

My Soul Longs, the Spirit Groans ([Psalm 63:1-8](#))

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WATCH/LISTEN: www.fbcjc.org/sermon/my-soul-longs-the-spirit-groans

As I look around the room today, and as I think back on my time at FBCJC, I can't help but be thankful. You taught me, as the Psalmist said, to "meditate upon God in the watches of the night." You reminded me that God's steadfast love is better than life. And especially in this season, where you have suffered tremendous grief, numerous changes, and are discerning your future together, I can't help but feel profoundly grateful and admire your faithfulness to God, to one another, and to the world. You have connected in worship together every week, even at the height of COVID, and made worship accessible to those who could not attend in person. You support your young people, who are not only the future, but already are the church, through sharing your homes, your space, your time, and very important, your snacks. And you continue to make a difference throughout Jefferson City and around the world. Whether you are collecting supplies for South School or praying for ministry partners in Ukraine, South Dakota, or Kenya, you are sharing Christ's liberating, wonderful love that makes a difference in so many lives.

This congregation, at this church, through ups and downs, taught me that God loved me, and God would be with me no matter where I went and what I did.

And yet, even though I knew that in my mind and in my heart, today, I still struggle with truly embracing that reality—that God is with me, that God loves me.

It's helpful that I'm not the only one who struggles in knowing and trusting in God's love. **The bible is full of psalms and stories like this one, which tell of God's steadfastness with us.** God was with Moses and the Hebrew people in the wilderness for forty years. God was with Jesus when he was tempted for forty days in the wilderness. God was with Paul as he sailed across the Mediterranean.

This same book, the bible, with its many authors and stories, Also tells us about people who struggle with God and following God's will. People like Moses, who had to practically drag the Israelites with him as they wandered in the desert. People like Jesus, who in the Garden of Gethsemane prayed to God "if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want." (Matt. 26:39). And people like Paul, who, as he travels preaching the good news, found himself aboard a ship during a storm. In Acts 27, in the message paraphrase, Luke describes the storm as "Wind and waves were battering us unmercifully, and we lost all hope of rescue." Paul, the confident Paul, even had his struggles.

And so, like Moses, Jesus, and Paul, David's encounter with God ranged the depth of human experience. Sometimes all in one day. If anyone suffered from drama, it would be King David. David's story was an R-rated, grief stricken, drama.

In fact, David did not sit on the throne when he wrote this Psalm. He wasn't even a kid, hanging out with the sheep. When David wrote this song, he was on the run. King Saul, who had once been his friend,

whom he had shared many a meal with, was now trying to kill him. In 1 Samuel 17, David had just defeated Goliath.

By the way, one of the funniest stories I remember here at church was when, as a teenager, my brother James got up on Josh Hill's shoulders to play Goliath in a children's play. They had this long robe and I'm not sure if Josh could see, to be honest. They came from the narthex, and James had to duck under the balcony as they entered. The kids were dressed as Israelites. The child who played David was really dramatic with his pretend slingshot, and there were even sound effects. Winding up, David aimed and hit Goliath with a pop! James' head moved back, pretending to have been hit. He and Josh dramatically and not so well-choreographed, hamming it up for the giggling congregation, fell ever so slowly to the ground.

Anyway, Long story long, David had defeated Goliath, gaining King Saul's approval. And then David became best friends with Jonathan, Saul's son. David, the golden boy, kept winning and winning, and the admiration of King Saul turned to jealousy and anger. When David realized that Saul was trying to kill him, David escaped with the help of his wife Michal (who was Saul's daughter) and his friend Jonathan (who was Saul's son). David kept evading Saul in the wilderness with the help of his friends. While Saul was trying to kill David, David still had compassion for Saul. Two times, David could have overtaken Saul. And two times, David spared Saul's life.

While on the run from Saul, in the desert plains of ancient Judea, David wrote the Psalm. I like to use my imagination when thinking about biblical characters, so I imagine David singing this song in the evening or at night. Maybe he couldn't sleep, as the stress from being pursued kept his mind racing. The desert wind whipped about the tents, and the sand stung his face. The shrub around the tent provided little in the way of protection. The fire embers were dwindling. And here, in the dark, with the cloud of turmoil raging over his head, David began to sing.

