An Ode to God

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The 50th anniversary of President Kennedy’s assassination has been an inescapable news story lately. John F. Kennedy remains an iconic figure in American life. Certainly his assassination had something to do with it, but another popular American president, William McKinley, was assassinated in 1901, yet few paid tribute to his presidency 50 years later.

Americans have an enduring fascination with its 35th president. Kennedy had that certain “it factor.” This decorated war hero was handsome and charismatic. His magnetic personality and glamorous wife drew us in.

JFK was a popular, complicated man. His shadow side was hidden from public view. His womanizing is now well-documented. The press, who was well-acquainted with his philandering, chose not to write about it. He suffered from an astonishing number of medical ailments—among them chronic back pain, colitis and Addison’s disease. He was administered last rites by Catholic priests three times before he became president, yet virtually every picture from that era portrays him as a man with robust health. His alleged ties to organized crime have been constant fodder for speculation. Kennedy was the last president whose private life was kept private. One of Kennedy’s biographers said of him, “He was a cool guy, no question about it. But he also had a dark side, a really dark side that many knew about and didn’t want to write about” (Seymour Hersh, The Dark Side of Camelot).

Such restraint would never fly in our day! Nothing is considered off limits anymore. Our wired world shows no mercy.

The narrator of David’s story would be more comfortable with our type of tell-the-truth news coverage. There’s no attempt to sanitize David’s behavior or airbrush sin from his story. David, like Kennedy, was handsome and winsome. He could have been Kennedy’s double. He had his sterling qualities, yet also exhibited a dark side.

We’ve come at long last to the final sermon in a 12 sermon series on David’s life. David’s story ends appropriately with a song. David wrote hundreds of songs called Psalms. One half of the Old Testament Psalms are attributed to David. This song, in 2 Samuel 22, is a virtual copy of Psalm 18 and serves as a fitting summary to David’s life.
We’ve been asking two questions of each episode in David’s life. What do we learn about David? What do we learn about God?

First, David. As I said last Sunday, David is complex. He has his virtues, yet many times his morals and manners leave something to be desired.

The question I’ve heard more than any other from those of you reading along in our daily devotional and Peterson’s book is why is there so much sex and violence in David’s story? The answer is rather simple. The Bible is a story about real people. It’s a record of how a real God engages with messy people to bring about genuine change and transformation.

When archeologists excavate our civilization thousands of years from now, what do you think they will say about our movies and TV shows? They will want to know why there was so much sex and violence in our culture.

David is not immune from the evil influences of his sex-crazed, violence-prone culture. He commits adultery with Bathsheba and arranges for the murder of her husband, Uriah.

The portion of David’s song that is most problematic for me is verses 21 to 24, “The Lord has dealt with me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands he recompensed me. I have kept the ways of the Lord, and I have not departed from my God…From his statutes I did not turn aside. I was blameless before him and I kept myself from guilt.”

My first reaction when I read these verses in anticipation of this sermon was to ask, David, what are you smoking, man? David’s self-congratulating piety strikes me as rather disingenuous.

Some Biblical scholars insist that David could only have sung these words before his sin with Bathsheba. Yet, the opening verse in the chapter which introduces this song seems to suggest that this psalm was sung at the end of David’s life.

Here’s what I think: David knows himself at his core to be forgiven. He takes Nathan at his word after committing his grievous sin with Bathsheba, “The Lord has taken away your sin” (2 Samuel 12:13). His blamelessness is entirely God’s doing. God has declared him blameless. His hands are cleansed by God, not because they’ve never been dirty. What God forgives, God forgets.

King Hezekiah praises God for forgiveness. He declares, “O Lord, you have cast all my sins behind your back” (Isaiah 38:17). What a provocative image. God puts our sins out of sight. What God forgives, God forgets.

God’s forgiveness is epitomized in a true story about
what God forgives, God forgets.

a much loved priest from the Philippines. This priest carried in his heart a heavy burden for a secret sin he had committed many years ago. He had repented of his sin, but he still had no real sense of God’s forgiveness.

There was a woman in his congregation who deeply loved God. She claimed to have visions in which Jesus spoke to her. This priest was skeptical, so he asked her, “The next time you speak with Jesus, ask him what sin your priest committed while he was in seminary.”

The woman agreed to his request.

A few days later, the priest asked, “Did Jesus visit you in your dreams?”

“Yes,” she replied.

“Did you ask him what sin I committed in seminary?”

“Yes,” she said again.

“Well, what did he say?” the priest asked.

“He said, ‘I don’t remember.’” Like I said, what God forgives, God forgets.

What do we learn about God from this story? I like what Eugene Peterson writes in his book *Leap over a Wall*. Incidentally, the title for his book is drawn from verse 30, “With the Lord I can leap over a wall.” He writes that we don’t become good and then get God. First, we get God and then we become good for something.

David’s psalm opens with praise for God’s deliverance. “The Lord is my rock, my fortress and deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold and my refuge, my savior” (2 Samuel 22:2-3). David’s mind is flooded with metaphors from real life. David’s conscience is so God-saturated that even inanimate objects like rocks and horns remind him of God.

The landscape in the Israeli desert is littered with rocks. I don’t mean little rocks; we’re talking gigantic stone formations, the kind from which David used to find refuge from his enemies. The use of the possessive pronoun “my” intensifies David’s connection to God. God is my rock and my deliverer.

David’s song is all about God’s deliverance. David sings, “He reached down and took hold of me. He drew me out of deep water. He rescued me from my enemies. He was my support. He brought me out to a spacious place. He rescued me” (22:17-20).

As David looks back over his life, he can count the number of times God delivered him from his enemies. God delivered him from Goliath, Saul, Absalom, Abner, Adonijah, Ishboseth, Nabal, Sheba, and Shimei. God prevailed against the Philistines, Ammonites, Syrians, Edomites, Moabites and the Amalekites.

David can see, with great clarity, God’s deliverance only as he looks back over his life. When I’m struggling with something and can’t always
recognize God’s deliverance, it’s only as I look back that I can say, ‘Now I get it. Now I see. God has delivered me.’

You may be facing some kind of crisis at the moment—an uncertain health diagnosis, stress on the job, conflict at home or the rupture of a friendship that means a great deal to you. Paul writes in his famous 1st Corinthians love chapter, a staple at so many weddings, “Now I see in a mirror dimly, but then I shall see face to face” (13:12). Someday, life’s mysteries will assume their true size. All of our “why” questions will one day be answered to our satisfaction.

“Life is messy” is the image we’ve been using for this sermon series. Many have told me that you identify with this graphic. Some will be reminded around the Thanksgiving table a few days from now how messy family relationships can become. “Messy” is not the full story. We need to add something else to the mix. God prevails—God delivers. God prevails in David’s messy life.

Today’s worship and this fall’s sermon series ends with a song. No one is quite sure the origin of this spirited gospel song. It’s a song that testifies to God’s mercy. It speaks of God’s ability to deliver us from storm and earthly harm. The refrain “He never failed me yet” repeats again and again to reinforce the theme. He never failed me, He never failed me yet.

Joshua, at the end of this life, says to his people: “Now I am about to go the way of all the earth. You know with all your heart and soul that not one of all the good promises the Lord your God gave you has failed” (Joshua 23:14).

As we look back we can sing with confidence, “He never failed me.”