

By Faith!

Most of you know that I sing in a chamber choir in Hattiesburg. I'll be leaving after worship this morning to be part of a concert with that group this afternoon. I'll let you know how it goes.

There are thirty-some of us in the choir. I don't know many of them well. We don't have a lot of time to visit. Mostly business while we're there. Most of them live over there, and, of course, I go back and forth like a few others do from out in the hinterlands. But I want to tell you about a few of those folks.

One of them sits down the row from me. We speak going and coming, but that's about the extent of our relationship. I know that he retired sometime during Covid, but I don't know from what. His wife also participates in our group. She's on the music faculty for one of the universities in Hattiesburg and plays piano and organ for us. The group came back to rehearsals the week after Easter this spring after being shut down like most other things during Covid. About a week after that, we got the news that our accompanist, this guy's wife, would have surgery. Some kind of exploratory surgery to confirm a cancer diagnosis. We'd have a substitute accompanist for a time or two, and then we'd see how things went. She had her surgery. I don't know details. But after she was out a couple of weeks, she came back. She looked a little peeked, but she managed to keep us on our parts. As we have progressed through the weeks, she has begun chemo treatment for whatever it was that necessitated her surgery. This past week she showed up with it—the chemo wig. You've all seen it. It looks enough like her real hair to help her feel good about herself, but it looks like a chemo wig. I think she's tolerating her treatment pretty well. We'll be through for a while after we sing this afternoon. They both looked a little weary when they came in for rehearsal this week. When the husband came up to our row, it was just the two of us back there, so I said, "Hey! How you doing?" His response was telling.

“Oh! We’re living the dream. Retired in the middle of Covid. Taking her to chemo twice a week. Just living the dream.”

I think I heard more frustration than I did bitterness, but I suspect there was some of both. I’m sure this is not the retirement he had planned. Her either. But for now, they are walking by faith and not by sight. What they can see ahead of them is too unsettled to focus on for long. So they take what steps they can by faith. I don’t know what faith they practice. The school where she teaches is church-connected, and I know they have sung in and played for church choirs like most of the rest of us in the group. But it really doesn’t matter what their faith is—it’s what’s sustaining them now. And it’s what will sustain them whatever the future brings. They are walking by faith, not by sight.

Choral singing draws mostly an older group of participants these days. But not everyone in our group is of an age at which health becomes a primary concern. We have had three members of our group become parents this year. One of those babies was born just before we started back at rehearsals and dad, who is the choir member, sat out this cycle so he could do Daddy duty at home. Two others have been born in the past few weeks. One of those dads missed a rehearsal or two and has been a little bleary-eyed since his return. The other child was born to a couple who both sing with us. He’s about two weeks old now, and he came to rehearsal on Thursday in one of those pouches that moms carry babies around in these days. Never made a sound. Slept through most of the rehearsal. Both mom and dad will sing with us this afternoon. These three children are part of what I suspect we’ll discover to be a whole generation of Covid babies. Lockdowns and blizzards and other times of confinement tend to result in increased birth rates. I wasn’t sure whether this one would or not. We all know that the past year and a half has caused us to rethink almost everything. For a while, we couldn’t be sure what the future would be, or if there would be one. To have a baby in the midst of all that uncertainty is another example of people walking by faith and not by sight. There are lots of other

things going on in the world that give us pause when we think about whether we need to bring another generation into it. When someone shoots and kills children in a grocery store in Florida, we stop and think. We have some other friends who have been married long enough that their parents have about given up on grandchildren. The kids are happy and healthy and productive, but they are pretty serious about their hesitance to bring a child into the mess we've made of the world. Carl Sandburg said that a baby is a sure sign of God's opinion that life should go on. Sandburg had three daughters, so he was not just waxing poetic when he said that. Bringing children into the world, now or ever, is another time when people walk by faith and not by sight. I don't know anything about the homes into which those three little choir babies have been born except that they will grow up with music. And that can't hurt.

The whole choir is yet another example of walking by faith and not by sight. The choir has been together for a long time. I don't know all of its history, but it has to have one. It has, like most groups, survived changes in leadership and membership. But, year in and year out it continues to learn and sing choral music, and people keep coming to hear it. We weren't sure how all that would come out when Covid hit. You remember hearing those stories in the news about churches that refused to stop singing and lots of people getting sick. Stories about choirs like ours who continued sing and had outbreaks and people died. We sang for the last time in February of 2020. You remember life then. We were all rocking along doing what we do. We usually take a week or two off after a concert before we start preparing for the next one. We were supposed to be part of the summer arts festival we're a part of this year in Hattiesburg last year. But you know how that went. There was no summer arts festival, at least not like it normally happens. And we didn't go back to rehearsal for over a year. We tried a couple of times, and someone got sick both times, so we quit until we had some assurance we could sing safely. You wouldn't believe how awkward it is to try to sing through a mask and to sit far enough way from others who are

learning your part that you can't hear them. We tried plastic face masks for a while. And we social distanced for a while longer. When we decided to give it another try in April, today's concert in June seemed like a long way down the road, but we started our journey toward it, walking by faith and not by sight. It was a rough to for a while. The music is hard, and the guy who wrote it is in town to hear it. No pressure there! But we set out on our preparation. We'll find out this afternoon how it goes.

