

**Sunday, August 12, 2018 – Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost**  
**“Joyful in Defeat”**

Psalm 34: 1-8

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Story Framed

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, Amen.

I'm mostly desensitized to the unique aspects of life in Las Vegas but one place that always gets me is McCarran. It's just so different from every other airport – the loud music playing in the terminal, pumping up the tourists for their Vegas party vacation. The slot machines at every gate. And the mood is completely different depending on when you fly – if you fly out on a Thursday or Friday you're walking against the flow of traffic as hordes of people who are totally pumped to be here rush to grab their bag and catch transportation to their hotel. If you fly out on Sunday, the music still says “party” but everyone is moving a little slower and the faces look worn and tired – maybe there was a little too much fun, or maybe too many losses – folks who come here to gamble can a lot like fishermen, you only hear about the biggest catch, and even then it's usually exaggerated – it gets a little bigger every time the story is retold. They'll tell you about their win whether you want to hear it or not, but not the losses, never the losses. No one wants to brag about their losses.

That's just human nature, really – and that makes this psalm a strange entry in our Bibles. Quick 45 second recap of Jesus' ancestor David, roughly 1,000 BC – a shepherd and teenager, the youngest son of Jesse. He's anointed with oil in secret by the prophet Samuel to take over as King of Israel, since God is rejecting the existing king, Saul. God's power rests on David. David kills Goliath, a great warrior of the enemy Philistines. He is given favor by King Saul – becomes best friends with Saul's son Jonathan and marries Saul's daughter, Michal – but Saul's narcissistic vanity can't take the people's love of David, much less this song that they sing of this very young man who is now an accomplished warrior, musician and poet: “Saul has slain his thousands – David has slain his tens of thousands.”

Can you relate to Saul's insecurity? David is one of these guys who has seen everything break his way. He was plucked from obscurity, elevated over his older brothers, selected to be the next king of God's holy people, saw great victories, became wealthy, married a princess and

is blessed with good looks, strength, intelligence, wit, charm and artistic talent. There's every reason in the world to brag in any of those things.

Saul and his insecurity can't take it. So, David falls out of favor and Saul puts a price on this guy, his son-in-law. David is on the lam and desperate, runs to the Philistine enemy, to Abimelech, which is a term similar to King – King Achish of Gath for protection but Achish orders David to be arrested – a useful bargaining chip for tough-nosed negotiations with Israel – similar to when Iran or Turkey or North Korea arrest American citizens and then ask for concessions from the U.S. government. They know David's reputation, what a great warrior he is. What happens next sets the stage for David's words of praise to God in the psalm for saving him, with beautiful praise like, "I will bless the Lord at all times; his praise shall continually be in my mouth. My soul makes its boast in the Lord; let the humble hear and be glad."

What's he so joyful to praise God for? God delivered him from danger. David, for his part, maintained no dignity in the process. He escaped arrest as a prized enemy warrior by pretending to be mentally ill. In 1 Samuel 21, the story is told this way: "12 And David took these words to heart and was much afraid of Achish the king of Gath. 13 So he changed his behavior before them and pretended to be insane in their hands and made marks on the doors of the gate and let his spittle run down his beard. 14 Then Achish said to his servants, "Behold, you see the man is mad. Why then have you brought him to me? 15 Do I lack madmen, that you have brought this fellow to behave as a madman in my presence? Shall this fellow come into my house?"

Can you see David there, a sane man, terrified of what the king will do to him? Standing at the city gate, ranting and raving, scribbling strange ramblings on the gate out in a highly public place, foaming at the mouth, spit running down his beard? This great warrior of whom songs are sung, abasing himself in fear to be less threatening to his enemy. He's rolling over. He's submitting. He's humiliating himself. And he's trusting God to see him through. This isn't the tale of the record fish or the great winning streak or the picture-perfect life for all to see on Facebook or Instagram – it's a humiliating moment from the one who had every reason to brag, but his actions prove true: "My soul makes its boast in the Lord."

Being a disciple of Jesus doesn't usually look like winning. In fact, life is full of defeats of one kind or another – family, career, personal, health, financial, academic. And even if another might look at us and imagine us to have everything, we know the fears and failures and insecurities that lurk within, that we'd rather not admit, that we don't want anyone to see. Maybe that's why those mountaintop, victory moments feel so sweet – because they're so rare and fleeting.

And you know, Jesus tells us to expect that – count the cost. Take up your cross and follow me – but David gives us a clue about finding reasons for joy and praise in a life full of defeats. At the beginning of this psalm, as there are for many of the psalms there's a short little explanation of the context. It's not an editor's notes added in after the fact, it's part of the text of our Bibles. This one reads, "Of David, when he changed his behavior before Abimelech, so that he drove him out, and he went away." Every psalm that David wrote that gives us some context about the occasion for his writing is about a personal failure or embarrassment, defeat or loss. This highly accomplished renaissance man anointed by God for some of the very greatest of things bragged not once in his greatness but did the unthinkable – he wrote about, broadcasted for the whole world to hear that "This poor man cried and the Lord heard him and saved him out of all his troubles."

He saw a God who doesn't turn His back, a God who will work through fear and foaming at the mouth and praises saying, "Look what God has done!"

For you and me, with defeats in our lives, we share that same reason for joy. It's why we call a shameful Friday good. It's why we ornament our churches, homes and bodies with a symbol of execution for the lowest of the low. It's why our funerals are rife with words like hope, eternal and resurrection. It's why you and I can come here, not needing to paper over our losses with tales of our biggest and best and be real, joyful and thankful for a God who turned His loss – His giving up His one and only Son to die – into a symbol of victory. It's why you can enter this space, moving a little slower, tired and worn from your defeats but the music still says party, voices still cry "Alleluia!" because joy of joys, God is still faithful, God is still good and we don't boast in our winnings, we boast in our Lord. Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good! Blessed is the man who takes refuge in him! In Jesus' name, Amen.

