

September 24, 2006
God in the Unexpected Moments

(Service begun with prayer)

The prayer said it so beautifully. We do not know what the future holds, but we do know Who holds the future, and that is cause for our faith and confidence.

Before I begin my sermon today, I have a personal joy to share with you. Most of you are aware that I have Chronic Lymphocytic Leukemia. Four months ago, my white blood cell count reached 105,000, and my Oncologist told me that it was time we consider some form of treatment; specifically, a hemoglobin treatment we had previously discussed. He said that I should come back in two months to recheck my blood count, and we would determine where to go from there. I went back two months ago, and my white blood cell count had fallen to 97,000. While I was grateful for this improvement, the doctor wanted to follow up again in another two months to determine if the decline represented a trend. So, this past Wednesday I was back for my two month checkup, and my white blood cell count was down to 84,000! (Interrupted by applause) I'll tell you, what's so cool about this is that I am not on any treatment other than my wife's tender loving care (and a lot of green tea, which she feeds me by the gallon!). But my story simply reinforces the assurance that the future is God's. When we live by faith and trust in Him, we discover the adventure of living in His love, always. That is a great segue to today's sermon, because today, we conclude our preaching series on "God moments" by talking about God in the unexpected moments of life. There are two passages of scripture I wish to share with you today. The first is from the 8th Psalm of David, and speaks gloriously of the majesty of God. The text is found in your sermon outline. If it is helpful, I invite you to follow along. This is what David proclaimed:

“Oh, Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is Your name in all the earth! You have set Your glory above the heavens. Out of the mouths of babes and infants You have founded a bulwark because of Your foes, to silence the enemy and the avenger. When I look at Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars that You have established; what are human beings that You are mindful of them, mortals that You care for them? Yet You have made them a little lower than God, and crowned them with glory and honor. You have given them dominion over the works of Your hands; You have put all things under their feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the seas. O, Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is Your name in all the earth.”

Then Paul, writing to the Church of Rome, in the 8th chapter of his letter, the 28th verse, said to those who are well familiar with the pain, sorrow, and sufferings of life: “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to His purpose.”

Here ends the lesson. Will you pray with me, please? Lord, today draw us from doubt to faith and confidence. Lead us from confusion to an assurance, a sense of certainty in Your love and Your presence with us in all the circumstances of life. In Christ, amen.

Our culture has become somewhat confused. Would you agree? The information we encounter is often conflicting, so I decided to have a little fun. I gathered up some confusing signs and headlines you may have seen as you've been out and about, or perhaps have seen online. These are not local, but are from all over the country. Let's start with this one (Photo is projected of a "One Way" sign with arrows going both directions.) Do you have a sense which way to go? Skip along, if you would, please. This is one of my favorites! Can you read this? (Photo is shown of a sign for Hussey's General Store, which indicates that they sell guns, wedding gowns, and cold beer.) You have all you need for a shotgun wedding right there! What's the next one? Oh yes - "Babies and children - Buy 2 get 3 free." Think of the college costs! Next, we have one from McDonald's: "Parking for drive-thru service only." That's McLogic gone wrong! This next one is a front page headline from a newspaper: "17 Remain Dead in Morgue Shooting." Hello . . . 17 *remain* dead? What's the next one? Oh, here's one from the Orient, on which the English translation reads: "For Restrooms, Go back toward your behind." Talk about "lost in translation"! This next one *has* to be from out west! Look very carefully, and you'll see the image of a cow falling off a cliff onto a car. This next one was posted at a gas station (which must have doubled as a restaurant) and says, "Kids With Gas Eat Free." I'm glad I don't work at that station! (I'm guessing their patrons must go to Taco Bell before they fill up!) What's the next one? Oh yes, posted on the same signpost, a STOP sign, directly below which is posted a sign which says, "No Stopping Anytime" - let me know when you've figured out how *that* is supposed to work! This next one is a billboard placed by the Illiteracy Foundation which *reads*, "ILLITERATE? Write For Free Help." They're supposed to figure that out *how*? The next one is a photograph apparently taken in Wyoming. Sitting beside a sign which reads "Open Range" is a stove which has its oven door open. I can't even comment on this one! Ah, yes! A "Keep Off The Grass" sign placed firmly in the middle of a sandy beach with no grass anywhere in sight! This next one is another of my favorites. Look very carefully. It reads, "NO ENRTY". What's scary about this one is that it was taken at the Kennedy Space Center where they *are* rocket scientists! The next one is a photograph taken of the front of a store on which there are two signs: one which reads "Store Closing" next to one which says "Now Hiring". I'm thinking they need to make up their minds. This next one reads "Dont't Drink and Drive." Perhaps the moral of the story is, don't drink and make signs! Thanks for indulging me on this little journey through some fun, though confusing, messages.

