

When we began this current worship series, I knew nothing about a new TV show that was being advertised other than its title: God Friendd Me. As I watched the first episode, I realized that the idea of God speaking to us through Facebook fit in quite well with what the Bible tells us about how God speaks to us through the spiritual growth practices we call spiritual disciplines: prayer, worship, Bible study, fellowship, giving, and service. Having experienced those kinds of convergences before, and having seen God touch people's lives through such convergences, I have learned to listen when God seems to be saying that He wants to work through such timings.

Convinced that this convergence was not just a coincidence, I therefore used part of that first episode as an illustration for the topic of "Private Disciplines." I was amused, but not surprised, when the script of the next episode of God Friendd Me fit in with the next topic: "Personal Ministry," and the script of the episode the next week fit in with "Providential Relationships."

The reason I was not surprised is because of today's topic: "Pivotal Circumstances." This is because one of the cornerstones of Judeo-Christian teaching is the belief that God is active in the events of history, bringing about His will through actual people, in the actual occurrences of their lives, rather than merely being far off and detached from the world in which we live.

It was also not surprising to me that this past week's episode of God Friendd Me continued that trend (as if just maybe God knew in advance what those scripts were going to be about, and had a hand in us deciding what we would be doing here in worship at the same time that TV show was hitting the air waves). And while I can't prove that divine convergence as scientific fact, I've seen it happen too many times to think it a mere coincidence.

If you saw last Sunday's episode, you may agree. In that episode, God suggested Miles friend the Hayden Planetarium. Since the previous friend suggestions had been people, this was odd. But since Miles didn't believe it was actually God sending him friend suggestions, he concluded it could be a clue as to who was behind "the God account." As he and his friend Cara stood on a walkway overlooking the main floor of the planetarium, they examined the crowd. Eventually, Miles suggested they look for clues somewhere other than the main atrium. But Cara didn't think they had been sent there to look for God account clues, pointing out that up to then "*it's all been about helping people.*" "*Then why didn't they just send us a name?*" Miles asked. Grinning, Cara replied "*well, the God account works in mysterious ways.*"

"*Look around,*" Miles said, "*How are we going to figure out who it is. It's not like any of these people are going to jump out and ask for help.*" As soon as he said that, a woman down on the main floor spilled the contents of her purse, and loudly drew everyone's attention. Cara grinned again, and said "*or maybe they will.*" Looking down on someone (literally and figuratively) who did not seem to have her act together, Miles doubted this was someone they were supposed to friend. "*You think the God account sent us here to help her?*" Miles asked. "*Why not?*" Cara said, "*You literally just said someone wouldn't jump out at us, and she practically just did.*"

That incident is a good illustration of how God often works through what Andy Stanley calls “Pivotal Circumstances” to try to grow BIG FAITH in us. This is because God does not merely announce His presence in our lives with a booming voice. Nor does God do things for which there is no other explanation but that God is the cause. This is because God wants us to trust that He is present in the midst of the circumstances of our lives, rather than force us to believe by irrefutable evidence. This is why the book of Hebrews tells us that faith is “*the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.*” Notice that the definition Hebrews gives us does not speak of what some call “blind faith.”

This is because God doesn’t call us to believe despite rational evidence to the contrary. Nor does God expect us to believe as if the decision to trust Him is made in a vacuum. What God expects us to do is trust that the occurrences of life are not merely the result of arbitrary happenstance - but a loving God being involved in our lives to bring about His good and gracious will, because of the very results of what has happened in the circumstances of our lives again and again and again. When the occurrences of life are joyful this is easy to do, and we praise God for His goodness. But when the occurrences of life are painful, or bring suffering, or do not unfold the way we want them to unfold, it is more difficult to do, and we can begin to curse God and question if He even exists.

We heard something of that in what Wendy Coons spoke about in the video. In that video, Wendy shared how after the darkness of getting lost in the woods, she came to the assurance that there was an unknown Someone who had actually been the one who “found her.” To get to the place where we have that same kind of faith in the midst of the circumstances of our lives, particularly in times of testing and trials, we need to start with examination of the way we look at life itself. In the TV show God Friended Me, Miles spoke about the way he had come to look at life. In recalling a painful time in his life, he told Cara how when he was eight his mother was diagnosed with cancer, and given six months to live. He prayed for her, and she recovered.

But then, on the way home from the hospital, she was killed in a car accident. “*I tried to make sense of it,*” Miles said, “*And the only way I could was that there was no God. Because if there is, it means that He is cruel. And I don’t want to live in a world that is governed by someone like that.*” But just because Miles couldn’t make sense of what had happened didn’t mean that the only answer available to him was that “*there was no God*” or that God is cruel. We see this when we look at what the scriptures that were read today.

