

What Cancer Teaches

Exodus 17:8-13; Romans 8:18-39

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I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.

Romans 8:18

“Illness,” writes the late journalist and cancer patient Susan Sontag, “is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place.”¹

For most of my life, I’ve been privileged to live as a citizen of “the kingdom of the well.” I never knew how privileged I was—until one day last fall, when my doctor handed me a prescription slip for a CT scan. At the bottom he had written these two words: “Suspect lymphoma.”

I hadn’t been feeling sick. I’d gone in for an annual physical, and—at my request—the doctor had ordered an ultrasound scan. I’d been growing concerned, as I moved into mid-life, that I ought to be checked out for an aortal aneurysm—something my father had had, and nearly died from. The ultrasound revealed no aneurysm, but it also uncovered something I’d never suspected was there. The doctor called it a “mass” in my abdomen, somewhere between the size of a baseball and a grapefruit. I didn’t know it at the time, but there are few other medical explanations for such a growth in that part of the body, other than lymphoma—cancer of the lymphatic system.

I’d never given much thought to my lymphatic system. Most of us don’t. It’s part of the body’s circulatory system, kind of a parallel bloodstream. It’s a network of vessels that serves as a highway for cells called lymphocytes, which our immune system uses to fight off disease. The lymphocytes congregate in junction-points called lymph nodes. If the lymph vessels are subway tunnels, then the lymph nodes are the stations where the passengers congregate.

In a certain number of us, the lymphocyte cells become cancerous. They grow in size, and increase in number. As more and more lymphocytes congregate in each lymph node, the node itself increases in size. For me, all this was happening deep inside my body. I had no idea, until the ultrasound picked up that mysterious mass—which turned out to be a bundle of swollen lymph nodes. Further tests revealed other enlarged lymph nodes, elsewhere in my abdomen and also in my groin.

I didn’t know it at the time, but I was lucky. Because I’d happened to go for the ultrasound when I did, the doctors were able to diagnose my cancer before I had any symptoms. Yet “lucky” was hardly a word that would have occurred to me this past December, as Claire and I sat in the oncologist’s office, and heard him tell me I had Stage 3 Non-Hodgkin Lymphoma, a form of cancer.

I never dreamed that, at the age of forty-nine, I’d have cancer. As a minister, I’ve visited plenty of cancer patients, but the vast majority have been people much older

than me. I've always known, of course, on an intellectual level, that some day I'm going to die—and that the mode of my death could, conceivably, be cancer. Yet, suddenly, as I heard the doctor say the word "lymphoma," the prospect of death seemed very real, very immediate. It was as though I'd been out driving on a foggy day and gotten distracted for a moment. The next thing I knew, the brake lights of another car were looming up in front of me, and a cold jolt of fear hit me in the gut. Nothing to do, then, but slam on the brakes—and pray.

Lance Armstrong, world-champion cyclist and cancer survivor, has written about his experience with testicular cancer that spread to his lungs and his brain. Armstrong underwent surgery, then chemotherapy. After that he went on to make one of the most amazing comebacks in the annals of sports, winning the Tour de France a total of seven times. In his autobiography, *It's Not About the Bike*, Armstrong describes his experience of cancer as "being run off the road by a truck":

One minute you're pedaling along a highway, and the next minute, *boom*, you're face-down in the dirt. A blast of hot air hits you, you taste the acrid, oily exhaust in the roof of your mouth, and all you can do is wave a fist at the disappearing taillights.... Good, strong people get cancer, and they do all the right things to beat it, and they still die. That is the essential truth you learn. People die. And after you learn it, all other matters seem irrelevant. They just seem small.²

There's a Latin phrase, *memento mori*. What it means, loosely translated, is "Remember that you will die." They say that, in ancient Rome, when a victorious general was parading into the city in triumph—his troops proudly marching in columns behind him, and his captives being driven before him, in chains—he employed a servant to stand beside him in the chariot. The servant's job was to say to the general from time to time, "*memento mori*—remember that you will die." Remember, in other words, that you are mortal—and that, like all mortals, you will one day be gasping out your final breath. On that day it will no longer matter that you once rode into the Eternal City at the head of a victorious army. On that day, your fate will be exactly the same as the most miserable prisoner standing here in ragged despair.

Maybe it was that same sort of insight Lance Armstrong had, as he went—in the space of just a few days—from world-class athlete to cancer patient undergoing surgery. Maybe it's because of his abiding sense of *memento mori* that Armstrong can write:

The truth is that cancer was the best thing that ever happened to me. I don't know why I got the illness, but it did wonders for me, and I wouldn't want to walk away from it. Why would I want to change, even for a day, the most important and shaping event of my life?³

I'm not so sure I'd be so bold, personally, as to use those words about my own cancer—to say it's "the best thing that ever happened to me." If I could somehow turn the clock back, wave a magic wand, and make those swollen lymph nodes disappear forever, I would. But you and I know that's impossible. I am what I am—and what I am, as I stand before you this morning, is a cancer survivor. It's the path on which

God, for whatever reason, has set my feet. It's a good path to be on, as good as any.

