

God Today



by Rev. Brent Hall

The following articles appeared in *Tidings*, the Concord United Methodist Church newsletter, beginning in January 2014.

I Saw God Today Introduction

George Strait sings *I Saw God Today*. For those of you who are not country music fans, you wouldn't know the words, but they go like this: *Just walked down to the street to the coffee shop, had to take a break, I've been by her side for 18 hours straight, saw a flower growing in the middle of the sidewalk, pushing up through the concrete, like it was planted right there for me to see. The flashing light, the honking horns, all seem to fade away, but in the shadow of the hospital, at 508, I Saw God Today. I've been to church, I've read the book, I know He's there, but I don't look near often as I should, His fingerprints are everywhere, I just look down and stop and stare, open my eyes and then I swear, I Saw God Today. Got my faced pushed up against the nursery glass, she's sleeping like a rock, my name on her wrist, wearing tiny pink socks, she's got my nose, she's got her Mama's eyes, my brand new baby girl, she's a miracle, I Saw God Today.*

Those words have inspired me to write a series of articles under the title *God Today*. In those articles I am going to share with you times when I believe, beyond a shadow of doubt, I saw God at work in my life and in the life of the churches I have served. They are "divine moments" that I will always carry in my heart and treasure.

Please forgive me for being so autobiographical in these articles, but keep in mind that they are not about me but about God and His activity today in the world. No doubt, you too have had those "divine moments" when you knew it was God at work. I would love to hear about those from you. Who knows, maybe we will do a little booklet that contains a collection of "God Today" accounts from the life experiences of His people at Concord. But my purpose for putting in print my "God experiences" is first and foremost to glorify God who is still at work in the world today. My second purpose is to bear witness to these "divine moments" so they can warm the hearts and build the faith of my family, friends and all who may read them. The Bible says, "Let the redeemed of the Lord say so." This is my opportunity to "say so" and share how the Redeemer has proved himself to me over and over again.

I will also bear witness to some of the "wilderness experiences" in my life where I thought God had moved away and failed to leave a forwarding address. As painful as those experiences were, they were also some of the most valuable times of spiritual struggle and growth. They help wean you from self-sufficiency.

All of the above is an introduction. I will start with my first "God Today" article next week. Pray that it will be used to warm hearts and bring people closer to Jesus Christ! God Bless You!

God Today

I have heard people say, "I would believe in God if God acted today like He did in biblical times." I suppose they mean for God to part the Red Sea or turn water into wine. They seldom mention God's self-sacrificial action on the cross at Calvary. While the Biblical accounts of God's actions are truly astounding, I believe God is still at work in the world in both subtle and dramatic ways. God still whispers! On occasion, God shouts! The event I share with you today recalls one of those whispers that had a profound influence on my life.

I was blessed to be born into a Christian home. My parents wanted their children to love God and do His will. They were not perfect people, but they were very good role models. They had their priorities right. We went to church three times a week; church attendance was not an elective for the Hall children. I went through confirmation class and gave as much as I understood about myself to as much as I understood about God. I grew up in a faith-enriched environment. But, at best, God was a concept for me. I hoped He was there. But He did not have my attention.

The first recollection I have of God getting my attention took place in March 1964. Pops Hall, my grandfather, died of prostate cancer. He had lived a full life, but his last five years were very difficult, and he had been in a great deal of pain. The cancer had spread to the bones, and eventually he lost his battle and gained his heaven. So while we were all sad, we knew Pops was fine. The challenge was for the rest of us to move forward. That challenge was especially demanding for my grandmother, Mama Hall.

As I stood by Pops' casket and viewed his body that had served him for some 70 years, God began to whisper in my ear, "Brent, this life is not all there is. There is more! This life is just the beginning of loving, growing, and serving me and my children." That was the first time I remember God getting my attention. I began to see God, not as a concept, but as the divine person who wants to relate to His children in a personal and dynamic manner. It would be over a year later when God would really get my attention, but that first God whisper was the foundation for all the other "divine moments" in my life.

People often ask me, "Brent, isn't it difficult to conduct funerals?" Yes, of course, funerals bring with them strong emotions, grief born of loss and, at times, regret. But I am also aware that often God whispers to those who mourn as He whispered to me long ago. He gets the mourner's attention. In our loss, He often plants seeds of hope that sprout in the springtime of the soul.