I heard a story recently. A fellow was looking for a job and had an interview down on the Plaza. He was circling around looking for a parking place, but could not find one. It was one of those days when everything was "parked up", and he grew desperate. He was going to be late for his interview (and you know how deadly that is for getting a job) and so he prayed passionately, "Lord, God, *please*, I need a parking place, and I need it now! Please, Lord, if You give me a parking place, I'll go to church every Sunday. I'll tithe, I'll work at the church - I'll do whatever You want." Just then, right in front of the place

where his interview was to be held, a car pulled out, opening up a slot for our fellow. A big grin spread across his face and he said, "It's okay, Lord, I found one on my own!" Isn't that true?

Today I want to explore with you an awareness of God in the surprising moments of life - in those unexpected moments when, I'm convinced, we often miss the Almighty. Let me test this out with you. I believe that God often resides in the periphery of our awareness. God has never appeared to me as an angel or as some celestial being, but I'm certain that if we were to push our awareness, and tune our hearts and minds, we would become aware of the presence of God and the love of the Holy Spirit. The cliché is, "seeing is believing." I suggest that the opposite is true for people of faith: it's when we believe that we finally truly see.

Consider the scripture with me. First of all, there is this magnificent passage from the Psalms. David speaks so eloquently of the power of God. "O, Lord, how majestic is Your name in all the earth! When I look at Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars that You have established; what are human beings that You are mindful of them, mortals that You care for them?" Be honest. That's the easy stuff, isn't it?

For example, in Rocky Mountain National Park, you can take the trail to Deer Mountain, which is actually a series of switchbacks. It's not even that arduous until you come to the last quarter-mile or so, and then it's like walking up a quarter mile of steps. When you come out through the trees, you're standing at the summit, and it is spectacular, glorious, and breathtaking! You look out over the horizon, which is so magnificent, you can't miss the handiwork of God. Or, go to any of the oceans and wait until the tide goes out, then stroll at sunset and see the gorgeous colors God chooses from His palette to paint the sky. Alternatively, stop and look at a flower, which serves no obvious purpose other than to bring grace and beauty to our lives. We see evidence of God's handiwork in the macro and the micro - that's easy. In Paul's letter to Rome, he pushes us a little further and tells us, essentially, to look for God in the places we'd never expect to find Him.

There are four characters from scripture that I want to explore with you today, because each has a unique experience of God. First, think of Joseph (You remember Joseph; Donny Osmond made him famous! It's kind of hard to shake the image of Donny Osmond in his technicolor coat from our minds, isn't it?) And yet, think of Joseph, as we learned of him in Genesis: favorite son of Jacob, sold into slavery by his brothers; hired by Potiphar, whose wife attempted to seduce him, which led to his languishing in prison in Egypt for ages. (What do you suppose the prisons were like in Egypt 3,000 to 4,000 years ago?) It's fascinating - Joseph interpreted the dreams of the Pharaoh's chief baker and chief wine steward after he had already been in prison for some time. In Genesis 41, we read that it was two long years later when Joseph interpreted the Pharaoh's dream, so we know that he spent more than two years in prison before being plucked from misery and ultimately elevated to a position of extraordinary power and influence.

There is this great line when Joseph is restored to his brothers. He said, "What you intended for evil, God intended for good." Now let's put that to the test. In your own life,

haven't there been times when you have faced heartbreaking days of trial and tribulation; when you were left in the "woe is me" state of mind, wondering why God would abandon you to such intolerable suffering? And yet, in retrospect, when you look back on those experiences, haven't they been the events that have shaped your heart, forged your character, and ultimately proved to be of benefit and blessing to you? These are circumstances you would not wish on your worst enemy, and yet when you reflect back on your life in retrospect, it is obvious that God was at work in a magnificent way to bless you. Now, here's the radical faith thought: what if, rather than always living in retrospect, we were to project that faith into the present and the future, so that when the tough times come - and it's not a question of if, it's only a question of when - we will be spiritually, emotionally, and mentally prepared to say, "OK, God, I've been there. I know how You have sustained me in the past. How are you going to bless me through this?" Imagine how that would open our eyes and lift the burdens, simply by living with the faith Joseph demonstrated in prison.