The first time I used that word "survivor" to apply to myself was not long after I was first diagnosed. I was filling out a form for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society—an evaluation form for an educational teleconference I'd just participated in. I was feeling pretty scared that day. I knew chemotherapy was almost certainly in my future, and I dreaded the as-yet-unknown side effects. Just below my name, on that form, was a series of boxes to check. I was to choose one option, from among "medical professional," "family member," or "survivor."

"Now, wait a minute," I said to myself. "There must be some mistake. Whoever designed the form left off the check-box for 'patient.' That's the one for me." But then it hit me. There had been no mistake. The box I was *supposed* to check was "survivor." Even though I was newly diagnosed. Even though that huge mass in my abdomen had grown no smaller since my diagnosis, and possibly even larger. Even though I had received, as yet, no treatment. The cancer hadn't killed me yet, and that made me *a survivor*.

And a cancer survivor I remain, to this day. I'm in remission, now. Chemotherapy's over and done with. There's no sign of cancer on the PET scan, and the doctors have decided I don't need radiation after all. The hair is slowly growing back—and, eventually, I'm sure I *will* be able to walk around the block without stopping to catch my breath. The news is good. And life is good. Yet even if the news is, one day, bad—even if life becomes a series of unremitting challenges—I will have learned one thing: I'll still be a survivor. *Memento mori*. It's one of the things cancer teaches. Let me tell you a few more...

In today's Old Testament lesson, we heard that peculiar story of the army of Israel in their battle with the Amalekites. Down on the battlefield, the soldiers are going at it, while Moses stands on the top of a hill, holding his staff up in the air. As long as Moses holds his staff up high, the Israelite army is winning. Yet, whenever Moses' arms grow tired and droop to the ground, the tide of battle turns and the Amalekites start to prevail.

Moses has two trusted lieutenants, Aaron and Hur. These two men realize what's happening and go stand beside their leader. They sit him down on a nearby rock, and, whenever his hands begin to droop, Aaron and Hur reach over and hold them up. Moses' miraculous staff continues to be held high, and Israel wins the day.

It's a model for us all. There's a part of us that wants to whine, like some petulant pre-schooler: "Go away! I can do it myself!" Our culture teaches us to value independence, and cherish individualism. Most of us would rather not feel beholden to anyone.

Yet cancer teaches otherwise. When Claire and I got a call telling us that members of Presbyterian Women wanted to bring us meals-on-wheels three days a week, our first impulse was to say, "No thanks, we can manage on our own." But then we considered the grueling schedule of upcoming medical tests and appointments, and we took stock of the chemotherapy side effects and what they would likely mean for all of us, and we said, "Thank you, that's very generous." Those meals were a tremendous help, and we're grateful for them to this day.

I've lost track of the number of times members of the church staff, or deacons or elders, said to me, "Would you like me to cover for you...?" I learned to say, "Yes, thank you, that would be a big help." Probably the hardest day of all was Easter

Sunday. I'd had chemo just a few days before, and was feeling wiped out by nausea and exhaustion. I sat in our bedroom over across the street, and looked out the windows on that beautiful spring day. I watched a long line of you make your way down the sidewalk to church: a procession of cheerful-looking people, in pastel colors, with even a few Easter bonnets thrown into the mix. It's a hard, hard thing for a preacher not to be in front of a congregation, on that greatest of festival days—and, more than that, to not even *be* in church at all. Yet, knowing the worship service was in capable hands, I sank back into the pillows and gave thanks that others were making sure the staff of God was held high in the air.

And don't get me started on family. Claire, the kids, members of the extended family: they were a rock through all of this. To them I will always be grateful. So, besides *memento mori*—the awareness of our death—cancer teaches: "Don't be afraid to ask for help."

Another lesson cancer teaches is found in Romans 8, our New Testament lesson: "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us"(v.18). There's something about this human life of ours that invites us to make ceaseless comparisons. You and I take stock of our condition in life, and immediately compare it with others. "Keeping up with the Joneses," as they say, has to do with far more than just material wealth: the houses we live in, the TVs we watch, the cars we drive. Some of us are blessed with years and years of healthy living, while others of us are in and out of hospitals. Some of us will live longer than others: decades longer, in some cases.

The cancer I have—non-Hodgkin lymphoma—has no identifiable cause. There's no environmental risk factor, no hereditary predisposition, no lifestyle choice—such as smoking, exercise or diet—that influences who gets it, and who does not (at least, not in the vast majority of cases). Some cancers can be influenced by such factors, but lymphoma generally isn't one of them. *It is what it is*. I've got it, and the doctors can't tell me why, or how.