I saw "God Today" in the death of my Pops. "Yea, though I walk through the valley of death, I will fear no evil for Thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me." Have you heard God whisper to you in your loss?

God Today – On Occasion God Shouts

Most of us, including me, are more familiar with a God who whispers rather than a God who shouts. But there have been those “Divine Moments” in my spiritual journey when God shouted. In this article, I will share with you one of those occasions which took place in June 1965 when I was 16 years old.

Two of my good high school friends and fellow teammates on the football team, Charlie Gregory and Jeff Raines, invited me to go with them to a special youth service at their church. In the past, they had invited me to many events but never to church. I took them up on their invitation, which would change my life forever.

That night we heard a young married couple, John and Bobbie Langraff, witness to their faith through music and the spoken word. They said, “God knows about you and has a wonderful plan for your life. All you have to do is find it. And you begin the journey of finding that plan by giving your life to Jesus Christ.” That comment was a spiritual arrow that went straight to my heart. In two months I would begin my senior year in high school. I knew that in the following months and years I would be making choices that would impact the rest of my life, including such questions as, “Where will I go to college? What will be my major? What will be my life work? Who will I marry?” I was clueless! I thought if God really did know all about me, perhaps I should turn to Him for guidance. That night I went to the altar of the church, and without so much as a tear in my eyes, I made my adult commitment to Jesus Christ. It wasn’t an emotional experience; that would come later. Rather it was a genuine surrender of my will to God’s will for my life. Jeff and Charlie also came to the altar and made their commitment to Christ.

The following night, Jeff and Charlie met me at a local youth hang-out. They got in my car, and we drove to a more private location where we could talk without interruptions. We pulled over on a quiet side street in my hometown. Jeff said, “Guys, last night we became serious about following Christ. I am excited about that, but I am also fearful. For you see, I just hope and pray that God can help me overcome a real problem in my life.” He went on to describe his behavior, the behavior of a teen-age alcoholic. It was far more than drinking with the boys; he was addicted to alcohol. He hid bottles. Jeff then said, “Guys, I am wondering if God can help me overcome this problem. If God would just show me a sign that He is here and can help me – if I just had a sign?” Just then all the lights on the street went out. And in that little car of mine, there was a warmth that engulfed all three of us. It was like you had turned on an oven. Love, like a mighty river, flowed over all three of us. We all three shouted at once, “It is God.” Jeff then said, “Now, if the lights will just come back on.” And they did. That night God shouted at the three of us. Forty-nine years have passed since then. Charlie is a vice-president of a college in Illinois. Jeff is a lawyer. Brent, as you know, is a preacher. All three of us will go to our graves convinced that God spoke to us that day. God’s self-authenticating voice shouted at three boys that day. Believe it or not! It happened to me!

God Today – The Call to Enter the Ordained Ministry

After making my commitment to Jesus Christ, I spent almost every weekend of my senior year in high school speaking in churches and addressing youth groups. Jeff, Charlie, and I didn't know that we were not supposed to tell people that we had a dramatic God experience, lest they think us crazy, so we talked about the lights going out and the reality of God's presence in that car. As we witnessed to our "God experience," churches began inviting us to share our story in morning worship services and at youth gatherings. That year, we saw literally hundreds of young people come to Jesus Christ. Years later, a man came up to me and said, "You are one of those light boys that spoke in my church years ago. In that service I gave my life to Christ, and I am a United Methodist preacher today. Thanks for sharing your story; it touched my heart and led me to Christ."

My plan after entering college was to be a Christian business man. But God had another plan. I came home one weekend from college; on Sunday morning I was comfortably seated next to my girlfriend Vicki in the balcony of my home church. I was listening to my pastor, Reverend Les Chapman, preach. Les' text was Isaiah 6:8, "Then I [Isaiah] heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I; send me!'"

I really don't remember all that Les said in that sermon. But as he was coming to the end of the sermon, he asked, "Is there anyone here today that feels the call of God on his or her life and, like Isaiah, is willing to say, 'Here am I; send me!'"? Once again, it was like an arrow going straight to my heart. God was speaking to me. I responded to the invitation, and there at that altar I made a commitment of my life to full-time Christian service. My parents, always supportive, came and knelt with me.