Because of the presence of both Southern Miss and William Carey in Hattiesburg, we have some students in our group, young people who are planning on becoming singers or directors and earning a living at it. Talk about walking by faith. In these days of virtual education and budget cuts and the conviction of some that the arts are not necessary, they may be the ones showing the rest of us what walking by faith looks like!

I'm sure there are other stories in the choir that I don't know. And I know that there are stories in these pews of people who walk by faith every day. Those are not just stories for some of you, they are your life.

That's what it was for Paul. He didn't know that he was writing Scripture that we'd be reading after all these years when he wrote what we call the Second Letter to the Corinthians. He thought he was writing a letter to people he knew, people with whom he had worked in ministry, people with whom he did not always agree, but people he knew needed to grow in their faith in Christ so they could share it with others. Things were not happy in their relationship. Conflict runs throughout this letter, perhaps as much as any in the life of the young Christian Church. You know how it can be in the Church. Leaders come and go. Paul had worked with these people and had then moved on to other work. He didn't have a Committee on the Ministry to be sure he stayed out of their business after he left, and they continued to seek counsel from him. New leaders followed him, and some decided they liked the sound of what they said more than they liked the things Paul had said and the way he had done things. You know how that goes. Things will never be as good as they

were with Pastor So and So was here. Those were the glory days of the Church. Every Church has a Pastor So and So. I think I might be one in a couple of places, but we have avoided the kind of conflict Paul experienced. The Corinthians apparently got mad at Paul because he had promised to come back to be with them for a while and was prevented from being there. Some said that made him unreliable. You just couldn't depend on him. That led others to say, "Well he really wasn't much of a preacher anyway!" Some even commented on his personal appearance, and not in a flattering way.

That must have been a painful time for everyone. Paul lashes out some, and others do too. These were real people and that's the way real people do conflict. Paul even says that things were bad enough that he thought it might be better if he could just go and be with God. But God wasn't through with Paul. And so he continued to teach, even in the midst of conflict. You can read how defensive he got in parts of this letter we didn't take time to read this morning. But in all things, he says, it is the love of Christ that urges him on and encourages him to look forward and not back.

Some of the most hopeful words in the New Testament come out of the despair Paul experienced. You've heard them a million times. If anyone is in Christ (And I'm sure there were people on both sides of that conflict who thought they were!). If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation. Everything old has passed away. See, everything has become new. All this is from God!

We know that everything old has not passed away. We're southern people. Faulkner pegged us when he said that, for us, the past is never dead. It's not even past. It might be a wonderful thing if we could all wake up tomorrow without any recollection of what has been—with only hope of what will be. But we won't. We will wake up tomorrow just as we woke up this morning, a complicated combination of what was, what we think it was, what will be, and what we think that will turn out to be. Hopefully we

can find hope as a guide for the life we live in the midst of all that. That's what walking by faith and not by sight offers us.

I know the world can be a scary place to walk through, especially when it involves things like chemo and radiation, new babies and who those babies grow up to be, jobs that aren't as secure as we'd like for them to be, communities that change, relationships that so south on us. If all we have to go on is what we see, we'll find ourselves right where Paul was, convincing ourselves that it's time to just draw the covers up around us and wait for Jesus to call us home where we know we belong, where we know we're loved. But that call is Jesus' to make and not ours.

And so we continue to walk by faith and not by sight. We continue to believe that what God has to show us is more important than what we want to see. New creation can be just as scary as present danger because we can't control it. In fact it wants to control us. And our most faithful response is to walk by faith, to believe that God will show us the way.

There's one key change in what we'll sing this afternoon that I'm counting on God to show me. I'm walking by faith through that measure. I'll let you know how it turns out. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Prayers of the People

God of all times and places, we thank you for your great power and might, and we pray that you would give us the faith to depend on them. Help us to believe that you really are alive and active, saying and doing things among us, that you are moving among all history toward your good purpose and plan for us and for all. We know that nations and powers and authorities exercise all kind of power: economic military, political, and that their power seems to rule over us. Help us to trust that your power is greater than theirs and that your power at work through us can change the world. Help us to believe that all that would oppress or mistreat is doomed to fail and that you call us to bring that failure about.

Help us to create communities in which all people can live in peace and dignity and live together. We know how hard that is. That's why we depend on your power to show us how to do it. We know we can't do it alone. We have tried, and you see where we are. Teach us to work together for the common good, to care for one another and to grow in understanding that bridges division.

We believe that you are at work among the least, the lost, and the last while people look to the powerful. We know that you come among us in ways we need to search for. Give us eyes to see and ears to hear how and where you are moving among us, calling us to join you in your work of justice and mercy. Humble us so that we can learn from whoever has much to teach us. Life-giving God, our lives can become dry and brittle, but we believe that you can restore us by the gift of your Spirit, making us full of life and good things again. We pray for all who are at the painful end of this transformation—for those who live with chronic pain or long-term illness that seems never to end. Help us to be signs of healing and care. For those who cannot find work or other meaningful ways to serve, we pray for opportunities. For those who will not do the work they have we pray for change of heart and mind. We pray for all who face an end—of life, of a relationship, of a dream—whether they sought this end or it was thrust upon them, we pray for a new beginning, a restoration, for whatever will bring new growth and hope.

No matter how small our faith is, Loving God, we pray that you would help us find ways to nurture it and to grow it so that we may be faithful to your call to share your love, for there are many around us who do not know what we know. Help us to work for the reconciliation of the world, to bring peace, and to share hope. We pray all these things in the name of Jesus Christ, who taught us all to pray together when he said: