

By Pastor Merv Thompson

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"Grace and peace to you from the God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

These monthly Updates usually are not planned in advance. There is no year-long plan for what they will contain. Usually they just happen. When I make my monthly trek from Minnesota to West Des Moines, I try to be open to what the Spirit is doing and saying at Hope, and then try to reflect this in my writing.

Sometimes the theme for the update comes in a conversation with Pastor Mike and sometimes in meetings with one of the other pastors whom I am mentoring. Or it can come from a reading that comes to me or even from the news from the wider church or world. I hope something or someone will tap me on the shoulder and give me an inspiration that can then be translated into words.

For some reason or another during my December visit I could not land on any particular subject about which I should be writing. I considered writing something about the economic crisis in the country and how it might affect the congregations. I also was asked, as I often am, to what would I attribute the growth and dynamism of Lutheran Church of Hope. Nothing seemed to crystallize; as I drove back to Minnesota I was out of ideas. I awaited a new inspiration. Little did I expect what happened in our lives.

Just last week we learned that our daughter Deanna was diagnosed with breast cancer. Not only does she have cancer, but it had already spread to the bones in her back where it was first detected. Late this summer she discovered she had a broken bone in a vertebrae and given a brace to wear. However, the spread worsened and necessitated more tests, then the cancer was found.

Our first reaction was similar to all parents and loved ones, shock, fear, weeping, praying, hugging and despairing. Nothing has been the same from this moment on, in fact, probably nothing will ever be the same again. Our world had just changed, our beloved daughter had cancer.

Thankfully in the first moments after we learned of the news we had something proactive to do and that was to take care of our granddaughters, Linnea, age 12 and Annika, age 9. Our immediate task while her husband Neal took Deanna to the hospital was to keep our granddaughters' world on somewhat of an even keel, make sure they had good food and rest, chauffeur them to piano lessons, confirmation and choir, ballet and chess club. This gave us a chance to answer their questions and to give many hugs.

During the first two days the news was more or less hopeful

depending on which doctor was speaking. The second evening we brought the girls to the hospital to visit their parents. To see the girls cuddling with their mother in her bed and walking the hallways arm-in-arm was a therapeutic moment for us all, but especially for them. They really needed to see and hug their mother.

Her Oncologist showed up and proceeded to give us a surprising and inspirational message of Hope. She said that this cancer is treatable. Deanna is a very healthy person otherwise and there have been improvements in the treatment options, and Deanna has an extensive support system. She said that Deanna should be feeling better by Christmas and experience many more Christmas's to come. We were overwhelmed with feelings of hope and joy.

Within a few days the radiation is expected to take away much of the debilitating pain that has been present in her back. Just as important is that there has been a huge outpouring of love and prayers and compassion. Deanna is a part of many different networks, as most of us are, and they have kicked into gear big time.

For instance, Father Tom is a dear friend of ours of more than forty-five years and he called to tell us that he had just contacted his good friend, Father Peter, in Calcutta, India. Father Peter was going to offer a mass for Deanna at the tomb of Mother Theresa. Tom remarked, "Both Father Peter and Mother Theresa are powerful pray-ers."

Pastor Mike and the Hope staff have reached out to us again and again offering consistent, specific prayers and love for us, for which we are so grateful. Deanna has also received hundreds of messages of support. We see so many shining examples of the Christian community doing what it does best, supporting those in need.

Deanna is a Professor of Religion at Hamline University in St. Paul. Just last month she gave two lectures at Augsburg College on the theology of hope, which we were fortunate enough to be able to attend. My wife Jackie and I grabbed and are holding fast to this theme as our guiding light during this time. We are to be messengers of hope. We are to bring hope to our daughter and her husband, to our granddaughters, to the rest of our family, and to those we meet.

We believe so strongly in hope because Jesus Christ is all about hope. His church has been commissioned to spread this message of hope. So we intend to be hope-bearers. I found in the Bible some powerful descriptions of hope.

I Corinthians 13: "Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres." Because we love so much, we always must hope.

Romans 15:13: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." God is a God of hope and brings us joy and peace, so that we might overflow with hope by God's grace, looking for ways to overflow with hope. And it is not our power but that of the Holy Spirit."

Isaiah 40:31: "Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength, they will soar on wings like eagles, they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not faint." What a majestic picture, those who hope in the Lord will soar on wings like eagles.

This reminds me of the time that Jackie and I spent a weekend along the Mississippi River in southern Minnesota during the peak "eagle-watching" season of late March. We saw close to fifty bald eagles soaring above the bluffs and fishing in the river. On Sunday morning we worshipped at a little Lutheran Church in the area and during the service the adult choir sang, most appropriately, "On Eagles' Wings."

"You who dwell in the shelter of the Lord, Who abide in His shadow for life, Say to the Lord, 'My Refuge,' My rock in whom I trust.

And he will raise you up on eagle's wings, Bear you on the breath of dawn. Make you to shine like the sun, And hold you in the palm of his hand.

But the major reason for our hope comes from the power and presence of God. God is the author of hope and God is the one who creates hope. Henri Nouwen in his book Compassion, describes the incredible compassion and love of God which is the source of our hope.

In the Gospels, Nouwen says that there is a Greek word that appears twelve times, and in every instance it describes God or Jesus. We translate this word today as "compassion." Many times we see a demonstration of divine compassion, a compassion emanating from the heart of God and a compassion beyond anything we have experienced on this earth. According to Nouwen, this compassion most often manifests itself in healing, restoring and making whole again.

He writes, "When Jesus was moved to compassion, the source of all life trembled, the ground of all love burst open and the mystery of God's immediate, inexhaustible and unfathomable tenderness revealed itself." The mystery of God's compassion becomes visible in the healing stories of the New Testament.

So we have hope because of the compassion found in God and in Jesus Christ. We have hope because of the prayers and

support of so many of the great cloud of witnesses. We have hope because we hear story after story of other people who have had similar diagnosis and today are cancer free. We have hope because of our confidence in the medical personnel who are using their expertise and care to treat Deanna. We have hope because perfect love casts out fear, and this is the kind of love we find in our children and grandchildren.

Jackie saw a banner which said, "Life Is What Happens To You While You are Making Other Plans." How true. Life is happening to us. God is present and compassionate beyond all we can think or imagine, and God's people are demonstrating this compassion to us. Our heart-felt thanks goes to all at Hope who are praying without ceasing for us and for our daughter. Thanks be to God.