That afternoon, at home, I talked with my parents about the call on my life and how I wasn't sure exactly what God wanted me to do, but I knew I was called into some form of ministry. My mother went into the other room, opened the cedar chest, fumbled through the contents, pulled out a little piece of paper, and placed it in my hands. It was a note that had been attached to a gift given to me when I was baptized as an infant. The note read "to little preacher Hall."

Mom said, "Brent, before you were born, your Dad and I prayed for a son and that one day you would be a preacher. That Sunday when you were baptized, we committed you to the Lord and to the ministry if it was God's will." I said, "Mom, why didn't you tell me this earlier?" She wisely responded, "We felt that if God was in this, He would tell you. We didn't want you to feel that you had been unduly influenced by your parents. Besides, you were always such a mumbler I didn't think people could hear you if you were called to preach." And she was right; I did mumble.

But that day, I felt the call to full-time Christian service and eventually found my way through the ordination process. After completing college and three years of seminary, I received my first appointment in the Holston Conference. Why Holston Conference instead of the Kentucky Conference? That is another article. I am so thankful that God is still calling people into the ministry. "Here am I; send me!" was definitely a "God Today" moment in my life.

God Today – Picking Up A Hitchhiker Who One Day Would Be a Bishop

I believe it was Spring 1972 when I appeared before the District Committee on Ministry in Bowling Green, Kentucky to begin the procedure for ordination in the Louisville Conference. It was my second year of seminary and I attended seminary at Asbury Theological in Wilmore, Kentucky.

I was young, naïve, and nervous. I was thoroughly questioned by members of the committee, which is what they were supposed to do. The district superintendent of the Bowling Green District was annoyed that I had chosen to attend seminary at Asbury and made no bones about it. When I walked out of that meeting, I didn't know what to think. Had I chosen a seminary that was considered to be a theological leper by the leadership of the church? I wondered if my home conference would even want me once I graduated from Asbury. I was mulling all this over in my mind as I was driving back to Wilmore. Just as I was preparing to take the Bluegrass Parkway near Elizabethtown, I saw a boy hitchhiking. I heard a voice say, "Brent, pick up that boy." Almost to my own amazement, I found myself pulling off I-65 and watched in my rearview mirror as this long-haired kid with a backpack ran to my car. He told me his name was Scott Jones, and he was hitchhiking from Nashville to Lexington to visit his grandparents.

I asked him what he was doing in Nashville. He said he graduated from high school a semester early and was in Nashville to work on the youth caucus for General Conference of The United Methodist Church. "Oh really!" I said. I found out his father was Dr. Jameson Jones, president of ILIFF School of Theology in Denver.

Scott was clearly a free spirit. He said, "Oh, I believe Jesus was a great man but not divine. I want to spend time in a commune and see what that is like." By the time he finished talking, I felt better about the sound theological training in the historic Wesleyan tradition that I was receiving at Asbury. I talked to him about my views of Christ, which were certainly different from his. I ended up taking him all the way to the mall in Lexington, where he met his grandfather.

A few years later, his father, Dr. Jameson Jones, who now was the Dean at Duke Seminary, was the featured preacher at Annual Conference. After one of his sermons, I asked Dr. Jones if he had a son who did a lot of hitchhiking. He said, "I have two sons, but Scott is the hitchhiker." I responded, "Dr. Jones, did you pray for your son when he was on the road?" "All the time!" was his response. I then told him that I had caught one of those prayers because I had never picked up hitchhikers, but God told me that day to stop and pick up that boy.

In 2004 I was at General Conference in Pittsburg. Dr. Scott Jones was leading his delegation from Texas, and I approached him and said, "Scott, do you remember me picking you up on I-65 many years ago?" He laughed and said, "I certainly do." I then told him what had happened before I had picked him up and how troubled I was, but when I heard how crazy his theology was I felt better about my theological training. Scott laughed and said, "Brent, about a year later a trucker picked me up outside of Bristol, Tennessee, and his love for Christ was so real that I vowed that before my feet touched the ground from that truck I wanted the Christ that man knew in my heart."