The second character I'd like to discuss with you is Moses, whose early years were spent in Pharaoh's palace, which would have been considered the center of the universe at the time. Moses is always described as a great leader in scripture, and he truly was. He led the Israelites out of captivity in Egypt; he led them into the wilderness and brought them to the Promised Land. But what I find most intriguing about Moses is that he was prepared to venture out from what was comfortable to what God intended. His willingness to do that took him through the wilderness experience that made him truly useful to God. Think of this. Many of you have seen the Disney movie, "Prince of Egypt". (We are so often dependent on the media to cast for us biblical images, but actually this was a pretty good movie.) Moses was raised as a son of Pharaoh. Imagine the lavish luxury in which he lived, and yet when he saw an Israelite being abused and oppressed, he rose up in revolt against his own comfort and culture, eventually fleeing Egypt for the fields of Midian. There, tending sheep near Horeb, the mountain of God, he encountered God. The moral of the story is that oftentimes, it's only when we move out of our place of comfort and venture into the wilderness that we discover what God really has in store for us.

My favorite poem of Robert Frost is, "The Road Not Taken". You know it, don't you? It's magnificent.

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth.

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I –
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

What I would suggest to you today is that often God calls us from our comfort. While it appears that He is dragging us into the wilderness, and we are tempted like the Israelites to murmur and complain, God is beckoning us to something greater.

Will Willimon, who is now a Bishop, was once Chaplain at Duke University. He tells the story of an angry encounter he had with a parent who came to see him. This parent was infuriated because his daughter was very involved in the United Methodist Ministry at Duke University. He sat down across from the Chaplain and said, “You know, this Christianity thing is all well and good; it’s fine in moderation, but when it starts changing the plans my daughter has for her life, something’s wrong.” What had happened was that the daughter, who was in pre-law, and was all ready to go off to law school, got involved with a group of people who were quite serious about their faith. She began to wrestle with her life, her choices, and the options God had laid before her, and she chose not to go to law school, but to go to seminary and into the missionary field in Africa. Her father was incensed because he believed she was being dragged into the wilderness far from the comfort he envisioned for her. What about you? Do you have the faith to see God in the burning bush? Do you have the faith to venture from Egypt and follow God into the wilderness?

Our third character, Paul, took a U-turn on the road to Damascus, but allow me to digress for a moment: something is wrong with our society today when Rush Limbaugh and Al Franken are the ones setting the boundaries of political discourse; we have lost our civility. There was a time, which seems far away now, when we did not have politicians - we had statesmen and women who saw beyond the narrow scope of partisan politics, looked for the good of the country, and worked together to find a course that was uniting rather than divisive. We live today in an age of polarization. If you are right, I have to be wrong. Not only that, if someone is wrong, inevitably there will be an attack - not on the argument, but on the person - an ad hominem attack, an attack of character. Something is terribly wrong in our discourse. Socrates, when he was being tried for sedition and blasphemy, had the audacity to stand before the learned men of Greece and suggest that he ought to receive a stipend for being the gadfly who challenged anyone who believed that they alone knew the truth. Now, back to Saul, who was convinced he was doing the right thing. He had letters and papers from Jerusalem sending him to Damascus to

capture Christians and to extinguish that infant faith. While on the road to Damascus, God “whacked him on the side of the head” to get his attention. (When’s the last time God did that with you?) The simple truth is that at times, all of us need that “loving Christian whack on the side of the head” from God, because we become so absolutely certain of our own course, that we become angry and indifferent to everyone else. Paul discovered that God led him to a U-turn he needed, on the road to Damascus. What about you?

Finally, the fourth character I would point you to is Mary Magdalene, who went to the graveyard and found joy and hope. That is the extraordinary good news of our gospel today - even in the face of death, God is with us. I know of no other spectre that frightens us as deeply or as dearly as death. And it’s not our own death that frightens us. It’s almost as if we are better equipped to deal with our own death than with the prospect of the death of someone we love - a spouse, a child, a parent, a dear friend. Facing that possibility is like drawing near to the edge of the abyss. If you’ve ever gone to the edge of a precipice and looked over, and felt your knees quiver and felt the shaking of your body, and wondered, “What if my footing fails?” you know the fear of facing the abyss. In that place, we don’t even want to look in for fear that there will be nothing but dark despair and blackness - but here is what is amazing. Having been to the cemetery myself and having gone there with you, I have discovered that each and every time we look into the abyss, we discover God. He reveals himself in the subtleties that comfort our hearts.

