

Waiting...An Advent Reflection

When Fr. Michael first asked me to speak about waiting, I immediately started singing the Tom Petty song in my head, "The waiting is the hardest part!" 2013 has certainly been a year in which I had to do a lot of hard waiting. On February 27th, I had a biopsy to follow up on a suspicious mammogram. That night, I lay in bed waiting. The results would take a couple of days, but I knew in my heart it was cancer. I lay awake that night praying I was wrong. Praying I'd get the results before the weekend so Andy and I would not have to spend two extra days in this agonizing holding pattern. Only one of my prayers was answered. We heard the words, "It's cancer" on that Friday, spared the weekend waiting for results, but embarking on a harder wait. For twelve days I waited for my surgery desperately wanting the cancer out of my body. Desperately waiting to take some kind of action, get some sense of control back into my life. The truth is we have no real control over our lives. The only thing we have control over is our attitude towards what this life gives us.

During the days before my surgery, my body was in "fight or flight" mode. I was extremely anxious, unable to eat much, not sleeping much...just waiting. While we waited those 12 days, something wonderful happened. People began to hear my news and reached out to help me, comfort me, pray for me. People from near and far. People I see every day and those I have not seen in years. This outpouring of love buoyed my wait. I realized life happens while we are waiting. Blessings abound if we look for them. It was during this wait when I began to write, pouring my thoughts and feelings into my journal. A journal that was cathartic for me, but I've learned also spoke on a deep level to many. It was during this wait that I reached out to God and found the spirituality of my youth. We can spend our lives waiting or we can live life.

After my surgery, a new wait began. The wait for pathology reports to return. This was the hardest wait because the results could tell me whether or not I had a decent chance of living. Never in my life did I think I'd be waiting on such news at 46. My family all lives well into their 80's and 90's and no one has ever had cancer. During this wait, I often whispered, "Why me?" During this wait, at times, I shouted, "Why me?" But, it was also during this wait that friends offered us their beach house for a few days. We pulled the boys out of school and spent 4 cold, rainy glorious days on the Outer Banks. We laughed, played mini golf, flew a kite, stuck our toes in the cold ocean, ate seafood, and took deep breaths. Even while waiting for life or death results, my life was good. I could have shut myself away in worry, but because I decided to live while waiting, I got to enjoy an amazing four days with my three favorite people. This year, I learned I could let myself feel joy even when I was feeling grief, anger, and fear.

When the pathology report came back with clear lymph nodes we rejoiced, but the waiting was not over. The tumor indicated the cancer was very aggressive and fast growing so now we would wait for my aggressive treatment to begin. The next six months were filled with some

extremely hard waiting, but also many wonderful lessons. I waited for days upon days for chemo induced headaches to end, but I also learned I was strong enough to endure intense, seemingly unending pain. I lay in bed unable to take the boys out on fun summer outings waiting for them to return, but learned I have many people in my life willing to take my boys out for fun. I learned I could share their joy when they got home and sat on my bed and excitedly told me of their adventures. I waited to feel well enough to have a real conversation with Andy, engage in life, be a real partner, but I watched him live his “for better or worse” wedding vows without complaint day in and day out and learned once again how blessed I am to have said, “ I do” to this man. I waited to be able to eat something, anything that would taste decent, but learned I have friends who will drive an hour to buy me the exact hummus I liked or deliver homemade chicken soup and egg custard because they were the only things I could eat. I waited to feel well enough to go out with friends and enjoy life, but I learned you can enjoy friends when they come and sit on your porch with you, make you tea, sit quietly while you sleep. I waited for 6 months to be able to read without feeling dizzy or getting excruciating headaches, but I learned my sister loves me enough to lay in bed with me and read hundreds of pages of my favorite books to me. While I waited, I learned my life is filled with tons of love and I am blessed. I learned to embrace life while waiting for the bad to end.

We spend so much of our lives waiting for the good moments to happen or waiting for the bad things to end , I think it is easy to forget that life is happening while we wait. If we can be present to the moments passing us by while waiting we can find joy in the midst of pain, comfort in the midst of struggle, blessings in the midst of hardship. Life is blessed and hard and fun and sad and joyful all at once. If we wait thinking there must be something better, we don't get to enjoy the life right in front of us with all its ups and downs. My cancer treatment is over, but my waiting will never end. Right now, I wait for genetic test results that could lead to nothing or to hard decisions about further surgery. I have years of waiting for test results ahead of me hopefully confirming I continue to be cancer free. I've learned to not hold my breath waiting for the good or bad news. All this hard waiting has taught me that each day is a gift. I am no longer waiting in line, I've jumped on this roller coaster called life and enjoying the ride not knowing what is waiting down the tracks. After all, Advent is a time of dark waiting and look at the Divine gift we receive at the end.