

September 18, 2011

Psalm 71:17-23; John 14:27; I Peter 5:6-7

## **NO STINKIN' THINKIN'**

It had been a good day, that Thursday back in April. We had had our staff meeting in the morning, during which we shared what was going on in our lives, then we prayed for each other, for specific prayer concerns, and for the ministries and mission of this church. Later that day the choirs met.

The bell choir was working hard on a piece that involved both choirchimes and handbells. The Sanctuary Choir was putting the finishing touches on a special musical service for the upcoming Sunday. It was titled "Walking with Jesus." Both rehearsals went well, and I fell asleep pleased with the progress that had been made, looking forward to Sunday worship with eager anticipation.

Little did I know what was lurking around the corner, just a few hours away. At 4:30 AM I was awakened out of a sound sleep by the most horrible back pain I had ever experienced. I sat bolt upright, thinking, "What did I do?" The pain literally propelled me to jump out of bed, and when I landed the pain and stress caused the muscles in my lumbar region to grab onto my sciatic nerve like vices, and I was nearly paralyzed.

After a trip to the emergency room, then trying to deal with the pain at home, I finally realized I was in real trouble, and back to the ER we went. This time, I was admitted to the hospital. When I was finally settled in my room at 2:00 AM on Saturday morning, I was in unspeakable pain and could not move without moaning or crying out.

I suggested to Jim that he go home and try to get some sleep, which he did. I lay in the darkness wondering what was happening to me, becoming more frightened with each passing moment.

The wonderful Moses Hogan arrangement of the Spiritual "Elijah Rock" has this verse. "Satan ain't nothin' but a snake in the grass. He's a conjur. He's a liar. Hallelujah Lord." It didn't take long for that old serpent to slither up beside me and whisper in my ear that God had abandoned me and I was all alone.

I knew I couldn't let that kind of stinkin' thinkin' take hold of me, so I decided to sing, in my head, some of my favorite songs. Interestingly, the first ones I sang were the songs I learned in childhood: "Jesus Loves Me," "Jesus Wants Me for a Sunbeam," "Jesus Loves the Little Children," "Tell Me the Stories of Jesus." Perhaps they came to mind quickly because I felt like a little child – helpless and afraid.

From there I went on to hymns and praise choruses. With the amount of pain I was in, there would be no sleeping; so I just kept trying to remember as many songs as I could. Thus began my nearly 2 month odyssey in the hospital, followed by another month of out-patient IV therapy.

Since I have been back at work, I've been catching up with my reading. I have a long neglected stack of books in my office that I have been trying to finish. Two of those books have to do with preaching and how we "do" church.

The authors of both books say that we need to speak the truth and share how God is real to us. That is what I hope to do today. I want to share with you how I experienced once again the truth of Scripture and the reality of God's presence with me.

In Psalm 71 the writer praises God, then says, "So even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me." In Lamentations, Jeremiah sings to God, "Great is your faithfulness." Peter, writing to the churches, advises "Give all your worries and cares to God, for He cares about what happens to you." And Jesus says, "Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you." These words from Scripture are true; I have experienced them.

In his book "90 Minutes in Heaven" author Don Piper writes about the terrible automobile accident that killed him (he had no pulse for 90 minutes), his experience of being in heaven then returning back to life, and the incredibly painful, long road to recovery.

One of the weapons he used to fight Satan's lies was music – tapes of Christian music. As he listened to the music, calmness swept over him and he was very much at peace. He writes, "Stark reminders from some simple songs had changed me. [They] reminded me that Satan is a liar. He wants to steal our joy and replace it with hopelessness.

“When we’re up against a struggle and we think we can’t keep going, we can change that by praising God. Our chains will fall from us.” p. 107 Music had helped me through my brother’s cancer, the deaths of my parents and my husband, and countless other painful, frightening experiences. I knew from past experience that God is faithful; so I called on those memories.

Jim greatly blessed me by loading my iPod-Touch with my favorite CDs. Most of my David Bailey albums, and wonderful a-cappella choral albums are now on my iPod. Hearing David sing “Hallelujah, I’ve got one more day” began my mornings, and Moses Hogan Spirituals got me through my physical therapy sessions – especially his arrangement of “My Soul’s Been Anchored in the Lord.”

