

**A Year of Gracious Uncertainty**  
**Bill Wilson**  
**2 Corinthians 4:16-18, 5:6-7**

Thank you for inviting me to be a part of your congregation's life as we begin a series of conversations and imaginations about the future. I lead the Center for Healthy Churches which is not an oxymoron. There are some - and this is one of them. What a gift it is to be a part of a healthy congregation seeking to look around the curve a bit like all good, healthy organizations do anticipating where God might be calling and inviting you to go. We will listen and talk with each other and begin to discern and discover this amazing gift you have inherited as a congregation that you will manage on your watch and will hand to others in the days to come.

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I'm a Baptist from South Carolina. I prefer certainty. I like order, predictability. I like it when planes leave at 7:03 p.m. and arrive at 6:42 a.m. I like it when I flip the light switch and the lights come on. Unlike this week when I flipped the garbage disposal and it didn't come on.

I prefer certainty. I want to go to the doctor with my symptoms and have the doctor say, "Yes, Bill, you have an infection in your finger and if you take these pills for seven days you'll be well." And I want to be well in seven days.

And I want my children – when I've raised them going to church and teaching them the right thing – I want them when they become teenagers to be predictable. I want to be able to predict for them what they are going to be predictable about. Like, I want them to come to me and say, "Dad, you did such a good job as a parent. I'm so grateful to be your daughter/son." When they go to college, to say, "Thank you so much. I'm working hard, studying, going to get a good job." Right!

And I want my church to be predictable. I want to walk in and follow the order of worship, sing songs I know. I want things to go the way I want them to go. In my own life, I want my faith to pay off. I want it to be like an investment, like the stock market (which I also want to be predictable). I want to do the right things, behave, and then get rewarded. I want good things to happen to good people.

As much as I crave predictability and certainty, what I get is uncertainly – chaos. The doctor walks in and says, "Mr. Wilson, I don't know what's going on. We need to do more tests." There's a dark spot on your mother's lung.

As much as I crave predictability for my children, at about age 16, there is a bomb that goes off inside their body – hormonal bomb – and they become monsters! They think for themselves. Who knew! They were soooooooooo cute!

My church that I wanted to be predictable instead hits rocky times or goes a certain way that is different from the way I would have chosen.

That personal faith thing...I played by the rules, honored God, did the right thing. I don't get the promotion and he does – the scoundrel!

My mother-in-law, Naomi, as godly a woman as there ever was, spends the last two years of her life in the memory unit becoming someone we didn't know, us becoming people she didn't know.

All that certainty I craved is elusive.

Do you know the name Oswald Chambers? He wrote a book, *The Utmost for His Highest*, published in 1935. It is still one of the bestselling books of all time in the world. It is probably the finest daily devotional that I've ever read. I read it every year; I commend it to you.

Chambers was a Scottish Baptist preacher's kid. In 1917 while serving the YMCA in WWI in Egypt and keeping the troops entertained, he offered a Bible study to keep the troops out of the brothels. Within a few weeks, hundreds, if not thousands, of people were crowding to hear Oswald Chambers, this 40-year old, dispense these pithy pearls of wisdom. He died a few weeks later of appendicitis because he didn't go to the hospital for fear of taking a bed from one of the soldiers who might be wounded in the coming battle. His appendix ruptured and he died of infection.

His wife was a court stenographer who carefully collected his teachings, Bible studies, and sermons, and created a series of books, one of which is this remarkable devotional. Every day is a different devotional. On April 29, the devotion is entitled "Gracious Uncertainty." When I read it, it changed my life. Chambers taught me something.

He states that the certainty we crave is the mark of the commonsense life and that gracious uncertainty is the mark of the spiritual life. He goes on to say the nature of spiritual life is such that while we are uncertain in the things that happen to us and with us, we can be certain of one thing – God. Whatever it is – God.

He begins to unfold and unpack that. Commonsense life wants everything nailed down, predictable, repeatable, something you can anticipate. However, what we find ourselves involved in every day is a sense of bewilderment at what is coming our way. He picks up on this theme from the Apostle Paul, "Friends, we walk by faith, not by sight because we look at things that can't be seen." How do you look at what can't be seen?

Take a look at what can't be seen. What you see is temporary – clothes, cars, buildings, people. What can't be seen is eternal. Thus he leads us to this wonderful motto for life. We walk by faith not by sight.

As your church thinks deeply over the next few months about its future, you are going to be challenged by your leaders and by the spirit of God to walk by faith and not just by sight. You are going to be invited to step into the role that your forefathers and mothers at Westminster have played for you. The people upon whose shoulders you stand today who were willing to walk by faith and not just by sight. For example, when they moved to this property. It was not an easy thing. Somebody could see what couldn't be seen. There were no houses anywhere to be seen on the property, the four lanes of traffic were not as congested as now. Somebody said the church needed to walk by faith and not by sight. And you did.

Beware of the temptation to only see what you see. Look at what you cannot see and walk toward that with conviction and anticipation. It is not easy. It is very tempting to walk by sight. However, if you don't walk by faith, then the things that come unexpectedly truly do tend to knock us out of commission.

I know there are some things coming in this next year that we cannot predict. Some will be good; some will be bad. Some of you sitting in the pews today will not be sitting in the pews on the first Sunday in January 2019. There are some people not here yet that will be joining us perhaps by marriage, birth, move, etc. There are some wonderful things that will happen in the coming year; but, there will also be some tough days. Some of you are going to face that doctor coming in and saying, "There's a bad spot on this x-ray."

Chambers says that as much as we fear the uncertainty, it is actually a gracious gift to us because without it we would really begin to think we run the show – we are in control. With it we find that unpredictability, as painful as it may be, is actually what drives us to our needs.

Without faith, the unpredictability destroys us. Uncertainty is the way of life. To embrace it is to see it as filled with potential.

How will your visioning process unfold and what will result? We have no idea, but I can't wait to see! It will be different and my guess is it will challenge and it will inspire and it will pull you into the future if you are willing to walk by faith and not just by sight. To try to become something you cannot be on your own.

Most churches fall into the trap of believing – since we cannot do it ourselves, let's not try it. One good question to ask is: what are you attempting to do for the kingdom of God that you can only accomplish with Divine Intervention?

In your own life: what is it in this coming year that you would be willing to commit yourself to that you can only do with God's providential leadership, guidance and assistance? What is it that when it sweeps over your life and blows your world up, you will respond by, *I'm walking by faith, not by sight*. I look at something that cannot be seen.

Chambers closes the devotion of April 29 with these words, "We are not uncertain of God but uncertain of what He is going to do next. If we are only certain in our beliefs, we grow dignified and severe and have the bane of finality about our views. But where and when we are rightly related to God, life is full of spontaneous joyful uncertainty and expectancy".

That is my prayer for you. As we walk into whatever it is before us – individually, as families, in your work, and in your congregation – that we would do so with expectancy. What is God going to do today with us because we walk by faith and not just by sight?

Might it be so. Amen.