

Tennessee Baptist pastor reflects on long COVID battle

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LAFOLLETTE, Tenn. (BP)—To call Pastor Zach Lloyd a walking miracle would be an understatement.

One year ago, Lloyd was in the early stages of a 175-day stay in the hospital and a double lung transplant due to complications from COVID-19.

At times, he wondered if he ever would return to his family or the pulpit. Death was imminent on several occasions while he lay helplessly in the COVID-19 ICU at Vanderbilt University Medical Center in Nashville.

After a seven-month hospital stay, Lloyd returned to LaFollette, Tenn., in May, where a crowd lined the highway through town to welcome him home.

“That was special,” he said.

He returned to the pulpit at East LaFollette Baptist Church on June 27 and has missed only two Sundays since.

“I’ve been excited to be back,” he said, adding that the highlight of his return happened Aug. 8, when he was able to baptize both of his children, Lily and Titus.

He is grateful for the compassion and support of his congregation. They have allowed him to preach while sitting down and are quick to let him know if they think he is “overdoing it.”

At times, it is easy to get so “focused on ministry and church growth that you lose sight of the love you have for just sharing the gospel,” Lloyd observed.

“I enjoy getting up and telling people about Jesus. To do that is a blessing,” he said.

One important lesson Lloyd learned through his experience has been not to take things for granted.

“To be able to get up and not be short of breath every Sunday just blows me away of how God has allowed me to get back to a normal routine of doing what I love to do,” he said.

Reminded of how God provides

Lloyd noted the past year has made him “a better husband, father, pastor and follower of Jesus” than he was a year ago.

He recalled a recent sermon he preached from John 20 about the doubts Thomas had following the resurrection of Jesus.

“Jesus is the hope for the doubters,” he said with conviction and firsthand knowledge.

“There were nights I doubted everything I had believed and preached about. There were so many uncertainties I couldn’t see, but later, you can see how God moved and opened doors in every situation,” he said.

“There are still days I look at the scars on my chest and am reminded of the pain, but I also am reminded of how God provides. All that has become more real as I read his words.”

‘God has opened doors’

Lloyd’s recovery period is far from over. Although he has finished significant rehabilitation, he remains under the care of Vanderbilt

University Medical Center and has to return to Nashville on a regular basis. He also still is under some physical restrictions.

He lost 100 pounds during his illness, but is getting better day by day in terms of endurance and strength.

The last six to seven weeks have been as normal as possible “and for that we are grateful,” he said. “The doctors are pleased with my progress.”

Lloyd’s illness and experiences have opened doors for him and his wife Sara to minister to families undergoing similar circumstances. This has been an opportunity to be God’s hands and feet to others who are hurting and have doubts, he noted.

“It has been amazing how God has opened doors for us to minister to others,” he said.

He has been able to reflect on the overwhelming amount of love and support shown to him and his family during the past year. Support came from the Tennessee Baptist Mission Board, the North American Mission Board, his church and the community.

“None of the gifts outweighed the other because they were all given from the heart,” he said.

The love shown to him—much of it from people he didn’t even know—helped him become a better person, he said.

“I’ve been blessed in such a way that I want to share those blessings with others,” he said.