

The Power of Prayer in the Wilderness of Cancer

The meditation I offer today in this time of division, uncertainty and daily change in our national life is personal. As I complete active cancer treatment, I reflect on the journey and offer my thanks to you for accompanying me in prayer. I pray that this reflection might be a support to you as you journey through every wilderness of this time.

It was a doctor named Gabriel who first told me that I had breast cancer, Gabriel the messenger who brings news that changes everything. A week later, a doctor named DeHeart said to me, "This really sucks. I'm so sorry," and I thought, "Since breast cancer strikes one out of every eight women, why not me?" From those first days, I needed a visual, poetic and biblical image to focus my response. The frequently used language of "battling" cancer or "fighting" cancer or "kicking cancer's butt" wouldn't work for me. I didn't want those images of violence in my life in a time when I really needed to breathe deeply and find hope. So I prayed and listened and was led to enter the time of cancer treatment as a journey through the wilderness.

As the Israelites spent forty years in the wilderness on their way to another land, I would willingly enter the wilderness of illness on my way to healing. As the Israelites spent much of the forty years camped in the desert, I would pitch my tent in a forbidding place, there to discover not only stinging scorpions and biting snakes, not only burning sun and howling wind, but manna and quails and water from the rock. I would enter the wilderness of cancer treatment as I'd previously hiked and camped in wild places of nature -- with careful planning, with humility and with deep respect for the journey. I'd also go with more than a little fear and trembling, even though I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that God was already there and I would never be alone.

As I camped out and wandered through the wilderness of illness, I was blessed with messages of hope. Again and again passages from the book of the prophet Isaiah, which were sent in cards and songs, or which I stumbled upon when I wasn't looking, came alive for me. "*Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old,*" I heard one Tuesday morning. "*I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.*" (Isaiah 43:18-19). That promise moved me to tears. "*The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,*" I heard the evening before one chemo infusion. "*The desert shall rejoice and blossom; . . . Strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, 'Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God.'*" (Isaiah 35:1, 4) These promises went with me into the wilderness and they made it bearable, even beautiful at times, though it was still a place of terror.

Throughout the entire journey, from diagnosis to surgery, through chemo and radiation, I felt absolutely buoyed by the prayers of others. When I was too tired or worried to pray, I was lifted by the prayers of the community. When I didn't know how to pray for myself, I was strengthened by praying for others. Time and time again I felt, literally felt, hope

flowing through my soul in the midst of fear, light pouring into my mind in moments of darkness, strength surging in my body in hours of weakness. Prayer carried me through the wilderness and guided me to recognize and rejoice in the presence of God there. I thank you for your prayers which were such a huge part of sustaining me.

I have now completed active treatment and begin the next five years of follow up care. My hair is coming back. My fingernails are beginning to grow normally. My full stamina is returning. I'm ready to leave this particular wilderness and enter whatever is next. Thanks be to God who is with us always, in every wilderness. Thanks be to God for the wonder and power of prayer.

May God bless you in every wilderness journey you take.