



CANCER AWARENESS DAY

CULTURAL RESOURCES

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I. Dancing in the Valley of Cancer

I have often wondered how we move from the mountaintop to the valley. What is it that takes us from the high, of life to the pits of despair? On July 2, 2007, I got my answer when the doctor said the word I dreaded the most, cancer. Cancer? Me? How? Panic raced through my body, my mind turned to mush and the thought of death immediately seized me. By the time I made it to my car, I was already wondering how long I had to live. I asked myself what my last days would be like as I remembered my brother's painful death from gastric cancer just two years earlier. I thought of my father who was actively dying from lung cancer. I thought about my husband, my five children and my grandson. How could life cut me down at such a young age (46)? A scream began to form in my soul and it rose like vomit racing to the surface. Right there in my car, I doubled over and screamed with everything I had in me. I had never felt so hopeless, so helpless, and so afraid. I had fallen from the mountaintop and into the valley of despair. No advance notice, no easing down the slope, I fell from the top to the bottom in the twinkling of an eye.

In the middle of the night, over a cup of coffee, while we are changing the baby, getting dressed for work or enjoying a quiet evening with a loved one, a thief sneaks in and hides in the deepest recesses of our bodies. We call it cancer. Cancer is a disease in which cells begin to divide

themselves beyond what is normal. This uncontrolled growth intrudes upon the surrounding tissue and begins to destroy it. Sometimes it metastasizes or spreads to other places in the body. Cancer knows no limitations: it affects the young, the old, the strong and the weak, but the risk for most varieties increases with age.¹ Cancer causes about 13% of all deaths.² According to the American Cancer Society, 7.6 million people died from cancer in the world during 2007.³ In the beginning, the disease moves silently through our bodies wreaking havoc on our internal organs. But, as it progresses, it is not so easily hidden. We may begin to notice little things -- fatigue, unexplained weight loss, changes in our skin, pain, sore breasts, a lump, a cough. As the symptoms become more obvious, we seek out a doctor looking for some relief. She pokes and prods and finally gives us the dreaded news.

The thief must go before he does any further damage. The doctors and surgeons plan an all-out attack, which may include surgery, chemotherapy and radiation. As if the cancer is not enough, our days are suddenly filled with a flurry of activity, including individual visits to a whole team of doctors, the radiologist, the cancer support center, the surgeon, the oncologist and, in my case, the OB/GYN. Surgery was to be the first line of defense. They would take a part of the breast, unless it had spread, in which case, they would take it all. Given the type of breast cancer I had, it was recommended that I also have my uterus removed at the same time

Agreeing with my medical team, I arose on the morning of my forty-sixth birthday and I headed to the clinic where they would do my surgery preparation. I was informed that the doctor would be putting a wire through my breast and into the mass. The wire would then be taped down and covered with a Styrofoam cup (yes the same cup you would use at a picnic to drink your lemonade) to keep it in place. If that wasn't enough, I would then be injected with a dye so that the doctor could find and biopsy my lymph nodes while I was in surgery. All of this without pain medication and once, it was all done, I would have to load myself in the car and have my husband drive me to the hospital a couple of miles away on my birthday!

They removed the mass and closed me up, they then took my uterus out, and I spent the next few days in the hospital recovering. The news was good, the cancer had not spread. I went home with a pile of medications and a list of "dos and don'ts." A few weeks later, I started on a 12-week course of chemotherapy and, it was in the midst of that treatment, that I really came to know what it meant to trust God.

The first treatment was not too bad. I had flu-like symptoms and a lack of focus, but that cleared up within a few days. The second round came three weeks later. In spite of the mega doses of anti-nausea medications I was on, my nausea was out of control. I was so weak that I could not lift my head from the pillow, and light blinded me and made my head throb. The smell of food made me gag, but the steroids made me ravenous. Sleep was so elusive; I counted down the hours until the sleeping pill would take me out of my misery.

I began to understand how, in a short period of time, a person's life could go from being vibrant to just making them tired. Just a month earlier, my life was on a high, my husband was Mr. Wonderful, the kids were doing great. I had received a pastoral appointment to a church in my hometown after having served two years as the pastor of a church that was over two hours away. I wondered how I had fallen so quickly into the valley; I asked myself, "what have I done to

make God angry with me?” Was this punishment for something I had done or left undone? How long would I have to suffer? Why me? Why this? I felt like I was standing in the middle of my bedroom floor screaming at the top of my lungs; instead, I was curled up in the fetal position buried deep under the covers seeking warmth. The only thing moving was my mind. I had already been back to the doctor that morning. They gave me IV meds to counter the dehydration and nausea. It didn’t help. In fact, I felt worse having had to move from my bed. The chills racked my body, the hunger ravaged me, the thirst weakened me and the nausea sickened me -- my mind cried out to God. Help me Lord! There was nothing else to do; the doctors couldn’t help me, the meds were useless and I, Superwoman, who had conquered the world, overcome great obstacles, balanced a multitude of responsibilities effectively and fixed the problems of others, was completely broken, defenseless.