Scott is now Bishop Scott Jones, one of the truly great bishops of United Methodism and a prolific writer on the subject of Evangelism. Picking Scott up that day years ago was no mere coincidence; it was a God-incident. It was a "divine moment ... a God Today moment."

P. S. In retrospect, there is no doubt in my mind that my home conference would have graciously received me. In fact, I was ordained a Deacon in the Louisville Conference at Bishop Short's home church in Louisville. But I never served a church in my home conference. In June 1973, I came to Holston Conference and took my first appointment. In June 1974, I was ordained an Elder during the annual conference held at Central UMC here in Knoxville.

God Today – I Heard God Laugh

On a beautiful Saturday evening in Fall 1975, I walked up the hill from the parsonage to the church. Entering from the door that opened to a room where the choir gathered before the Sunday morning worship service, I made my way to the sanctuary and sat down on a small pew just behind the pulpit.

For a few moments, I found refuge in the quietness and beauty of the sanctuary. It had been a very busy and challenging week. Contrary to what some people may think or at least kid us about, ministers do work more than one day a week. I grew up on a farm, and I had worked hard all my life; I was no stranger to work. While being in the ministry is different from the physical labor often associated with farm work, believe me, being a minister is work. It is very fulfilling work when you are called, but if you can do anything else, then perhaps you should do it. Being a Christian minister should never be viewed as a profession you choose, but rather a calling you receive from God.

As I sat there, emotionally tired, I cried out to God: "Lord, I know you called me into the ministry, but Lord, I can't do it. I just don't have what it takes. I can't do it!" It helped me just to voice my feelings out loud to God. Suddenly, in my spirit, with the ears of my heart, I heard God laugh and say, not in an audible voice but a voice none the less, "Of course you can't do it. I knew that when I called you. I just had to give you time to discover for yourself what I already knew. No, you can't do it! But I can! I can do it through you if you will give your ministry to me. Without me you can do nothing, but if you abide in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit."

That night, at the altar of Dunlap United Methodist Church, with no one else present but God, I gave my ministry to Jesus Christ. I realized in a fresh and personal way that God provides the resources for those He calls. Being a minister has always been too much for me. But nothing is too much for God. God laughed that night because He knew all along how absurd it was for me to ever think I could be a minister in my own strength and power. That kind of thinking results in burnout and can contribute to moral failure.

Truly, Jesus is the vine and we are the branches; as we abide in Him, we bear much fruit. But if we seek to be a Christian in ministry separated from Him, we shrivel and die. Without Christ we can do nothing. But we can do all things through Christ.

I walked out of that sanctuary with a second wind. I was ready to move forward in ministry, not in my own strength but in the strength of the Holy Spirit. Whenever I forgot the truth learned that night, my ministry did not go well. When I remembered and said, "God, forgive me for trying to live and minister in my own strength," then I once again felt God's pleasure and power.

That night long ago, I heard God laugh. It was a God moment that taught me the secret to power and peace in the Christian life and in my calling as a minister. Are you running on your own steam? Are you about to burn out? God knows that in your own strength you can't go on, but abiding in Jesus you can do all things!

God Today – Real Estate

From my experiences over the years as a pastor, I have found God to be active in the real estate market when it comes to property and the local church. Keep in mind that I have been a minister in seven local churches over the last 41 years and have been involved in major building programs and/or purchases of additional properties in five of those seven churches. When building or purchasing additional property, the members of a local church usually have a variety of responses. Some members are all for it from the very beginning. Some are against it! Others need to know more so they can make an informed decision. It is the role of the pastor and the leadership of the church to inform the congregation so that at church conference they have the needed information to cast an informed vote either for or against.

I learned in a very dramatic way that God gets into the mix when it comes to acquiring needed property for His church. From 1983 to 1987, I was pastor of Central United Methodist in Radford, Virginia. Early on in my ministry there, a cross-section of the membership and certain leaders of the church joined me in strategic planning for the church. The material we used was *Vision 2000 – Planning for Ministry into the Next Century* written by Joe A. Harding and Ralph Mohney. Each Sunday evening, for six weeks, we met at 7:00 in the evening and usually got out at about 9:00. Through a very biblical and orderly approach we became familiar with what God had to say about the church being a visionary community. Following Bible study we would then go through a directed journey of appraising where we were as a church. What were our strengths and how could we build upon them? What were our weaknesses and how could we grow at our weak points? What was next? What direction did God want us to take? During those six weeks together, the Holy Spirit bound our hearts together in prayer and study.