Many of you know Rex Hendrix. Rex died early this morning. I had gone to be with Joie, and she shared with me an extraordinary God moment in a story she told me. Rex lay dying last night; we knew it was close to the end, and I had seen him during the day. Anyway, yesterday evening the phone rang. Joie answered, and it was one of her friends, one of her neighbors, one of her fellow John Knox residents who is also a member of this church. The woman called her up and said, “Is your power out?” Joie said, “No, I have power.” The friend said, “Well, something’s wrong – maybe a transformer blew. My oven is out. Is yours working? Would you go check?” So Joie went to check and came back to the phone and said, “My oven’s working.” The woman said, “Great! I made homemade yeast rolls which have risen, and I need to bake them.” As Joie told me this story, she said, “My first impulse was to say, ‘No, no, don’t interrupt me - my husband is dying.’” But then she thought, “This is a dear friend, someone I love.” So instead she said, “Sure, bring your rolls.” Joie took my hand when she got to this part of the story and said, “This was the most amazing thing. I was sitting there with my dying husband, surrounded by the smell of death (and if you’ve been in a room where someone is dying, you know that smell), when all of a sudden, wafting through the house, came the most magnificent, delicious aroma you can imagine. It triggered all sorts of memories and reminiscences - it was literally the smell of love.” She looked at me with tears in her eyes and said, “I knew God was there with me.” Whenever we go to the graveside, we encounter God. There in our darkest grief, God’s love illumines our lives.

TIME magazine published an article, “Angels Among Us”. Did any of you see it? Do you remember? They interviewed a woman named Melissa Deal Forth, whose husband, Chris, was dying of acute leukemia. One night she had fallen asleep in his hospital room.

When she awoke, he had gotten out of the bed, maneuvering himself and his IV pole around her, and left the room, somehow getting by the 360 degree view of the ward from the nurse's station. Shortly before 3 a.m., Melissa remembers being shaken awake by a frantic nurse who said she couldn't find Chris. They both anxiously began the search. Melissa ran down the hall and happened to peer into the chapel, where she found her husband, Chris, sitting there talking to a man Melissa didn't recognize. (She later said that not only did she not know him, but she had a hard time describing him.) "There was no real age to him," Melissa said, "No wrinkles. Just this perfectly smooth and pale, white, white skin and ice blue eyes. I mean, I've never seen that color blue on any human before. They were more the blue like some of those Husky dogs have. I'll never forget the eyes." She said he was wearing a flannel shirt and Levi's, which both looked brand-new; and work boots that had obviously never been worked in – the laces looked too new and crisp. Her husband waved her away and said, "It's fine, I'm alright." Later, her husband came back to his room and she described him as being a different man. "He was lit up, just vibrant. Smiling. I could see his big dimples. I hadn't seen them in so long. He didn't have the air of a terminally ill and very weak man anymore." She asked Chris who he was chatting with and he said, "You won't believe me." She pressed again, and he said, "I was talking to an angel, my guardian angel." Melissa searched the hospital to find the man, but there was no sign of him anywhere. After the visit, Chris told her his prayers had been answered. She worried for a while that he thought the angel had cured his cancer, but finally realized that he wasn't talking about a cure, but about the blessing the angel had brought with him - the absolute peace of mind. Two days after this incident, Chris Beal died. To this day, his wife, Melissa, is so grateful for their unexpected encounter with God.

As I said earlier, I have never seen an angel. I have never seen God, but I have felt His presence and I have heard His voice. I am convinced that whenever we live as people of faith - whether in prison, in the wilderness, on the wrong road, or in the graveyard - we never walk alone. God is with us. If we look, if we listen, we will experience God in the unexpected moments of life. Amen?

Pray with me, please. Lord, You are maturing us as Your children. You are inspiring us, Lord, to live in faith, to look with love, and to experience Your presence in all the circumstances of life. Truth be told, Lord, we will find ourselves imprisoned in miserable circumstances; we will find ourselves wandering in a wilderness not of our own choosing; we will cling to our stubbornness, even when we are wrong; and Lord, we will go the graveyard filled with grief. But in each and every one of those circumstances of life, may we find You and the hope and love that is ours, in Christ. It is in His name that we pray, Amen.