

We Walk by Faith, Not by Sight

A sermon preached by the Rev. Roger Scott Powers
at St. Andrew Presbyterian Church in Albuquerque,
on Sunday, May 14, 2023.

2 Corinthians 4:16-5:10

I want to continue this morning where I left off a few weeks ago with Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. "We do not lose heart," Paul writes. He is telling the Corinthians, in other words, "don't despair, don't grow weary."

I realize that many of you may be feeling a little bit anxious about St. Andrew's future now that Susan and I have announced our plans to retire, leave Albuquerque, and move back east to Maine. It's unsettling to be sure. You probably have a lot of questions on your minds. For example, how will you go about finding new pastoral leadership? And how will you manage in the meantime? Rest assured that the Presbytery of Santa Fe will help you through this time of transition. Indeed, with assistance from the Presbytery's Commission on Ministry, a committee appointed by the Session is currently searching for a Bridge Pastor who would provide St. Andrew with pulpit supply and other pastoral assistance on a temporary basis until a Transitional Pastor can be found. That will give you a little breathing room to consider your options as you move forward together.

It may not seem like it right now, but in time I think that you'll look back on this time of transition as a "slight momentary affliction," in Paul's words. It may feel more serious than that now, but in the larger scheme of things, congregations find ways to continue on with their ministry even though their pastors come and go. Indeed, this "slight momentary affliction" may be preparing you for what Paul calls "an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal." In other words, there may be a lot

more going on here than first meets the eye! And God may yet have some surprises in store that will give St. Andrew a brighter and more promising future than any of us can imagine!

Later in this morning's scripture reading, Paul puts it more succinctly: "we walk by faith, not by sight." Note that he says "we walk." Paul has the church on the move. He doesn't say "we stand" or "we sit" or "we lie around." He doesn't say we rest on our laurels. No Paul has us on our feet and going somewhere! Our life together as a church community is active, not passive. We are on a journey. "We walk by faith, not by sight."

Paul's phrase reminds me of an activity we used to do in youth groups. We would have people pair up with each other. One person would put on a blindfold and the other person, who could still see, would be charged with guiding his or her partner as they walked together, maneuvering over and under and around various obstacles in their path. The guides usually took their responsibility very seriously, especially given that they knew they would be taking a turn as the blindfolded person later on. They were very careful not to let their partner trip and fall or hit their head on something above them. And it meant that those who were blindfolded had to put enormous faith and trust in their partners, that they would communicate clearly with them and be responsible for their safety and well-being. The activity forced them to "walk by faith, not by sight."

I suppose that the hardest thing about this transition is that you can't see what's coming next, you can't see what the future holds, and that can be a little scary. Martin Luther King, Jr., once said that "faith is taking the first step, even when you don't see the whole staircase." Right now, you may not be able to see clearly where you're going or where you'll end up (you don't see the whole staircase), but you need to keep moving forward nevertheless, taking one step at a time. Otherwise, you're just standing still. And while standing still may feel safe, it doesn't get you anywhere. You've got to continue the journey. You've got to keep on keeping on.

Fortunately, you are not alone. Like the blindfolded youths, you have partners to hold your hand and guide you along the way. You have the staff of Santa Fe Presbytery and the elders of the Presbytery's Commission on Ministry. You have the other congregations in the Presbytery that value St. Andrew's mission and ministry and that care about St. Andrew's health and wellbeing. And you have God in Jesus Christ as a companion on the journey, walking before you, behind you, beside you, supporting and upholding you every step of the way.

In a way you are in a similar situation to Jesus' first disciples. They didn't know where Jesus was going or what following him might entail, but they followed him nevertheless. They began a journey with Jesus, not knowing where the journey would lead or how it would end. They walked with him "by faith, not by sight." And their faith was an active faith.

I think that Jesus' early disciples would have resonated with what former President Jimmy Carter says about his faith. "I have one life and one chance to make it count for something," Carter says. "I'm free to choose what that something is, and the something I've chosen is my faith. Now, my faith goes beyond theology and religion and requires considerable work and effort. My faith demands -- this is not optional -- my faith demands that I do whatever I can, wherever I am, whenever I can, for as long as I can with whatever I have to try to make a difference."

Jimmy Carter is an inspiration to me, as he may be to some of you. He is a man of deep Christian conviction, whose faith compelled him to do whatever he could to make a positive difference in the world. At 98 years old he is the longest living U.S. president. And until recently, when he entered hospice care, he was still involved in the international work of the Carter Center, for which he received the Nobel Peace Prize, he was still building affordable housing with Habitat for Humanity, and he was still teaching Sunday School at his hometown church in Plains, Georgia.

Another letter in the New Testament -- the Letter to the Hebrews -- defines faith as "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." It was written in the first century to a community of second-generation Christians who were experiencing abuse and persecution for their faith. The letter tells us that they were growing weary under the strain. They had become weak in the knees, and they were in danger of losing heart. One of the reasons the letter was written, then, was to give that community of Christians strength and encouragement to keep the faith. Faith can enable people to achieve great triumphs as well as endure great trials. It was faith -- "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" -- that carried them through.

So, with the apostle Paul, buoyed up by our faith, we can have confidence in the future. St. Andrew is a healthy and vibrant congregation with the strength and resilience to continue serving God and God's people into the future.

"We walk by faith, not by sight." God walks with us, giving us strength to endure the trials and tribulations we encounter so that we can continue on the journey wherever it may take us. And for that we give God our thanks and praise. Alleluia. Amen.