In our last session together, we began to refine our community owned God-given vision and talked about how we were going to implement certain strategies to get where we felt God wanted us to go. It was truly an exciting evening. About 8:50 that night we gathered together in a circle to pray and close out our time together. But before we began to pray, one person said, "One thing we have not included in our planning. We need the house and property next door, if it ever becomes available. But I don't know if it will ever be available to the church. Mrs. Prater has no plans of selling. But let's pray about that property tonight that in God's timing we might be able to buy it and use it for expanding our ministries." Sure enough, we prayed that very prayer that very night.

The next day, at noon, I left from my office in the church to go to lunch. As I was getting into my car, I saw Mrs. Prater pacing up and down on the property line between the church and her place. She motioned to me and said, "Preacher, I want to talk to you. Now preacher, I may not look too smart, but I am smart enough to know that if anyone needs my property your church does.

But preacher, I am a Lutheran, not a Methodist, so I am not going to give it to you. But I will sell it to you at a fair price.” Then she told me what she wanted for her property and it was an appropriate amount. I said, “Mrs. Prater, did someone from the Vision 2000 team at our church talk to you about this last night?” She replied, “Vision 2000 team? I don’t know what you are talking about. No one from your church talked to me last night. Rather, I was lying in the bed about 9:00 last night thinking about what I needed to do to care for myself in my advanced years, and it became clear to me that I needed to sell this house and move into a place which required less up-keep. Preacher, do you think your church might be interested in my property?”

Within a few weeks Central UMC owned the property and within the year we transformed the house into added space for our thriving pre-school program. Mrs. Prater was happy, and Central UMC was blessed and convinced that God hears our prayers and that God often gets into the real estate business when doing so helps His church multiply ministry. That was a God Today moment for me! Thank you, Lord, for hearing your children’s prayers; for answering, “Yes,” “No,” or “Wait awhile.”

God Today When "No" Is the Answer

From 1983 to 1987, I was Minister of Discipleship at First Broad Street United Methodist Church, Kingsport, Tennessee. First Broad Street is located on Church Circle, so named because around the circle were four churches - First Presbyterian, First Baptist, the old First Methodist building used to house the computers for the city, and First Broad Street, formerly known as Broad Street when it was the southern church and First Church was the northern church. Eventually, the two churches merged and the merged church was named First Broad Street. Just off the circle was the Christian Church. The members at First Broad Street had been considering a proposal to renovate the children's building and build a new family life center. The proposal was thoroughly reviewed by the Trustees and the Administrative Council and now it was time to have a Church Conference to vote to accept or reject the plan. On the date of the Church Conference, church members came out of the woodwork to vote. Members showed up that no one had seen in church for years, and the vote to build was rejected. The "No" votes prevailed. Many of us walked away from that meeting shocked and sad. Surely, the church had missed a great opportunity to move forward in ministry. How could this be God's perfect will when more space was needed for a growing church? Sure, the new building did take up some prime parking spaces, but hopefully sometime in the future additional property could be purchased and used for parking.

In retrospect, the "No" vote was the right vote. Little did we know that within a year the city of Kingsport would decide that they no longer wanted the old First Church building and the agreement made many years before read that if the city no longer wanted the building, it was to be turned back over to First Broad Street UMC. A few years later the church renovated the old First Church building and built a million dollar tunnel to connect the two buildings. No parking space was sacrificed and additional rooms were made available for a growing and vital church.

I learned a valuable lesson from this experience. God sometimes says "no" because he knows a better opportunity lies ahead in the future. I am glad those people showed up that day and voted "no." I am convinced it was a God Today moment!

A Very Recent God Today Moment

My oldest sister, Sharon and her husband, Dewitt, were a devoted couple, nurturing parents, committed Christians and very active in Mt. Washington United Methodist Church, Cincinnati, Ohio. DeWitt died seventeen years ago when he was sixty-five and my sister died twelve years later at the age of 72. Of course, I thought they were the greatest! Since they were quite a bit older than me and my youngest sister, Debbie, we looked up to them. They were like second parents for the both of us. And they were also very close to my sister Brenda who was four years younger than Sharon.