In the first passage, we heard about an event in the life of Jesus. Jesus had been preaching, teaching, and healing. One day, a messenger arrived to tell him that a friend named Lazarus was ill. Jesus continued with what he was doing, seemingly unconcerned. Two days later, Jesus told His disciples it was time to visit Lazarus. In the conversation that followed, Jesus revealed that He knew that Lazarus was dead. Why He waited to that point isn’t explained, except with the cryptic statement He made to the messenger Mary and Martha had sent: “*it is for God’s glory.*” When He arrived in Bethany, Jesus went said something similar, reminding Mary and Martha of what he had told the messenger: “*did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?*” After praying, Jesus then “*cried with a loud voice ‘Lazarus come out!’*”

The key to understanding what was happening here isn't hard to find however. For while it may be puzzling why Jesus allowed his friends to suffer, Jesus was acting in this incident in a way that is consistent with how our Heavenly Father acts in the circumstances of all our lives. We see this when we analyze the words Jesus prayed before He called Lazarus from the tomb: "*Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.*" In these words, Jesus said that what He had been doing (from the moment He heard about Lazarus being ill to what He was about to do in calling Lazarus from the grave) was so intended to help those present "believe," or - to put it in the terminology of our worship series - grow BIG FAITH.

That is because that is what our Heavenly Father seeks to do in every event of our lives: help us grow BIG FAITH. For some reason that process is not as successful as it can be if we only experience problem free living. For it is in difficult times that we sometimes hear God best. And it is in the midst of our pain that we sometimes are able to more fully understand how much our lack of faith inhibits what God is trying to do in our lives. We see this in the book The Problem of Pain, where C.S. Lewis wrote that "*God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts in or pain: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.*"

We see this spoken about more fully by James. James wrote to *the twelve tribes in dispersion*," the Christian believers of Jewish heritage who were scattered around the Mediterranean world. The reason he was writing to them was that they had become scattered because of persecution, fleeing from place to place to find somewhere to live where they wouldn't be harassed merely because of the ways they sought to live. But that never seemed to happen. Everywhere they went, they experienced persecution. So, as James wrote to encourage them to hold onto their faith and not give up, saying "*whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy.*"

The reason James recommends considering trials "joy" is because it is only by experiencing trials that "*endurance*" can be produced. And it is only as endurance is produced that we are - day after day - able to grow the BIG FAITH we need to not only see God's presence in all the circumstances of our lives (good and bad), but also fully walk with God in the midst of those circumstances. That can be a hard concept for us to grasp, however. Like kids in school, we can tend to feel like tests are being thrown our way to make us fail, cause us to stumble, and hold us back. We hear this reality spoken about in a video statement by Kathy Evans.

But as any wise student knows, tests are given to us to enable us to show what we have learned, and put into practice the wisdom we have accumulated. For it is only by mastering one level of something, that we are ready to move on to learn - and practice - more advanced things. Which is exactly what James was talking about when he said not only that it is God's will that "*the testing of your faith produces endurance,*" but also so that endurance would "*have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.*" And the reason that is so important for us to grasp is that God seeks to not only use the circumstances of our lives so that we might mature as His followers, but also so that He might effect the lives of other people through us, bringing us all into a place where we are "*mature and complete, lacking in nothing.*"

In my own life, I have seen this reality play itself out again and again and again. In April of 1989, for instance, I was asked to participate in an event. It really wasn't something I wanted to do, but it came along with another responsibility I held. So I said yes. During the course of the day, I met someone new. And through that circumstance, my life, and her life, went in a whole new direction. But it wasn't just each of us who had our lives effected by God because we let him into the circumstances of our lives. The decision we each made to be there that day, and the decisions that followed, led to a whole new set of circumstances, one of which was the birth of this little guy in 1993, and the addition of his brother in 1996.

I am sure you have similar stories. I am sure you can point to circumstances in your life that are pivotal in you not only being here today, but being here as a person of faith. In order to replicate that reality in the lives of additional people, we will have people taking a step toward walking deeper and wider with God today by taking vows of church membership. As they do so, you are invited to renew your membership vows, so that today can be a pivotal circumstance in your life as well.

For each time we renew those vows, we invite God into our lives anew. And each time we invite God into our lives anew, it can give birth to new realities. For most of us, those new realities won't have peach fuzz hair, or need to be given names, but they can be just as alive to us as a new child coming into our lives - if we allow God to work in the circumstances of our lives in such a way that we "*see His glory.*" For when we "*see His glory,*" we can't help but want to go deeper and wider in our walk with Him.