The first song I sang out loud (as a duet with a physical therapist) became my theme song for my hospital stay: “Precious Lord, take my hand; lead me on, help me stand. I am tired, I am weak, I am worn.” It’s also on my iPod, and it got played frequently, especially when I had to walk down the hall to and from the PT room.

Heather called me 3 times a day with news of my grandchildren and what was going on in her classroom. She waited patiently when I fell asleep during our phone conversations, or when I babbled incoherently. I guess I said some pretty funny things while I was all drugged up.

One day, when Jim was visiting and I was trying to talk to him, my mouth felt like it was full of cotton, my tongue felt too big for my mouth, and I couldn’t get my words out correctly. I finally looked at Jim and exclaimed, “What on earth is wrong with me?”

Jim calmly replied, “Mother, you’re stoned!” For some reason, that just hadn’t dawned on me! I thought, “Gosh, I wish my parents were alive. I’d love to call them and say, ‘Mom and Dad, you got me through the 1960s and I never smoked one joint, never took an illegal drug. Now, here I am in my 60s and I’m stoned.’”

But even the drugs could not prevent me from calling out to God, using the words of the Psalmist, when I could not feel God near me, or when the pain became unbearable, or when Satan was trying to wear me down with discouragement or frustration.

I figured if David could yell at God, then burst into songs of praise, so could I. “My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?” was followed by “Thank you God for sending all these wonderful medical people to help me. Thank you for everyone who is praying for me. Please bless them all.”

I tried to “give thanks in all circumstances” as Paul advised the Thessalonians. So I thanked Him that in all 3 hospital rooms in which I stayed, my bed was by the window so I could look outside as Spring bloomed. I thanked God for the folks who cleaned the rooms because the smell of Clorox meant I might not get yet another infection.

I was blessed to have good friends in Greenville who visited daily and washed my dirty laundry for me so Jim wouldn't have to do that. My heart and soul were strengthened by the wonderful pastors who visited me regularly and prayed for me. They took time out of their busy schedules to minister to me; and they were visible reminders of God's presence.

One of the greatest blessings I experienced was just resting with God. I had been so busy working for God that I had neglected just enjoying His presence. When you're flat on your back and can't move, it's a little hard to be too busy to be with God.

When I finally gave up trying to control what was happening to me and gave control back to the Lord, I experienced once again His incredible peace. I felt His arm around my shoulders – felt the weight of it and the warmth – and was flooded with the peace that only He can give. Jesus speaks the truth: “Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you.” He truly does.

The Lord never left my side – even when I could not sense His presence. In those times when I felt alone, I would play my music, or sing, or quote Scripture that I had memorized as a child. Thank you, all my wonderful Sunday School teachers who required Scripture memorization!

“Yea, though I walk **through** the valley of the shadow of death....” “The Lord is my light and my salvation. Whom shall I fear?” “You shall call His name ‘Emmanuel’ (which means ‘God with us.’)” “Sing to the LORD.” “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore....”

God cared for me through every person who touched my life in those 3 months. I was so blessed to meet the nurses in the medical oncology unit where I received my daily IV treatments once I returned home. The gentle care, laughter, and support they gave their cancer patients was beautiful.

And the hope those patients expressed to each other was palpable. What a privilege it was to be part of that group, if even for only a month. I saw the love of God in so many people and experienced the grace of God in so many places during my illness and recovery. And I felt every one of your prayers covering me like a warm snuggly. My eyes were opened once again to the awesome presence of God in all of life.

Yes, the Bible speaks the truth. Yes, God is very real, and cares about us even to old age and gray hairs; and He is with us in the good times and in the bad times. We need to remind ourselves over and over of God's constant faithfulness, love, mercy, and grace, and give thanks for all He has done for us in Jesus Christ our Lord. Let there be no stinkin' thinkin' here!

Pray with me. Heavenly Father, thank You that You care for us, and are with us through all of life. Thank You for the peace Jesus gives us. Thank You for the truth we have in Holy Scripture. Precious Lord, thank You that in our darkest hours, You come to us, take us by the hand, and lead us home. Amen.

The Rev. Pamela Maloney  
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