Just the other day, my niece, Sharon D. Hughes and my nephew, Mark Celsor, received an e-mail from Serena Tsaung. Serena and her husband, Mark, were natives of Taiwan. Mark was a physician and they both came to Cincinnati as young people who were a long way from home. They joined Mt Washington UMC and became very faithful members. My sister and brother-in-law received them with open arms and made them part of their own family.

But for my niece, nephew and all my family this "thank you" note was a definite God Today moment. We were moved by Serena's kind words that tell of two very special people who saw strangers and welcomed them. Hospitality extended to a stranger in a strange land is a Jesus thing. My sister and brother-in-law were always acting like Jesus! Their good works live on in the hearts of all who knew and loved them.

Dear Sharon D. & Mark:

Hope this greeting finds you both happy and well. You may wonder why I am writing you a "Thank You Note". :) Well, the Bible Study I am doing now for the Lent season is called "Kingdom Come", which requires a personal challenge at the end of each week. The one I got for this weekend is "write a thank you note" to someone who helped me get to where I am now in life and thank her or him to something good I have now that was influenced by them. The people who popped into my mind and my heart are your parents. But, how do I send out the "Thank you note" since they are both deceased. So, I decided to send it to you and let you know how much your parents and you two, too, meant to me when they were here.

God took me a thousand miles away from my homeland, my family and friends, my roots where I was born and raised, yet, He didn't forsake me in this foreign land. He brought your parents into my life. Your parents took me right into their wings when we met at Mt. Washington Church. Right away, they showered me with their kindness, their support, their friendship and their love for a girl who felt so lost in the mid of the cultural shock and language barrier. I gradually learned and enjoyed the new life I was thrown into. I began to adapt to the wonder-

ful church community and the beautiful environment I was surrounded. Your parents were always there for me and my family. The most touching moment we had was when your dad showed up at our swore in ceremony when Mark and I became American citizens, and a surprise party that night at your house. This was just one of many occasions they had been in our lives that they showed us what a family is really for and is. Not mentioning how many times I had to call them for help when I was alone with a sick child (while Mark was on call taking care of his patients) in the middle of night or just knock on their door whenever I need a shoulder to cry. The list goes on and on.

I wish they knew how much I miss them and love them. Forever, I am grateful for their love, and I thank God everyday for family like yours.

May God continue to keep you and bless you.

Keep in touch.

Serena

God Today – At Concord

At Concord UMC, I have observed God at work on numerous occasions. I have seen the laity of this church step up time after time and do God's work within and beyond the walls of this church. I serve with a staff that cannot be surpassed. They are gifted by God and committed to being channels of God's grace in the Church and in the world. They love God and love people and will give their very best to make God's love visible.

When I came here as Senior Minister, a long-range strategic plan was already in place. The goal was to buy the eight houses to the east and build what we now know as the east wing and provide an additional 140 parking spaces. This vision was owned by the congregation and believed to be God's preferred future for the Church. But it also provided certain God-sized challenges that would definitely require Divine intervention if the goal was to be realized.

I remember returning to the office somewhat bewildered after visiting the homeowners. While all the visits were very cordial, there was little, if any, interest on the part of the residents for moving out of their homes. Several people indicated that if they ever changed their minds and wanted to sell, the church would be the first to know. I walked into my office, sat down, and began to talk to God. I said, "Lord, we believe this expansion is your preferred future for the church, but we cannot change the hearts and minds of the homeowners; only you can do that. Lord, we are going to be good neighbors, and we want this to be a win-win for them and for the church. If you, O Lord, are truly guiding us in this endeavor, please make a way where at this time there seems to be no way." In just over 4 years, all but one of the houses was purchased. In most cases, the neighbors got back in touch with us and said something like this, "We have been thinking and praying and have decided that we would like to sell our house to the church." The good will was evident in each case.

Ah, but there was one last hurdle. One house was not purchased. The elderly gentleman who owned the house had previously sold his former house to Concord Baptist. When he purchased this residence next to Concord UMC, his first concern was that the church behind him was not interested in expanding. The man selling the house assured him that Concord UMC was thinking about relocating but not expanding at the present location. At the time, that was accurate. He bought the house and vowed that no one from the church could ever talk to him about purchasing his house. If the expansion for the church was to be realized, his property was essential. But we were not allowed to talk to him.

