

My Faith Journey

In my memory, “I 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 my hand” was shared with me as a message of God’s strength by my grandparents. We were avid letter writers during the months we were separated. When I was challenged, they always offered scripture along with hugs and words of encouragement. All the best things Grandparents do. It was a bit of a surprise to me that this “verse” is not actually a verse at all, but an amalgamation of the whole of Psalm 91. This fake verse is my verse anyway - it’s what faith can do for you - and what it has always done for me.

I consider myself a pretty lucky person - I wanted a good partner, and I got one, I wanted children and I have 2 great ones, I wanted to teach and I do. I am surrounded by loving and supportive family and friends. I have a good church with wonderful ministers, friends and great music. I live a comfortable life with money for extras now and again. So, I’m lucky. The story I want to share with you is about how I’m not just lucky, I’m blessed.

In our 30 years of marriage I have had to face the possible loss of John, my husband, twice and out of respect to my children’s privacy, I will only say that we/they have faced immense challenges too.

A bit of context about us, the story I’m going to share started in the fall of 2006. In March of that year Bethany at 11 had been diagnosed with Epilepsy and it was not yet under control. We’d already fought through many miscarriages and years of infertility as a result of endometriosis and I was always managing symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis - something diagnosed in my late teens, although later diagnosed as fibromyalgia. As an active decision to our infertility we adopted our son Travis in 2000. John was enjoying the challenge of his work and I, after being a mommy first, employee second, had recently started my second career as a teacher. Really, at this point, I saw us a typical young family - Bethany’s health was our biggest concern.

But, John had been experiencing “strange” headaches, some balance issues and hearing loss. By August it was really impacting his life - a call to our family doctor to describe these symptoms and overnight we had an MRI scheduled - that told me volumes about the seriousness of the issue. Tuesday night was the MRI, Wednesday morning we were told that he had a massive brain tumour.

Over the next few days we googled brain tumours finding nothing but terminal outcomes, and just struggled with too many questions and no answers, we kept the news to just a few people - we didn't want the kids to know until we could give them some concrete news.

I'm a worrier - always have been. So I did what came naturally to me. I hid my fear from everyone close to me, acted brave and worried by myself. That Sunday morning, before we really knew anything, I went to church alone. I picked a row. No one who I was particularly attached to was there - it was summer after all, and I usually sat in the choir anyway. The service started with the hymn - I don't know what it was, but it opened the tap and the tears started. I felt throughout the entire service every message of comfort was just for me. My tears did not go unnoticed and I soon found myself surrounded by members who just hugged me and gave me kleenex. In that hour, I was allowed to let my worries overwhelm me, I was able to be weak and so very, very afraid. I opened my heart and in walked just what I needed: comfort, no promises but that whatever came next I was not alone. A glimpse of God in action. These women, acquaintances only really, rallied by my side in love and support to help hold me up. Angels from heaven, and the words - messages from God.

Within 8 days, we were in London for what turned out to be a marathon day of specialist appointments: ENT, neurosurgeon, ophthalmologist, neurological ophthalmologist, and probably more. To give you a sense of John's priority, the pre op registration centre went and got us lunch so we could see the next Dr. and the chief of neurosurgery was sent to us - so we wouldn't have to go upstairs and then down again. We arrived at 8:30 in the morning and left the hospital at 5:30. I have never had to hide my fear as much as I did that day. I wanted to be brave and positive, upbeat and supportive. During a quiet moment with the ENT I asked him how big the tumour was. On the wall was a poster of the ear. He stretched his arm wide around the poster - "that big" I blanched, and he immediately apologized. I'm just glad John didn't see that. We heard that this tumour was the size of a mandarin orange; that it was wrapped around the facial nerves and would likely cause them to be forever damaged; that his speech would be slurred; that he had an 80% chance of going blind due to the pressure the tumour was causing, (and John, an avid reader - really avid reader), and that he would definitely be deaf in one ear. We were buoyed by the fact that the tumour - an acoustic neuroma, is never malignant. His surgery was scheduled for the following Thursday - 1 week away, they didn't want to reschedule a patient who's surgery had already been postponed twice already. The next morning the Dr. called to say that John couldn't wait the week - it would be in 4 days.

