

“Not As the World Gives...” Message for May 9, 2010

This has been one of the hardest weeks of my life...last Saturday morning after a quick counseling session with some newlyweds-to-be, I headed home and turned the corner on Oregon. Right in front of my mom’s house (she lives a mile away from me) sat two huge emergency vehicles and an ambulance. My nephew Billy, who lives with my mom, was standing in the front yard, looking scared and nervous. I jumped out of the car and asked what happened – and they said she was found non-responsive in the kitchen. Billy had gone for groceries, came home to find her face down on the floor, and called 911.

Well, this was the beginning of a roller-coaster ride that I’m sure most of you have experienced yourselves. Mom was down for the count for nearly two days – a massive stroke, the size of my fist, had occurred in the upper left side of her brain. She fell hard enough to cut her head and bruise her right shoulder – no broken bones, though, and the doctors told us – after CAT scan and X-rays, that it looked pretty serious.

We began to prepare our thoughts and our family for the worst – we began to make plans for her sendoff (because it would indeed have to be a celebration of her amazing life and strength). We pulled oxygen tubes and she was given morphine to make her comfortable – all according to her Living Will.

And then on the second day, as a nurse’s aide was straightening her cover sheet, she grabbed the girl’s arm and said in a loud, clear voice – “Leave me alone!”

You must know that this was the most amazing and shocking moment in my life. She was alive, and she was mad – and we put all the medicine and tubes back. She couldn’t speak well except for that one sentence and she drifted in and out because of the morphine, but she was still with us in some fashion, and we had to let her show us how much longer she would stay.

In the days that followed, she slept for very long periods and it seemed like she wasn’t coming back again (that “rally” everyone talks about?) – and she got a touch of pneumonia, which needs

antibiotics to treat. She found words – yes, no, water (she yelled for water one night) – and there were moments when we thought she was really on her way back.

The hospital nurses, who were very helpful and kind to her and to us, knew that she would have to go someplace else, because she had been put on the surgical floor where there were lots of beds on the weekend, but as the week went on, surgeries were scheduled and they wouldn't be able to care for her as well. So we called hospice, since she was pretty listless most of the time, - even the doctor thought it would be better for her.

In the midst of the emotional ride, I also was learning a lot about the medical system and how things work. Medicare pays for hospice if she needs skilled nursing care – right now, she absolutely does, but each day she comes back to life a little more and she's even starting to hold little conversations. It looks like we may be moving her to a nursing facility soon, because she won't need skilled care – and Medicare won't pay for that, though her insurance might pay for some.

I'm also learning about what happened to her. Stroke recovery can take up to four months – a person might need that long to allow the parts of the brain that were damaged to sort themselves out and return to what will be normal for them for the rest of their lives. And – here's where the roller coaster comes in – stroke recovery looks a lot like the final days of someone's life. There are long periods of inactivity and unresponsiveness. Breathing is raggedy and irregular. The person seems far away – but don't be fooled by a body lying quietly in bed.

My mom heard everything, and someday, we may have to explain our talk of her dying, her memorial service, and what she would want or like. She has become stronger each day – she knows she wants tapioca or chocolate pudding and asks for it. She knows who we are and calls us by name – she can express that she's hungry, and she told my sister that she didn't like my version of shrimp salad – I had forgotten the pickle relish she puts in hers.

Her right side is slowly returning some of its skills – the eyelid is lifting, she can almost smile with her whole face – her right leg looks like it can move around. We don't know for sure if she can see yet (the right eye is the only one that works, and it has glaucoma, so that may be her biggest challenge), and while her right arm still hasn't moved on its own, there's a chance it will come back.

And we've learned to watch out for that left arm – she's strong and she uses it to grab her sheets because she's frustrated at the catheter tube hooked to her leg, or when she holds the cup as she sips apple juice from a straw, or she holds my hand while I tell her the days' events. I treasure each moment – even when it's hard to take all this in.

This past week, I've spent a great deal of time with my mom, watching her, thinking about her and talking to her. The first few days, I was there almost 24/7; since she's been in hospice, I've felt more willing to leave her for the nights and attend to other parts of my life. As you can guess, I'm emotionally drained because I love her and hate to see her in this condition – and, there are so many people who need and want to know what's happening – communication during a time like this is an important piece. My sister and her husband have been very involved, and Donny has been the rock at home that I need to recharge. We are hopeful for her future – today, we will celebrate Mother's Day with her for a while after church, and this week, we may move her and settle her into a new home with people who will be sure she's as OK as she can be as we wait to see how much of the original Alice returns.

And through it all, my mind kept coming back to the Scripture I'd chosen for this Sunday...I choose it on Tuesday and decide on a title for the sermon, because we want to get it in the paper and that's their deadline, so there's always a little challenge in how things will go writing the sermon after giving it a name. So throughout the week, I think about the Scripture and let ideas pop in and out to help me when I begin to write on Saturday.

Here's one section that just kept playing in my head all week:

“My peace I leave you – not as the world gives, but as I give. Don’t worry, don’t be afraid...”

Jesus wished this for his friends on this, his last visit with them as he returned to his place with God. Jesus is God’s physical form and God’s voice – and he wanted to give his friends God’s absolute gift of Peace.

So, as I sat on hospital chairs and stood by my mom’s bedside, I thought about the Peace of Jesus – God’s Peace.

I thought about how I could never have come through this time without knowing God’s Peace, and I wondered how others who don’t believe manage to get through something similar without the safety net of God’s Love and Peace, because to my mind, the “world’s peace” is very different.

For some, peace in the world means having lots of things and possessions, lots of money and security, lots of friends and many relationships, being in control of all parts of life. There’s no room for God – room only for yourself and what you want and need. If all parts are in place, I suppose there might be some type of peace. But if something happens that shatters this shallow and false stability, the crash into reality – alone – without the Peace of Jesus – is a killer. Many people can’t handle true reality...there’s no safety net.

But God’s Peace – the Peace of Jesus – is the soft blanket of comfort that surrounds us and lifts us up, even when things are the worst they’ve ever been. Our hearts can ache, we can be bone-tired with worry, we might even fear for our lives – but if we have God in our souls, there’s a little space of God’s Peace that shimmers inside of us – reminding us that we aren’t alone – bringing a micro-second of comfort in the middle of turmoil and horror.

God’s Peace – the Peace of Jesus – encourages us to give up control of everything – it reminds us to accept whatever comes, because it will be what it is, and that’s OK. It tells us that “all will be well” and that this time of suffering and shock won’t last. God is there to take it over – and all we have to do is let God go

to work and trust the power that's stronger than ours.

God's Peace – the Peace of Jesus – comes in many forms that help us stay centered while the troubles swirl around us.

God's Peace is a hug from a stranger at Albertson's – cards and emails from friends who care – phone calls from a friendly and familiar voice– a gentle husband who lets you ramble and cry at odd times so you can hold it together for everyone else – and so much more.

My dear friends, I know as sure as I stand here that you have been the Peace of Jesus – God's Peace – for me this whole week. I know that you and anyone else you know and invited into my life, have been praying for my mom, for me and for my family as we make our way through this crazy and horrible time, sorting through all the emotions and levels of this ordeal. You've given your support naturally, because we who believe in God's Love will all experience times when we must give or receive the Peace of Christ. It's who we are – it's what we do.

And because of your love and kindness, I can say that I'm certain God's Peace is anything that comes from those who know God - and love God - and want to be God for you, just because. It's an amazing gift from Jesus to us – and you, dear friends, have shared it with me so generously.

I don't know how the future will play out with my mom, but I'm not worried or afraid because I felt and still feel, that undercurrent of love and quiet peace – God's Peace – the Peace of Jesus – alive in me, in you, and demonstrated in all we do and say.

God's Peace to you – thank you for your love.

Amen.