Leonard Scarborough (neighbor) told us that the man had a son who might be willing to talk to us. One day, Tim Priest* called me and said, "Brent, let's go together and visit the man's son." I don't recall Tim and I making any previous visit together. There may have been one time. But we arranged the visit, and guess what? The gentleman was an avid UT football fan. We ended up making

about three visits over a year. In each visit we spent about 45 minutes talking about UT football and 5 minutes talking about the possibility of his father selling the house to the Church. On our final visit, our newfound friend said, "I am going to do all that I can to help you get my dad's house for the church." He did, and we ended up with the house. To me the whole house purchasing process was a God at Work Today experience. But, if Tim had not called and said, "I will be happy to go with you, Brent," I am not sure that we would have ever purchased that last house. God knows the heart and interest of people, and He knows how to bring together the right people at the right time to accomplish a task that is according to His will. The last house was purchased. Good will was maintained. God did it all working through God's people and the power of prayer. We are laborers together with God in proclaiming the kingdom and building His church.

**CUMC member Tim Priest is a local trial lawyer and a color analyst on the VOL Network and made All SEC his senior season. He was inducted in the Greater Knoxville Sports Hall of Fame.*

God Today – In Life's Valleys

In previous articles in this series, I have shared with you those times when God has made Himself known in some rather dramatic and unmistakable divine moments. I love when – as in days of old – God parts the waters and His deeds are obvious. These events build faith within the community of believers and often get the attention of the nonbeliever. These are mountaintop experiences. We all would like to live on the mountain all the time. But life does not work that way. As it is true of landscapes, so it is with life. There are mountains, and there are valleys.

Over the past 40 years of ministry, I have known my share of valleys. I have learned that God is not just God of the mountain, but He is also the God of the valley. When you are so low that someone would have to jack you up to bury you, God is still God, even though you can't perceive His presence, power, and love.

My valley episodes came from my occasional battles with depression. Depression is known as the common cold of psychological disorders and is no respecter of persons. Depression has afflicted such notables as Abraham Lincoln and Winston Churchill. Churchill called it that dark dog biting at his heels. Books have been written on Lincoln's life-long battle with depression. Lincoln wrote, "A tendency to melancholy ... let it be observed is a misfortune, not a fault." Lincoln's boyhood friend, James Grigsby, talked about how Lincoln would "get fits of the blues." The truth was Lincoln suffered from clinical depression. One friend said of Lincoln, "His melancholy dripped from his fingers." In his early years in the Illinois legislature, Lincoln confided to a colleague that he never carried a pocketknife with him for fear that in one of his low moods he might do harm to himself. Lincoln found some help with his depression by being with other people and indulging in fun and hilarity. He also found help in noting that the moments of intense sadness would pass after a period. And there would be some good days.

Many of us who are not as notable also have known our battles with depression. My oldest sister, Sharon, and I confided in each other about our bouts with depression that seemed worse in winter. We were convinced we had Seasonal Affective Disorder, often associated with lack of sunlight and reduction in serotonin. For years, I thought because I was a minister that I could not admit I had a problem with depression. I feared my congregation would not understand, and the Bishop and the cabinet might think I was crazy and be afraid to appoint me. So I would prod through my periods of depression and keep them hidden from everyone but my dear wife and sister who I knew loved me, warts and all. Finally, my depression got so bad I knew I had to do something. I listened to one of my own sermons on dealing with depression and went to a doctor to seek help. He put me on medication, and within 2 weeks, I felt like my old self again. I was fortunate. I know in some cases it takes both counseling and trying different medicines to find the one that helps. This process can

be very long and drawn out. I wish I had swallowed my silly pride and gone to a doctor much earlier. This action would have saved me a lot of misery. We all have problems. If you are dealing with anxiety or depression, don't feel ashamed. Welcome to the human race. I love the words of the playwright, Eugene O'Neill, "Man (woman) is born broken. He lives by mending. The grace of God is the glue." I have found God's amazing grace not only on the mountain-top, but also in the deep dark valley of depression. And so can you!