I prayed for God to come and save me from my misery. And it was in the midst of prayer that I found relief. My physical self was left behind and I was drawn into the presence of God. The nausea, chills, and aches were still there, but I was separated from them, far removed from them. And, in the absence of those physical symptoms, I just began to rejoice and thank God. God just ministered to me. And the more I poured myself out before God, the deeper I fell into the embrace of God. For the first time in my life, I had fallen completely and totally out of my own control and into the care of God. It was a beautiful place where I was one with God, and where my healing began to take place -- it was there that I began to dance.

II. Songs for this Moment

Cancer can feel like the billowing sea and seem as if it will utterly wipe you out. In times like these, great hymns of the church are so apropos. One hymn says: “Father, I stretch my hands to thee. No other help. I know.” In other words, when we are totally devastated and no one else can soothe us -- not even medication or doctors -- it is to God that we can go. Our trust in God leads us to proclaim, “Whatever my lot, thou (God and the Word of God) has taught me to say, it is well with my soul.” The reason that every believer can say “it is well” is because, through it all, no matter how scary and how painful, we have the “blessed assurance” that we are never alone or forsaken.

Father, I Stretch My Hands to Thee

Father, I stretch my hands to Thee,
No other help I know;
If Thou withdraw Thyself from me,
Ah! whither shall I go?

What did Thine only Son endure,
Before I drew my breath!
What pain, what labor, to secure
My soul from endless death!

O Jesus, could I this believe,
I now should feel Thy power;

Now my poor soul Thou wouldst retrieve,
Nor let me wait one hour.

Surely Thou canst not let me die;
O speak, and I shall live;
And here I will unwearied lie,
Till Thou Thy Spirit give.

Author of faith! to Thee I lift
My weary, longing eyes:
O let me now receive that gift!
My soul without it dies.

The worst of sinners would rejoice,
Could they but see Thy face:
O, let me hear Thy quickening voice,
And taste Thy pardoning grace.⁴

When Peace, Like A River

When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,
when sorrows like sea billows roll;
whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say,
It is well, it is well with my soul.

Refrain:
It is well with my soul,
it is well, it is well with my soul.

Though Satan should buffet, though trials should come,
let this blest assurance control,
that Christ has regarded my helpless estate,
and hath shed his own blood for my soul.
(Refrain)

And, Lord, haste the day when my faith shall be sight,
the clouds be rolled back as a scroll;
the trump shall resound, and the Lord shall descend,
even so, it is well with my soul.
(Refrain).⁵

Blessed Assurance

Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine!
O what a foretaste of glory divine!
Heir of salvation, purchase of God,
born of his Spirit, washed in his blood.

Refrain:

This is my story, this is my song,
praising my Savior all the day long;
this is my story, this is my song,
praising my Savior all the day long.

Perfect submission, perfect delight,
visions of rapture now burst on my sight;
angels descending bring from above
echoes of mercy, whispers of love.
(Refrain)

Perfect submission, all is at rest;
I in my Savior am happy and blest,
watching and waiting, looking above,
filled with his goodness, lost in his love.
(Refrain).⁶

III. Reducing Risk Factors/Prevention

Professor Yolanda Smith, who provided the Cancer Awareness cultural resource unit for 2008, offered key strategies to reduce cancer and helpful resources to aid persons stricken with cancer. Some of the information she provided is repeated below.

Some key strategies to reducing cancer include:

1. Avoiding smoking and tobacco use;
2. Maintaining a healthy body weight by eating a balanced diet and increasing regular physical activity;
3. Taking advantage of high quality screening services and regular follow-ups;
4. Having regular screening/diagnostic testing as appropriate for various cancers e.g., mammograms for breast cancer, colonoscopy for colon/rectum cancer, prostate-specific antigen (PSA) blood test for prostate cancer, Papanicolaou (Pap) test for cervical cancer, etc;
5. Consulting a doctor immediately if you are experiencing unusual symptoms. Go to a neighborhood clinic, or even an emergency room if you do not have health care, but do see a physician;
6. Working to eliminate racial and ethnic health disparities by raising awareness about socioeconomic concerns, environmental factors, genetic variations, cultural barriers, racial discrimination in health care, and specific health behaviors;
7. Participating in cancer clinical trials;
8. Mobilizing churches and community organizations to work in partnership with health care providers, public health agencies, and communities of other racial ethnic groups to develop and implement culturally based programs, resources, research opportunities, preventative education, and clinical services;
9. Developing public education campaigns at your church; and,

10. Providing support resources (including psychological and spiritual) for persons affected by cancer and their families.

