



October 12, 2021

## Postcard from Paris

By Dodd Sims, M.D.

I am starting this reflection sitting in our rented apartment in Paris. I will finish it when I'm home and a week has passed. I intend to write about the glories of travel even in our pandemic world but would hate to return with the virus and have to send out a disclaimer. So first the glories, and then we'll see how the story turns out. But isn't that the way stories work?

On Tuesdays and Fridays, the street market is around the corner. The other days we need to walk a few blocks. We come home with our bag full of fruit and vegetables still wet with morning dew or the glistening fish that came in from the coast overnight. Next, a coffee and croissant at the café across the street, after we show our covid documents, then off to walk for much of the day.

Our afternoons tend to end in the Luxembourg Gardens. We sit on a bench under the chestnut trees and watch tennis matches. The children collect the chestnuts and lay them out on the ground in designs. Other kids are over at the large fountain sailing their model boats.

We take a picture and send it to my 94-year-old patient. He was born a few blocks away, near the Pantheon, and remembers sailing boats in the fountain when he was young. He replies instantly, touched by the memories. He tells us that he remembers the small fish in the fountain, almost the size of his boat. To him they were whales. Oh, the perspective of a child!

On Sundays we walk across the river to the American Cathedral of the Holy Trinity in Paris, an Episcopal church built in the 1880's, and one of the oldest English-speaking churches in Paris. A Gothic Revival building with the tallest bell tower in Paris, America's Episcopal/Anglican Church in Paris, serves as both a vibrant parish church for the city of Paris, as well as the seat of the Bishop-in-Charge of the Convocation of Episcopal Churches in Europe. It is full at the 11 a.m. service. There is a busy Sunday School and a host of fellowship, education, and outreach activities throughout the week. In fact, for a supposedly secular city, Paris seems to have a very lively religious life.

On our Sunday morning walks, the bells are ringing, and small crowds are gathering around the churches. One of the main Protestant churches of Paris, around the corner from our apartment, is bustling with activity. It is a part of a federation of French Lutheran and Reformed churches.

A few blocks past that is Saint-Sulpice, a Roman Catholic church, and the second largest church in Paris, after Notre Dame. The neighborhood is full of religious activity, with the Institut Catholique de Paris (the Catholic theology faculty of the University of Paris; the Protestant faculty is a twenty-minute walk). There are young friars on the street in their sandals and brown cloaks.

The Arc de Triomphe, this famous monument, is wrapped in a cloth shroud, a posthumous project of Christo, the Bulgarian installation artist who recently died. But there is anything but a shroud hanging over the city. It is September, la rentree -- a fresh start when the country begins again after the August break. The French have returned from les grandes vacances of the summer. The students are back. The new movies and plays are premiering. This year's crop of best-sellers is in the bookstore windows.

Yes, Paris still has bookstores, and movies, and live theatre. And people are there. They are there with masks. They are there with their pass sanitaire,

proving either vaccination or testing every 72 hours. In central Paris, most every block has bakery, a greengrocer, a chocolate shop, and at least two cafes with tables spilling out into the street. Even to sit at one of those tables you need to show your pass sanitaire. But also on every block is a pharmacy that does covid testing from morning to night – efficient, friendly testing that is free for the French and affordable for the visitors.

Some of my favorite walks are early in the morning, just as the sun is coming up. The night-shift nurses are coming out of the hospitals; the day shift entering. At the corner stores, delivery vans are unloading crates of produce. The street markets are setting up. I find the youth hostel where I had stayed on my first visit to Paris in 1974. It hasn't changed much. It is early, but still there are a few young people coming out, setting off to explore Paris for themselves.

A lot has changed in my world since 1974. Some of the change is good; in other cases, I'm not so sure. I need to think about it.

We made it home. Our tests have remained negative. We are finally able to see our granddaughter for the first time in several weeks. She spent the night and is still asleep. One day she will be walking the same streets of Paris, taking it all in and marveling at all the same things. Meanwhile, I live in hope for her future and wait for the pictures of the Luxembourg Gardens she will send me.

Yes, we'll always have Paris.