

July 12, 2021

Dear Praying Family and Friends,

Today I enter the hospital for infusion cycle No. 3 (five days hooked to an IV pole). It may prove to be a busy week, so I'm going to send out this update now before I depart for the hospital.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Overall, the first week of my two-week respite went well: routine lab work came back great! So good that I ventured out to a picnic with the alums of St. Athanasius Anglican Church on July 3.
- A huge surprise and blessing overwhelmed me on June 29 - a much loved comrade in ministry - Pastor Tim Bayly - suddenly appeared in Waxahachie to retrieve my library which I have donated to his church's pastor training program. We spent a very rich evening of fellowship, and I received much needed encouragement and counsel about end-of-life challenges. What a blessing!
- Tuesday of the second week I had a nasty surprise (see below for details) - I needed to promptly undergo a [lumbar puncture, to insert a dose of methotrexate](#) into my spinal column! Also, they would search for evidence that the lymphoma had invaded my central nervous system.
- On Thursday I was majorly gobsmacked at how painless a lumbar puncture is. Three cc's of spinal fluid were removed for analysis, and three cc's of methotrexate were injected. Forty-eight hours later I detect none of the potential side effects.
- I am scheduled for a PET scan on July 21 - to assess how effective the previous cycles of chemo have been.

WHEN PATIENTS ARE IN THE DARK

I fear these updates will be littered with complaints about medical care. This is deplorable because the vast majority of the medical personnel I encounter are extravagantly helpful, competent, polite, skillful, and compassionate. Yet, I nevertheless encounter "speed bumps" that generate confusion and alarm, especially in a patient facing a life-terminating illness. I've related a couple of these speed bumps in a previous update. Here's another:

On Tuesday, July 6, about 8:00 PM, I received this message at my patient portal on the internet. This message came from my oncologist's chief assistant.

I had called you today because I wanted to inform you that, per the doctor's plans you were supposed to have Intrathecal chemotherapy which is chemo administered via lumbar puncture with each cycle. This is to treat any lymphoma proactively if they were to spread to your brain and Central nervous system. You have missed the dose with last two cycles, and the doctor would like to catch up on the dose missed. We would want to give one dose of intrathecal chemo prior to your next admission to the hospital. Please let us know when will be a convenient time this week to have it done.

Several things disturbed me as I read this message:

- This was the **first** I had ever heard about “intrathecal chemotherapy.”
- This was the **first** I had ever heard about a lumbar puncture.
- I had, evidently, “missed” two doses of this! Why? How? To what consequence?

Contacting the clinic the next day, I learned that methotrexate would be infused. [Google's opinion about this drug isn't exactly encouraging](#), especially when you propose to bathe the brain in the stuff!

Feeling as if I were leaping from a cliff without seeing any safety net to catch me, I went to the imaging center of the hospital. I enlisted some “emergency” prayer support from family and one prayer supporter who'd already trod this path in her own frequent bouts with a different but deadly cancer. Her on-point comment was that though I didn't know much about what was going on, our Lord does.

Just before the procedure, I had an unexpected consultation with my oncologist. I discovered that I had not missed anything! The lumbar puncture was delayed until two cycles of chemo were completed, in order to reduce the concentration of cancer in my body. This reduces the possibility of “spillage” - when cancer in one part of the body gets spread to a different part of the body by surgical procedures.

In other words, my oncologist did not want the needle that enters my spinal chord to carry with it a few lymphoma cells that would then “colonize” my central nervous system. Surely, you can see what would have avoided those couple of days of high anxiety for me.

In that consultation before the lumbar puncture, I learned even more about my “therapy plan.” Specifically, I learned that [I will have a PET scan](#) on Wednesday the 21st. This will show us how well the previous cycles of chemotherapy have worked (or not). The report from the PET scan will determine the next steps in therapy.

The point: all this could have been (or, *should* have been) discussed with me *at the outset of therapy*. It wasn't.

Why not?? Perhaps because I did not get “cranky” enough to press for every possible detail. On the other hand, as a seminary professor used to tell us, “There's a parable in there somewhere.”

THE PARABLE HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT

That seminary professor's advice from 50 years ago is true! The world and all it contains is full of the glory of the Lord. This is the message of Psalm 19:1-6. And, embedded in all that glory is a flood of parables. The cancer-smart supporter I mentioned earlier pointed to the parable I'm considering here when she told me “Though you didn't know much about what is going on, our Lord does.”

What vexed me so much? Well, it was the way my chief therapists played their therapy cards so close to their chests. This inevitably leads to surprises for the patient, and surprises are usually not happy ones.

But consider - how much of what lies ahead has the Lord revealed to me? For that matter, how much of the remainder of *your* life has the Lord told you is coming? James warns us against presumption in chapter 4:14ff -

... you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that." But now you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.

And, so, I wonder - How much of my vexation with my untalkative physician is simply a frustration with our Lord's *emphatic refusal* to lay out before me all the details of my remaining life? Both of them - my oncologist and our Lord - withhold to themselves information that we would dearly love to have. *And who withholds the most information?* Whose knowledge of the future do we desire more than anything to know?

Are we, therefore, left *entirely* in the dark? No we're not. The Lord has left us two things.

First, there is the record of His dealings with His creatures, recorded in the Scriptures. There we may watch how He deals with mankind, and a host of individual men and women, vile sinners and holy saints and everything in between.

Second - and this is often harder to "read" than reading the Bible - there are our own memories of how our Lord has managed the details of our lives up to the present. Note that both these records of our Lord's interactions with all sorts of people, nations, and ourselves - *all of it is in the past*. We have the record of our Lord's dealings with mankind and ourselves. It's all in the past.

And, what of the future? So very, very little of the future is ever shown to us. We are promised things at the end of history - a glorious resurrection like our Lord's own resurrection. Yet, even that is murky from the standpoint of the present. John says:

Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. (1 John 3:2).

AND SO, THIS PARABLE TEACHES US . . .

So, here we are in the present. The future - though it appears far away (and possibly is very distant in the future) - that future has a shape, an outline, a sketch to it, drawn by the promises of our Lord.

But, the next five minutes? The next five hours? Or days? Or weeks?

No. from those perspectives, the near future is actually, truly blank, though we *suppose* we know how it will proceed.

What then? On what do we depend? How may we live without fear, without anxiety? We may do so only insofar as we know and trust the One in Whose hands the future rests. We do not know what the future holds for us, except far out there. Nearby? Nope - we're ignorant of that. But, our Lord knows, and it is on Him we put our trust.

For that reason we make our prayers to Him, asking for good things from the one who pointed out to us another parable found in an ordinary father - "What man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent?" (Matt. 7:9ff)

Because of that parable of an ordinary father, we pray to our Father in heaven. "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. ... If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him!" (Matt. 7:7-8, 11).

Thank you all, then, for praying for me, for Barbara, and for my extended family. We are all indebted to you for the good things that have come my way in this medical adventure.

Much love in Him,

Fr. Bill Mouser