The morning of John's surgery I felt God herself. It was early in the morning - about 6:30 or so I walked away from the hospital leaving John behind and I said to God: Okay God, I've done everything I can think of: found the best surgeons, got the answers I could get and I don't know what else I can do. I'm giving it over to you. I may have even lifted my virtual bundle of worries up. And the gentle breeze shifted and almost stopped, and I felt such peace after that. A peace that didn't promise everything was going to be okay, just a peace that whatever happened next wasn't mine to hold onto. I didn't need to hold on to this big worry alone. Have you ever felt all worry absolutely leave you? It is/was an awesome experience. The peace from that moment carried me through the day and long into the evening. Walking beside me throughout John's surgery was my mom - carefully watching me - ready to pounce on anyone who pushed me too much, distracting me when my worries got too big. She communicated to our loved ones. Throughout that long day, we were unable to get any word about how things were going - the check-ins we tried were fruitless - each time, the OR could not relieve anyone to pass on news. Not confidence inspiring words!

When I had asked John what his biggest fear was the night before his surgery, he told me it was the catheter - that was such a John answer - facing a life threatening, life altering surgery - would worry about a catheter. So... at about 11:30 that night, our neurosurgeon approached mom and I. His eyes were red and bloodshot, he looked exhausted. My heart went out to him. He told us some scary facts from the surgery but then took us to see John in recovery. The first bit of good news: no ICU required! I held John's hand and he roused just briefly when I called his name. He said, "I have a catheter." With tears in my eyes I told my mother he's going to be just fine. And he is.

This probably sounds like the end of the story - but it's not. While John got better, the kids got worse - their trauma leaking everywhere in our lives. John wasn't strong enough, so it was me -, just me parenting them through their responses - and it went on for months, actually years. When caring people would ask me how I was managing, I would say. What's behind me was terrible, where I am now is not much better, so I'm moving towards that small pinprick of light. While home was a refuge maybe only to John, outside of it we were cared for and cherished by so many people it's hard to list them all. The minor house league association who allowed me to pick Travis team so that he could be driven to hockey, to my teacher colleagues who collectively fed my family for 4 months! To my friends who allowed my news to be received second hand, and always welcomed me, no matter my state of mind. To my brother

who sheltered my very traumatized son in his home, to my father-in-law who came to the house every morning to get our two very distractible kids off to school for months until John could descend a staircase without losing his balance, to my parents whose home was a haven when I just needed to be a scared daughter and not a wife or mother. I realized that it was in the faces of those friends, acquaintances, and even strangers that I felt God. I felt held up by my community through God, I felt that even in this hardest of times I could still shine, and I felt my worries carried by others.

I have one other piece to this story that reaffirms my faith every time I share it. John was invited by his neurosurgeon to speak about his experience at a fundraiser. The fundraiser was called the Great Drake event. My dad upon hearing that, told me that his father, my opa, had been operated on by Dr. Drake, in London. The story goes that my grandfather had some sort of growth in his brain - cysts, abscesses, something like that. There was an experimental surgery that could be tried, but no one had lived through it so far. Would he want to try? He decided to have the surgery and he was the first Canadian patient to live! That surgery was the surgery used on John and our surgeon had trained under Dr Drake. My grandfather's leap of faith is what allowed his granddaughter's husband to live. God has a plan. We can't always see it. I know my grandfather couldn't have imagined the impact his decision to try out this crazy new surgery would have on his little world.

What scared me most about sharing this part of my journey with you is that you would see my challenges and pity me, I hope you to saw what I saw - the hand of God helping me, and my family. When I think back on this dark, hard, scary time, my strongest feeling is one of gratitude and praise. I don't believe God hands out challenges only to those who can handle it, nor do I think anyone should experience what we did - it was awful! But I do believe that through all of it I was protected and sheltered, that I was given strength when I had none left and that I was raised up and allowed moments in the sun because God was there beside me.