

Voices: What cancer does and can't take from us

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CAUTION: The following article contains descriptions of cancer's physical effects that may be difficult for some readers.

I always have been a catastrophizer. I am well-practiced at dreaming up, and planning for, the worst-case scenario. But the possibility my beautiful wife would be diagnosed with breast cancer—and in her 40s, no less—never found its way into my self-generated nightmares.

But it happened.

2022 already had been a difficult year. I was a new pastor, and my wife Natallia, who only recently had begun learning the guitar, was leading our worship, because COVID-19 had wreaked havoc in our tiny congregation.

In March, our [historic church building burned](#), along with several other buildings in downtown Ranger. In June, we lost two church members we could not afford to lose, because we wouldn't merge with another church in town.

In July, my wife decided it was long past time for her to get a mammogram. She usually is conscientious about her health, but she had not undergone this important diagnostic procedure in several years. Nevertheless, when she went for the test, we weren't worried. She did her monthly self-examinations, and she never had felt anything that concerned her.

So, we were surprised and dismayed when the radiologist called the same day to say there was something amiss on the scans. A week later, on Aug. 3, Natallia went for an ultrasound of what we assumed was a single, small

spot. I'll never forget how I felt when she called me with the results.

"The doctor says that there is a 90 percent chance that it is cancer," she told me. Then she added there was a tumor in both breasts.

Fear and trembling

This outcome was worse than my worst-case scenarios. I didn't know a lot about breast cancer, but I knew, or thought I knew, metastatic breast cancer is close to a death sentence. And I assumed, because the cancer was in both breasts, it was metastatic.

As is so often the case, my wife faced her diagnosis with courage, but I fell to pieces. Her apparent fate was a double blow. It was not only the death of my best friend and only lover, but it was my own death, too—at least in a metaphorical sense.

I was born with Leber Congenital Amaurosis, a rare, genetic disease of the retina. Over time, the disease has robbed me of almost all of my eyesight.

My wife helps me with every aspect of my ministry, from reading papers submitted by students to making pastoral care visits to hospitalized parishioners. Without her, it is difficult to imagine how I could have a life of purpose and meaning, much less one that fulfills my calling as a pastor and scholar.

By the end of the week, I had landed in an urgent care facility, seeking treatment for anxiety. The fear was unbearable, but so was the shame. At precisely the point I should have been the strongest for Natallia, at precisely the point when all the focus should have been on her, my own acute suffering took precedence.

Miracles of the ordinary

When I have been under emotional distress at other times in my life, I have found it difficult to hear God's voice. But not this time. Indeed, God's voice—reassuring me he would give me Natallia's life and prompting me to ask for more—carried me through those moments of terror.

It is fashionable these days to enumerate all the ways the church has failed, and there is a place for that kind of critical reflection. But for us, the people of God were the embodiment of his presence and activity in our lives.

Our tiny church stood tall, giving us the space we needed to rest, grieve and heal. Our former church, which is much larger, came alongside us, providing support and assistance our own congregation could not.

Plus, God provided Natallia with an excellent team of doctors. Not only were the folks at Texas Oncology competent, but they also were compassionate. That is not something every cancer patient experiences.

That is not to say everything worked out the way we hoped. From insurance problems to tumors much larger than they appeared to be on the initial scans, we seemed to get bad news with almost every bit of good news.

Every bit of bad news threatened to overwhelm us once again with dread. But we were not alone. The God who created the universe, who superintends all of history and who joined humanity in its suffering, was walking with us and working for us.

Cancer's cost

I hate cancer. I hate it with every fiber of my being. Sure, the cold, scientific mind could argue it is no different than any other disease process. It is simply the result of perfectly natural interactions between a person's

DNA and her or his environment—nothing less and nothing more.

But my heart doesn't buy that. Cancer relentlessly attacks the body God made to be good until that body ceases to function. Even if a cure is possible, the cost of that cure is barbarous.

Breast cancer, in particular, mangles the most distinctively feminine parts of a woman's body. For my wife, it robbed her of her breasts, but treating it also involved giving up her ovaries. Some women don't have to give up their ovaries, but they lose their hair.

Some women lose it all in a desperate struggle to remain present for their husbands, children and other family members. It is enough to drive even the most faithful Christian to agree with Kate Bowler's anguished cry: "Before was better."

Sometimes, I feel guilty about lamenting this cost. After all, I still have my wife. That would not have been the case throughout most of human history, and it might not be the case if we were living in another part of the world.

Yet, failing to acknowledge my own loss is also to fail to join Natallia in hers. It is to deny my own creatureliness and to participate in the Gnostic lie that the body does not matter.

So, with my wife's approval, I will speak the truth. Cancer has stolen something precious from us, something we will not get back in this life. Indeed, if it is true there will be no marital intimacy in the new creation, then—for me, at least—the gift of my wife's unmangled body is gone forever.

Spiritual intimacy

Perhaps this explains why Natallia and I have felt so closely connected with our God of late. We actually are losing something precious in this

trial—even if that loss is not permanent—and only the presence of our faithful God can comfort us in the face of such a loss.

In the aftermath of that loss, I read both Kate Bowler's *Everything Happens for a Reason, and Other Lies I've Loved* and Max Lucado's *Anxious for Nothing*. The approaches Bowler and Lucado take to the problem of human suffering are quite different, but I think they both have something to contribute to our efforts to understand God's mysterious ways.

God's beautiful habit of working through terrible circumstances to bring about good (Romans 8:28) does not undo the trauma inflicted by those circumstances. Rather, the trauma and the good rest uncomfortably beside one another, illustrating both the perilous situation in which humanity finds itself and the beneficence of a God who refuses to waste our suffering.

It is a constant struggle to hold that tension. Sometimes, I seek the false comfort of pretending I haven't lost anything. At other times, I fail to recognize I have gained as well as lost.

Intimacy with Christ is worth whatever pain is involved in bringing it about, but there is more to what God is doing in our lives than bonding with a suffering Messiah. God has woven Natallia's heart more deeply into mine than I ever thought possible. She has modeled for me a kind of selfless love that makes the narratives and propositions of our faith come alive.

Without a doubt, this enlivening of the biblical witness has pointed a finger of conviction at the most selfish and depraved parts of my heart. But it also has filled my heart with hope. Goodness is real. Love is possible. And we can—by God's grace and with God's help—experience them, even in a world that has been swallowed alive by evil and pain.

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