Here, I'll quote from the Common English Bible, my new favorite translation:

*God! My God! It's you—
I search for you!
My whole being^[a] thirsts for you!
My body desires you
in a dry and tired land,
no water anywhere.*

David may have felt the hunger and thirst pains as he laid in his tent that night. He longed for a good steak and a nice drink of water. He also longed for reconciliation. Reconciliation with Saul. Peace in the land.

His longing may have felt overwhelming. The emptiness and desire and grief mixed together, and he couldn't handle it all. He didn't know what to do with it all.

So instead, he cried out his feelings to God. He knew God could handle it. When David was alone in the tents, in fear for his life, he felt the protection of being gathered under God's wings. **When David felt as if he had nothing left, he turned to the comfort God.**

And then David says something weird. We didn't read it in when we opened our bibles today. Frankly, I didn't want to read it. I didn't want to deal with it because it makes me nervous. At first glance, it makes David look like he's seeking vengeance. And it feels like God celebrates such vengeance seeking.

Here's the rest of the Psalm, verses 9-11:

*But those who seek to destroy my life
shall go down into the depths of the earth;
¹⁰ they shall be given over to the power of the sword,
they shall be prey for jackals.
¹¹ But the king shall rejoice in God;
all who swear by him shall exult,
for the mouths of liars will be stopped.*

To quote a friend, yikes on bikes.

But then, a biblical scholar had me wondering about this.¹ She said that David, justifiably, has a right to be upset. After all, he had done nothing wrong at that point. And when he had the opportunity to kill Saul, he didn't, and instead showed Saul mercy.

David also trusted that God would act justly to those who have been oppressed or hurt.

If God can't handle all of our feelings—both praise and despair, both anger and joy, then God really isn't God. Maybe verses 9-11 is not so much of a divine pronouncement. Maybe verses 9-11 is about David putting his hope in the God who wants justice to be served. So often when we take revenge into our own hands, when we seek to punish someone, we become consumed by anger and self-righteous, that what started out as noble intentions could become evil.

When anger—even righteous anger—takes over us—it leaves us wanting to be like God. And we know that doesn't end well.

So, David trusted God with his longings. David trusted God in his sorrows. And David trusted God with his anger.

Trusting God with the good and bad is difficult. Sojourner Truth, a nineteenth century Black preacher woman, knew that too well. She was born around 1800 as an enslaved woman in the Dutch-speaking New York. She walked away from her enslaver as an adult with her baby in her arms and found refuge with the Quakers. At age 46, in mid-life, she changed her name from Isabella to Sojourner Truth and began to preach about abolition and women's right to vote. As you could imagine, she had her share of heartache. She bore the scars of whippings and had a hand injury from her time under slavery. Her only son died while aboard a ship in the South Pacific. And she faced the ridicule of many people along with way who refused to see her full humanity.

She, like David, wanted to see her oppressors suffer. At times, she had prayed that those who abused her would be killed, would go to the depths of the earth. But she also knew that her faith in the God who gave second chances compelled her to trust God for justice. Despite her anger and suffering, she

¹ Sarah Derk on this <https://freshtext.fireside.fm/168>

knew, without a shadow of a doubt that “she lived and God lived in her.”² Because the Holy Spirit dwelt within her, she knew “God’s steadfast love is better than life, and her lips would praise God.”

Maybe, just maybe, we don’t have to be scared of verses 9-11. Verses 9-11 were meant for those who had been hurt unjustly. For people like David, who incurred Saul’s wrath without reason. For people like Sojourner Truth, whose humanity was continually denied by white people.

Who in the world are being hurt unjustly today? Who are those people who have to trust that God will provide judgment? And how might we have compassion, solidarity, and empathy with them?

It’s tricky, to say the least. And when we don’t know what to do with everything we experience or feel, when we don’t know how to pray, we can trust, like Sojourner Truth, that God lives within us. That God within us is the Holy Spirit. One of the scriptures I’ve been fixated on recently is Romans 8. Perhaps it’s the turmoil going on in our world, or the turmoil in my own heart, but this passage just hits right.

In addressing the Romans, Paul explained in verses 26-27:

“the Spirit comes to help our weakness. We don’t know what we should pray, but the Spirit himself pleads our case with unexpressed groans.”²⁷

As we continue this delving into the Psalms during Lent, and as you continue to discern what God calls you to as a church community, know that God can handle it all. Your joy. Your desire. Your grief. Your anger. The Holy Spirit dwells *within* you, knowing the range of what you think and feel, and you will always, always, always be protected under the shadow of God’s wings.

² Washington, KL 6028