

Three Gifts from God on our Cancer Journey

by Gary and Jenni Hoag

It was probably the worst scenario in which to find out I had breast cancer. The date was January 19, 2011. I was alone. Gary was in England fulfilling his PhD residency requirement. Sammy and Sophie, our two teenagers, were in school. I received a phone call from the doctor saying I had ductal carcinoma en situ. In English, that is early stage breast cancer. What followed were three more painful biopsies, a bilateral lumpectomy, radiation, and a long year of recovery.

As a family we learned three lessons first-hand which we are privileged to share. **First**, through this experience we learned:

God is enough.

Allow Jenni to elaborate: To be alone and learn I had cancer, led me to ask God: Really? Me? After shedding many tears, I was graciously led by God to receive this cup of suffering like Mary embraced the news that she would carry the Christ-child: "Let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38).

That was a gift because it opened my eyes to see this unexpected intrusion from His perspective. It was a gift. You may think I am crazy, but it was. It led me CLOSER to Him.

We decided to wait to tell Sammy and Sophie until Gary returned from England. On Sunday, January 23, we made our favorite chocolate chip pancake breakfast and broke the news to the kids. We were not prepared for what would happen.

Sammy seemed completely at peace. Sophie took Jenni into another room, sat her down and expressed this. "Mommy, people probably look at us and think that God has blessed us because we seek to serve Him and that we don't understand suffering. This will just give us a chance to show the world that Jesus can carry us through suffering."

Wow. The biblical truths we had tried to teach our kids over the years reaped an abundant harvest that day. When I shared this with Gary, we both wept. God would use our children to regularly remind us that God is enough to get us through anything, even if the cancer would take my life.

The **second** lesson we learned has to do with the miraculous. Most people think this has to do with physical healing. It doesn't. Have you ever thought about the fact that every person Jesus ever healed eventually grew older, and from one malady or another, died? Barring the return of Christ in our lifetime, all of us are going to die. So what was the miracle of our cancer journey?

The miracle of having Christ in the cancer journey is not necessarily healing, it's peace.

We experienced what Jesus described as peace that “the world knows nothing about.” The Apostle Paul called it “peace that passes all understanding.”

Gary wants to give you some examples of this.

Even as God led Jenni to accept the news like Mary, after sharing that with me, God led me to the Word to see what message was there for Joseph. Upon reading the words, “Do not be afraid” (Matt. 1:20), I felt overcome with a sense of peace.

When bills came that we did not have the money to pay, we gathered as a family and called to God for help. What happened? He filled us with peace as we waited on Him. Unsolicited, six checks came to us that exactly paid the bills. God provided.

In a world that on the surface says everything is “fine,” which is perhaps best described in the movie Italian Job as “freaked out, insecure, neurotic and emotional,” we were at peace. One friend said that when he’d see us, it was as if a glow of joy and peace radiated from our faces.

Sammy was a rock for us through this journey, and in his own way, helped fill our hearts with peace. Music was his conduit. He loves contemporary Christian music and through the ups and downs of the year, often recommended we listen to CD’s which he thought might bless us. Here’s a top 10 list of songs that filled us with peace:

10. “Blessings” by Laura Story
9. “Strong Enough to Save” by Tenth Avenue North
8. “Everything I Need” by Kutless
7. “How He Loves” by David Crowder Band
6. “Manifesto” by The City Harmonic
5. “Praise You in this Storm” by Casting Crowns
4. “Our God is Mercy” by Brenton Brown
3. “These Things Take Time” by Sanctus Real
2. “Know By Now” by Josh Wilson
1. “Never Once” by Matt Redman

I can’t describe it, but again, it was indescribable how God’s Word, and the biblical truths proclaimed through music helped fill our hearts with the peace of God.

Every time Jenni endured another medical procedure, we had peace. And this may sound nutty, but at times, we had more peace than our friends who reached out to encourage us. It became clear to us that the journey upon which God had placed us became our ministry for 2011.

Some have cancer or challenging illnesses, others endure marriage problems, difficult work issues, or some other really tough stuff. We have no answers for most of their problems except one word: Jesus. We have had the privilege of pointing others to Him, the bottomless source of fathomless peace.

What's the **third** lesson we learned? **Every day is a gift.**

When we share excerpts of our story of being carried by our loving God through 2011, we like to share this point using the cute cliché from the Disney movie, Kung Fu Panda, which proclaims a profound reality that will shape the rest of our lives.

“Yesterday’s history and tomorrow’s a mystery, but today is a gift, that’s why they call it the present.”

When you think of “the present” as a “gift,” it changes how you live each one. As it is better to give gifts than receive them (Acts 20:35), we have learned to treat every day as a gift from God to be enjoyed and shared with others in a way that reflects our love and gratitude to God for all His blessings. Every moment of every day truly is a gift from God.

We are thankful for the journey of 2011, which led us to experience the reality that God is enough; we are filled with peace, despite the challenges of life, and we are celebrating each day as a gift from God. And we hope our story encourages you.

How are the Hoags doing in 2012? In the wake of cancer, we are not filling our schedules as much. Jenni has recovered fully, though she is on very strong medication for the next several years that sap strength and energy. When Mom has little energy, it inevitably requires shifting priorities. Favorite places we like to visit on an annual basis are not in our plans. And speaking engagements like the one we have been looking forward to at Camp Spofford need to be postponed with hope that it will be a possibility in the future. We pray with you as you look for a new speaker to bring the truths of God's word next summer.

Gary Hoag (gary.hoag@efca.org) serves on the Directional Team of the EFCA as the Generosity Monk. Jenni (jennihoag@me.com), a Spiritual Director, facilitated a spiritual retreat at the 2011 EFCA Leadership Conference. Sammy and Sophie attend Front Range Christian School. The Hoags live in Littleton, CO, and are a part of Trailhead Church, a church plant that meets at Bethany EFC in Centennial, CO.