

Read also John 11:32-36. Check out the service at www.fpcd.org.

What is your earliest memory of God? It may or may not have to do with the church. For some, it is when you see a beautiful sunset or sunrise and you think *this didn't just happen by itself*. You feel there's something bigger. For others it might very well be connected to the church.

I remember as a young child going into a sanctuary which seemed peaceful and comforting. My mother took my brother and me down the left aisle and we sat back a little past halfway back. But I would watch my church friend walk with her family down to the fourth row from the front. I remember asking my mother, *why can't we sit down there?* She said it was because we were Presbyterian...

Then we would go bowling after church every Sunday. I'm not sure whether my earliest memory of God is connected to the church or going bowling, but Sunday's included both and that made them good days.

There are other memories that point to God. I can remember my grandmother in her kitchen cooking dinner, singing at the top of her lungs along with some Gospel hour on the radio – *I'll fly away, O glory! I'll fly away; when I die, hallelujah, by and by, I'll fly away.*

In my childhood imagination I saw myself as a child floating up to the sky with angel wings on. And, looking back, it was comforting because it gave me the innate sense that there's much more than we can see and that life does not end when we leave here.

What is your first memory of God? Today is “Back to Church Sunday.” That assumes a time of once being in church; or having a memory of God or speculation about God or desire to know God. I believe God plants that desire in us and it is an anchor for us, whether we realize it or not. God also gives us stories of His people.

We have been talking about David in the Bible. Even if you do not know anything about the Bible, you know a little about David. Even if you have never been in church, you have probably heard, *The Lord is my shepherd / shall not want...*

David wrote that. He was a poet and his poems are part of the Bible. Most of them are his prayers to God; many of them complaints. He told God everything. He was not afraid to be real with God.

Why, God, does this happen like this?...

So the Bible is full of reality. Reality includes times of joy and times of utter grief. Today's lesson is one of those “grief” times for David. Let's read it:

¹After the death of Saul, David returned from his victory over the Amalekites and spent two days in Ziklag. ²On the third day a man arrived from Saul's army camp. He had torn his clothes and put dirt on his head to show that he was in mourning. He fell to the

ground before David in deep respect. ³"Where have you come from?" David asked. "I escaped from the Israelite camp," the man replied. ⁴"What happened?" David demanded. "Tell me how the battle went." The man replied, "Our entire army fled from the battle. Many of the men are dead, and Saul and his son Jonathan are also dead." . . . ¹¹David and his men tore their clothes in sorrow when they heard the news. ¹²They mourned and wept and fasted all day for Saul and his son Jonathan, and for the LORD's army and the nation of Israel, because they had died by the sword that day . . . ¹⁷Then David composed a funeral song for Saul and Jonathan, ¹⁸and he commanded that it be taught to the people of Judah.

How hard life is at times. Even Jesus in the New Testament reading which you heard grieved when a very dear friend died and his sisters were just so beside themselves. Where do you go for help? When you have loss of any kind, do you think of the church as a place where you can just be you, whether in pain or in joy? David did. In this case, the reigning king had died and David mourned.

When a Jewish person receives news of a death, even now, in 2013, they turn to God. They believe God is the King of the universe, the True Judge, and that God is in control in life and death. It gives great comfort.

In the Christian tradition that's like saying, "I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ."¹ And Jesus is there for us, just as He was there for Mary and Martha when their brother died.

Just as in the Bible, today the Jews rend their clothes at the news of a death. Orthodox men cut the lapel of their suit on the left side, over the heart. Other believers cut a necktie or wear a button with a torn black ribbon.²

These are ways to acknowledge that God has power over life and death, and has an eternal future for us. That's what David was doing.

So how does one develop a lifestyle that "sees God" even in bad times? How does one write something like "the Lord is my shepherd" and live with that constant belief that God is near?

As a teenager, David worked for his father as a shepherd, and he writes that the job was filled with challenges – lions and bears, bandits and thieves. And so David called on God for help. And over the years he developed an amazing sense that life included more than you can see. God actually gave him victory in hard times.

David went on to become a great warrior. He defeated Goliath; then David was taken into Saul's court. But then while in the court, Saul, who had been close enough to David to consider him like a son, became estranged from David, jealous, love turning to hatred, and in ongoing fits of rage he wrongly persecuted David, causing David to flee to the wilderness where he live a marginalized existence. So life turned from good to bad; to crisis and struggle for existence.

¹The Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 1., *Book of Confessions*, 4.001.

²*Life, Death, and Mourning*, <http://www.jewfaq.org/death.htm>, accessed 9/11/13.

Yet David felt that God was with him. God honored David again and again.

And David honored God in the way he handled himself and led his men. Here's a Psalm he wrote. In my Bible it's called "The conduct of a good person in trouble:"

O LORD, I am calling to you. Please hurry! Listen when I cry to you for help! Accept my prayer as incense offered to you, and my upraised hands as an evening offering. Take control of what I say, O LORD, and guard my lips. Don't let me drift toward evil or take part in acts of wickedness. Don't let me share in the delicacies of those who do wrong. (Ps 141:1-4)

Isn't that amazing? Instead of feeling resentful because his life was a struggle he busies himself with asking God to shape his character. David chose to be influenced by God. Why is this helpful?

Why would this habit help us, should we do likewise?

Saul's hatred toward him and all the danger it caused in David's life was certainly cause for bitterness. But David realized a bitter life was a handicapped life. He realized rage would stunt his whole life experience. So he chose instead to believe that there's more with God. And so he backed off and instead of retaliating against Saul, he told himself, "God chose Saul to be king. And God knew what He was doing."

At the same time, God had not abandoned David just because Saul had become his enemy.

- Had not God helped David subdue not only lions and bears, but Goliath?
- Had not God provided food for David and his men when they needed it?
- Had not God kept David safe in the wilderness?
- Had not God provided victory over his enemies?
- Had not God given them a place to live, wives, children, and possessions?
- Had not God promised a great future blessing?

David could have been destroyed by Saul's hatred. He could have shaped his life around it and let that hatred determine his outlook. Instead, he wrote in that same Psalm:

But my eyes are turned toward you, O GOD, my Lord; in you I seek refuge; do not leave me defenseless. Keep me from the trap that they have laid for me, and from the snares of evildoers. Let the wicked fall into their own nets, while I alone escape. (141:8-10)

He left it with God. He saw God's goodness toward those who turn to God. In that, he saw victory. He learned he was safest when he placed himself in the hands and heart of God.

With no bitterness driving his life he was able to mourn Saul's death and even see the good that Saul did as Israel's king. Hear his eulogy. (Read 2 Sam 1:19-27)

This was a man who was able to see the good, even in the bad relations.

Believing in God and worshiping God – coming here week after week, even when things are bad, bringing our children so they can feel God’s presence opens our hearts so we can see God.

May you see God today, and with David say, *even though I walk through the valley, God is with me.*

AMEN