Moreover, I'll probably have it for the rest of my life. Even in the best-case scenario—that the remission started by these six rounds of chemotherapy will continue, and I'll never have a relapse—I'll still need to keep going for scans for the rest of my life. Always, as I'm awaiting those test results, I will wonder and worry whether the cancer has come back. That means, one way or another, healthy or sick, I'll always be living with cancer.

That truth is starting to dawn on me, and *it is what it is*. I can't escape it. These are, for me—as Paul puts it—"the sufferings of this present time." Yet, as he goes on to say, these sufferings "are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us." My human sufferings are not to be compared with the circumstances of other people. Human comparisons do nothing for us: they only make us bitter and alienated. Yet, there *is* one comparison Paul cheerfully invites us all to make. Compare your sufferings, he urges the Roman Christians, with "the glory about to be revealed to us." Compare the temporary, time-bound trials God sends us in certain seasons of our lives with the promise of eternal glory for all who believe.

Last summer, I preached a sermon in which I told a story of the French writer Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, author of *The Little Prince*. Saint-Exupéry was a pilot in the French Air Force during World War II, stationed in North Africa. He became friendly with some of the local Bedouin: that tough, resourceful race of desert-

dwellers. On one occasion, he even managed to fly a few of them back home with him on a visit to France. On that visit, he expected those desert nomads to be wowed by Western technology: the Eiffel Tower, the railroad locomotive, the automobile—but the desert tribesmen observed these things with indifference. The one thing that truly impressed them was a waterfall in the French Alps.

The thing about the waterfall that filled them with wonder was that it never stopped. These were men who had measured their lives by water: by how much water their canteens could hold, how many hours' ride it was to the next oasis, how long they or their camels could hold out without taking a drink. Yet here, gushing from the side of a mountain, was an endless cascade of God's abundance. In the author's own words:

They stood in silence. Mute, solemn...gazing at the unfolding of a ceremonial mystery. That which came roaring out of the belly of the mountain was life itself...The flow of a single second would have resuscitated whole caravans that, mad with thirst, had pressed on into the eternity of salt lakes and mirages. Here God was manifesting Himself: It would not do to turn one's back on Him.⁴

The hardscrabble reality of Bedouin existence was not worth comparing to the glory of a free-flowing alpine waterfall. In the same way, "the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us." It's not that these present difficulties are in any way illusory, or unreal. It's just that there are bigger things in the universe than the struggles, strivings, and worries that weigh us down. *Bigger, even, than cancer.*

The whole of creation, Paul says, "was subjected to futility" (v. 20). If the entire universe is characterized by futility, should you and I, then, be surprised when our own, small lives likewise demonstrate some aspect of random suffering? No, God has far greater things in store. The creation, for now, is "groaning in labor pains" (v. 22). Yet, soon and very soon, we will witness the birth of something so new and wonderful that the pain of this present moment will no longer be remembered.

And so we Christians live in hope. Our hope is fueled by the vision of a glorious new life that awaits us on the other side of this one. We can't see that life in any of its details—indeed, as Paul points out, if we *could* see it, we would then have no further need of hope: "Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience" (vv. 24-25).

Cancer teaches those of us who have it to be aware of our death. Cancer teaches us to rely on friends and family, who love us and want to be here for us. Cancer teaches us to live by hope: for there is no other alternative. There are other lessons cancer teaches as well, that I have learned and am still learning: and I could go on for a very long time, telling you about them. Yet, here we stop: for these lessons I've mentioned are enough for one day.

I would never wish that any of you come down with cancer, or contract other serious illness. Yet, if you do—and the statistics say that a great many of you sitting here today will experience something like it, sooner or later—know that there is much joy, even in the midst of it. And know, also, that, on the other side of every experience of suffering undertaken in faith, there is the bright promise of glory.

Let us pray: We ask, O God, not so much to be spared the time of trial, but that, in the midst of it, you would deliver us from evil. Deliver us from hopelessness, from despair, from rank unbelief. Deliver us from all that directs our eyes to the dusty ground at our feet, rather than up to the heavens on high. In every trial and struggle of life, keep our minds fixed on you: the giver of strength and courage. In the name of Jesus—who looked up to you, even from the cross. Amen.

Notes

1. *Illness As Metaphor* (New York: Picador, 1978), 3.
2. Lance Armstrong with Sally Jenkins, *It's Not About the Bike* (New York: Putnam's, 2000), 2-3.
3. Armstrong and Jenkins, 4.
4. Antoine de Saint- Exupéry, *Wind, Sand and Stars* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1940),143, quoted by Belden Lane in *The Solace of Fierce Landscapes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 203-204.