

Protagonist Corner

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In December, 2010, I had major heart surgery at Duke University Hospital in Durham, North Carolina. Four years earlier a routine test had revealed that I had an aneurysm on my aorta which could be fatal if it ruptured. This problem is often not discovered until it is too late because there are no symptoms. After the diagnosis, my condition was monitored closely by a cardiologist.

In the spring of 2009, the doctors recommended that I seriously consider having the surgery. Having the surgery may seem like a “no-brainer,” considering the seriousness of the problem; it is a risky procedure, and when you are feeling well, the decision is not so easy to make. I followed my doctor’s advice and had the surgery.

The operation was a success, and my recovery has gone extremely well, for which I am profoundly grateful. Dwelling on one’s health is not attractive to me. During this period of my life, I got tired of talking about my condition. I am sharing this with you because I was asked to reflect on how this experience affected me as a preacher.

The last sermon I preached before the surgery was the First Sunday of Advent, 2010. The lectionary text I focused on was Isaiah 11, and the theme was hope in the promises of God. I was preaching to a congregation anxious about their pastor, and I was also anxious myself. I was apprehensive to say the least—afraid is more accurate. I found comfort in the affirmation of faith in scripture that God can be trusted. It does not hurt for the preacher to preach to herself or himself.

Not long before my surgery, an elder and good friend in the congregation I serve said he had a sermon request. “When you come back to preach again after your surgery, I would like for you to reflect on what it was like to face life-threatening surgery.” I was taken aback by his up-front acknowledgement of the danger ahead, but I was comforted by his assumption that I would be back in the pulpit!

I have reflected on his question a great deal. I think he wanted to know what resources were available to me to face this crisis. The primary insight is what I suggested about the sermon on hope. I discovered that when you face a crisis, a deep reservoir of faith given to us comes to the surface.

Having been raised in a faith community and having served as a pastor, many times, I have heard and uttered words like:

- “In life and in death, we belong to God.”¹
- “Whether we live or whether we die, we belong to the Lord” (cf. Rom. 14:8).
- “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me” (Ps. 23:1, 4).
- “What shall we then say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us?” (Rom. 8:31).
- “I am persuaded that nothing in all creation, neither life nor death nor things present nor things to come, powers and principalities, nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (cf. Rom 8:39).

- “Through many dangers, toils, and snares, I have already come; ‘Tis grace has brought me safe thus far, and grace will lead me home.”²

These words of faith and hope had been internalized and were there for me in a difficult time. I knew I was not alone. I knew I was surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. I am convinced that these are God’s gifts made available through the communities of faith that have nurtured and sustained me. Isn’t this the gift of being part of a community that practices its faith? In the midst of trials and tribulations, we do not have to go out looking for something to help us get through the crisis. What we need has been there all the time, but when we need it, it rises to the surface. What a sustaining and hopeful insight for me!

This was my first experience with a serious health crisis. I had never been a patient in a hospital. Having visited many people who were in the hospital, I imagined what it might be like to be dependent on the care of others. I believe it gave me helpful insight on what it is like to be on the receiving end of health care. As pastors, we often find it easier to give than to receive. Letting others care for me was a humbling and enriching experience which has strengthened the bonds between me and my congregation.

It was my experience that I received support in a variety of ways, some expected and others out of the blue. On the night before the surgery, I was given an IV with an anesthetic in preparation for the surgery. Because of the medication, I was drifting in and out when I heard this voice that sounded like Moses or one of the prophets. “What is this, a message from God?” I thought. I opened my eyes, and to my amazement, it was Walter Brueggemann on TV, preaching at Duke Chapel. I later learned that the sermon Walter had preached the day before was being shown on Duke’s in-hospital TV network. When I told Walter his voice was the last one I heard before surgery, he responded, “I knew my sermons put people to sleep, but I did not know they were being used to anesthetize folks!”

Another good friend, Mel Williams, who was pastor of Watts Street Baptist Church in Durham, visited me soon after my surgery. He informed me that he had a Bible verse for me from Psalm 57:7 (KJV): “My heart is fixed, O God, my heart is fixed: I will sing and give praise.” Even though the Hebrew translation may be dubious, I was grateful for the sentiment.

I am deeply grateful for all the communities that helped “fix” my heart. The medical expertise in diagnosing and treating heart disease was incredible. The sensitivity of the care given was amazing. The congregations and friends who offered prayers and support were astounding. In my head, I knew that we live by the love, support, and convictions of others. Now I know it with my heart, which causes me to sing and give praise.

Notes

1 *The Brief Statement of Faith*, Presbyterian Church (USA).

2 John Newton, “Amazing Grace,” *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 280.