IV. Research and Organizations That Assist Cancer Patients and Their Families

Organizations, such as the American Cancer Society, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the National Cancer Institute, and others, are involved in numerous research projects to better understand the risk factors, health disparities, environmental factors, genetic variations, early detection and prevention benefits, treatment, survivorship, and other aspects of cancer among African Americans. These organizations also provide information on advocacy, current trends, community networking, clinical trials, health and wellness, education, racial/ethnic disparities in health care, books, pamphlets, resources, and much more. To learn more about these organizations and the services they provide contact their national offices or visit their web sites.

Organizations

American Cancer Society
National Home Office
1599 Clifton Road
Atlanta, GA 30329
1-800-ACS-2345
www.cancer.org

Cancer Care, Inc
275 7th Avenue
New York, NY 10001
(212) 712-8400 (admin.)
(212) 712-8080 (services)
www.cancercare.org

Cancer Research Institute
681 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10022
1-800-99-CANCER (800) 992-2623
www.cancerresearch.org

Centers for Disease Control
& Prevention
1600 Clifton Road
Atlanta, GA 30333
(404) 639-3534
(800) 311-3435
www.cdc.gov

Health Resources & Services Administration
Hill-Burton Program
U.S. Dept. of Health & Human Services
Parklawn Building
5600 Fishers Lane
Rockville, MD 20857
(301) 443-5656
(800) 638-0742
(800) 492-0359 (Maryland area)
<http://www.hrsa.gov/>

National Cancer Institute
Public Information Office
Building 31, Room 10A31
31 Center Drive, MSC 2580
Bethesda, MD 20892-2580
(301) 435-3848 (Public Info.)
www.nci.nih.gov

V. Books

The following are books that I would recommend for persons who have cancer. Two provide information that is spiritually uplifting, and Managing Cancer: The African American's Guide to

Diagnosis, Prevention, and Treatment is a very helpful resource for managing cancer and staying healthy. These are books that can be obtained from your local library and purchased online:

When God & Cancer Meet by Lynn Eib

Managing Cancer: The African American's Guide to Diagnosis, Prevention, and Treatment- Revised and Updated by George Rawls, Frank Lloyd, and Herbert Stern

You Have Cancer - A Death Sentence that Four African-American Men Turned Into an Affirmation to Remain in the Land of the Living by Ronald P. Bazile, Ellis M. Brossett, Preston J. Edwards, and Benjamin M. Priestley

VI. Conclusion

Today's scripture speaks directly to the situation we find ourselves in when we find ourselves in the valley of cancer. It offers the hope that cancer is not a punishment and, while there may be suffering, God is with us all the way. It reminds us to call upon the Lord in this hour and God will give us reason to rejoice.

¹Bless the LORD, O my soul, and all that is within me, bless his holy name.

²Bless the LORD, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits—

³who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases,

⁴who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,

⁵who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.

⁶The LORD works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed.

⁷He made known his ways to Moses, his acts to the people of Israel.

⁸The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

⁹He will not always accuse, nor will he keep his anger forever.

¹⁰He does not deal with us according to our sins, nor repay us according to our iniquities.

¹¹For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him;

¹²as far as the east is from the west, so far he removes our transgressions from us.

¹³As a father has compassion for his children, so the LORD has compassion for those who fear him.

¹⁴For he knows how we were made; he remembers that we are dust.

¹⁵As for mortals, their days are like grass; they flourish like a flower of the field;

¹⁶for the wind passes over it, and it is gone, and its place knows it no more.

¹⁷But the steadfast love of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting on those who fear him, and his righteousness to children's children,

¹⁸to those who keep his covenant and remember to do his commandments.

¹⁹The LORD has established his throne in the heavens, and his kingdom rules over all.

²⁰Bless the LORD, O you his angels, you mighty ones who do his bidding, obedient to his spoken word.

²¹Bless the LORD, all his hosts, his ministers that do his will.

²²Bless the LORD, all his works, in all places of his dominion. Bless the LORD, O my soul.

Notes

1. "UK Cancer Incidence Statistics by Age." Cancer Research UK. Online location: <http://info.cancerresearchuk.org/cancerstats/incidence/age/> accessed 25 September 2008
2. "Cancer." World Health Organization. (Feb 2009) Online location: <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs297/en/> accessed 25 September 2008
3. "Report Sees 7.6 Million Global 2007 Cancer Deaths." Reuters. (17 Dec. 2007) Online location: <http://www.reuters.com/article/healthNews/idUSN1633064920071217> accessed 8 January 2008
4. "Father, I Stretch My Hands to Thee." African Methodist Episcopal Church Hymnal. Nashville, TN: The African Methodist Episcopal Church, 1984. #318
5. "When Peace, Like A River." African Methodist Episcopal Church Hymnal. #448
6. "Blessed Assurance." African Methodist Episcopal Church Hymnal. #450