pain.

Even now, with a vaccine slowly being disseminated, the amount of sickness and death has been rising even more quickly. We continue to hear record-breaking numbers of infection, hospitalization, and death from COVID. The projections from our health experts indicate that this will most likely get worse before most people receive the vaccine.

These are not just numbers. Each one represents the life of a beloved. As this grave situation continues without any noticeable sign of abatement at present time, **I am obligated to plead with you not to hold in-person gatherings in our churches until further notice.**

I yearn to be present in worship and fellowship with my Christian sisters and brothers. My beloved, that time, however, is not yet. The darkest time of wilderness of COVID is not yet behind us. As painful as it is, as disheartening as it is, we must continue to be vigilant in safeguarding our people and our communities from spreading this dreaded virus. I am imploring you to continue to put the safety of others first by not to gathering in person.

However, our churches are never closed. We must continue to do all we can. I've heard about some creative alternatives our churches have adopted. I am in awe of how you are reaching out in new ways. I know that you are connecting and gathering in Zoom meetings, Facebook Live webcasts, and other means for worship, fellowship, Bible study, and prayer. While we are asking you not to gather in-person inside the building, it is permissible to offer drive-in and outside worship, as long as safety protocols are in place. I know many of you have already purchased FM transmitters so that they can safely offer drive-in worship.

Our God is a God who, as we recall in this season, transcended everything people expected and brought us an infant born in a lowly stable. God provided a savior at just the right time—but not in the way we anticipated.

That same God knows our pain and our struggle. The Apostle Paul reminds us that the firm foundation of God's love toward us compels us to keep hope alive even in suffering and makes us persevere in trials until we reach triumph. Indeed, our God is greater than any challenge we face. So we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.

I know with absolute certainty and trust the words of Isaiah: "And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away" (Isaiah 35:10).

While we experience Christ in the midst of our brokenness this Christmas, may we also continue to find ways to safely offer the hope of Christ in compassionate response to the many in our communities and world who experience much more dramatic losses, the loss of jobs and income, those who will have no human fellowship or compassion this Christmas, those who have no safe place to shelter, and the many other cries in our community. May we demonstrate God with us by finding safe and yet concrete ways of offering the Christ who is God With Us to our communities who also struggle and suffer in ways many of us can only imagine.

Please know that the Cabinet and I pray for you, your congregations, and your communities without ceasing. Together let us continue to live the Christmas Story in all we do in the best way we can.

Christmas Blessings,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Jeremiah Park".

Jeremiah Park