

FIRST-PERSON: Don't waste your medical crisis

by Karen Allen, posted Friday, April 17, 2020 (10 days ago)



EDITOR'S NOTE: Karen Allen is the wife of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary president Jason K. Allen.

KANSAS CITY, Mo. (BP) -- A year ago, on April 11, 2019, my life was forever changed. Until that day, 2019 was a year marked primarily by busyness. Life and ministry with my husband and family was full. The days were good, but long. Daily, I raced through my to-do list. When reading God's Word, too often my heart wasn't still before Him. Rather, I found myself looking for a quick nugget of truth I could take with me to start my already full day.

A year earlier, my world had been rocked with my father's diagnosis of pulmonary fibrosis. I am the quintessential "daddy's girl." The thought of losing my father terrified me.

Medically, pulmonary fibrosis has no cure. Save a lung transplant, it's a death sentence for all who receive the diagnosis. Given his age of 76, my father wasn't an apparent candidate for a lung transplant. Yet, in God's kind providence, he did qualify. My parents quickly moved from Alabama to Duke University in North Carolina and began preparations for the transplant.

On March 16, 2019, my father received a single lung transplant. His surgery went surprisingly well. He didn't need a single blood transfusion and was out of ICU in less than 24 hours. The doctors were amazed at his progress, especially given his advanced age.

However, soon after he was discharged things began to go downhill. His lung capacity decreased; he regressed. I was confused, fearful and questioning God. In support of my mom, my two sisters and I took turns visiting them at Duke. The day after Midwestern Seminary's spring trustee meeting, I flew out for my turn -- medical mask in hand, not wanting to bring a pathogen to my immune-suppressed father.

I arrived at the hospital to find my father quite ill and my mother exhausted. She and I went to the hospital cafeteria for a quick bite of lunch. Since it was my 41st birthday, I opted to go "all out" for the taco salad. Afterward, however, my stomach felt like a washing machine, so I decided to skip dinner. That night my mom and I went back to their rental house and celebrated my birthday with ice cream and Easter candy. If you know me well, you know it was a perfect celebration!

The next morning, I awoke dizzy and nauseated. I wasn't that alarmed since I struggle with inner ear issues and had flown the day before. I drank a protein shake and hoped for the best. After entering the Duke Medical Center parking garage, it was a long walk to the hospital. I grew weaker still, so I stopped by the gift shop and purchased a sugary drink -- Hawaiian Punch fruit juice. In hindsight, that was a bad choice.

I grew worse by the minute. I was stricken with nausea and vomited up the Hawaiian Punch -- or so I thought. Alarmed, my mother shuttled me back to their rental house where I lay on the dark bathroom floor. My mother returned to be with my father, who remained in the hospital for tests.

Throughout the day, I deteriorated. Confident that what I had was a severe inner ear affliction, I took medication and went to bed, hoping to sleep it off.

However, in bed I continued to shake, weaken and grow fearful. I cried out to God for help like never before. Isaiah 26:3-5 came to my mind, then Psalm 23, and then it was as though I was listening to a recording of myself reading Philippians aloud. Strangely, I was calm and at peace. I fell off to sleep and slipped out of consciousness, where I continued to lose blood for the next five hours.

Thankfully, my mom found me at 2 a.m. and called 911. I have little recollection of the happenings around me other than chest and muscle pains and the weird feeling of something-like a PVC pipe going down my throat. I awakened to medical personnel standing over me. They peppered me with basic questions, but I couldn't find the answers.

A young ER doctor quickly diagnosed the cause. I was bleeding internally. In just a few hours, I'd lost more than 70 percent of my blood supply. I suffered from a ruptured ulcer (which I did not know I had). They proceeded to clamp the ulcer and gave me three cycles of blood transfusions.

I stayed in Duke's ICU for four days, meeting more physicians and nurses than I can count. After hearing my story, they'd all make a similar comment, referring to me as "one lucky person." I'd kindly remark how I didn't believe in luck but in the providence in God.

While in ICU, I had ample time to reflect on my life before the crisis. In candor, I'd questioned God's providence in my father's life, but while in ICU I began to see things more clearly, more biblically.

God's providence had kept me alive. My health crisis occurred while at Duke Medical Center, in immediate proximity to one of the premier medical centers in the world. I was placed on the seventh-floor ICU, just down the hall from my father. For days, we recovered together and rejoiced together in God's care and kindness through it all.

Through all of this, I learned much -- much that is applicable to any medical crisis, including COVID-19. First, when our bodies begin to fail, we learn the harsh realities of Genesis 3 in a personal way. No matter how healthy we eat or how much we exercise, we can't add to our numbered days (Psalm 139:16). Our life is a vapor. Death is always near.

Second, there's no fear like fear caused by a medical crisis. Yet, we can indeed trust our heavenly Father. He's all powerful, and He is good. As a society, COVID-19 has brought death near to us, but the pandemic crisis also gives Christians an opportunity to share the peace of Christ amid fear and death.

Third, every day is indeed a gift from God. When my alarm goes off in the morning, my first thought isn't my to-do list. It's that God has sustained me for another day. Prioritizing eternal things truly is most important, as is knowing every day is God's gift.

Fourth, a medical crisis can bring about lasting spiritual change. I'm praying the fear, disruption and tragedy COVID-19 is causing will awaken the church and our society to Christ.

Last year was the hardest year of my life. I spent it trying to regain the physical strength and energy I lost through my medical crisis. But everything I endured proved to be a gift. It changed my life in so many good ways. As a dear friend recently reminded me, there is nothing that strengthens our faith -- from pumice to granite -- like the hot coals of affliction.

I can personally attest that God is good. His providence cannot be improved upon. His perfect will is, in fact, for our good and His glory. When you or a loved one encounters a medical crisis, you can know this too. Don't waste your medical crisis.