

Learning to Live Again

by Vicki Hogge

If anyone had told me that I was going to be on this particular journey with its many challenges, changes and opportunities I would surely have said no, not me! Like many of you, my life has been filled with all of those things. The one thing that has remained steady throughout has been my love for Jesus Christ.

I would like to share my latest challenge and how I have done my best to do my best as I have faced the struggles of being told you have pancreatic cancer and maybe six months to live. As everyone may recall in the beginning of the year 2020 the Covid virus began its March across the United States. At that time, I was among other things the educator at the hospital where I worked. I had already made plans to retire at age 65 in July of that year because I wanted to be home with my husband who had been diagnosed several years ago with normal pressure hydrocephalus and had surgery and a VP shunt placed to control the excess spinal fluid collected in his brain. As this had gone multiple years without diagnosis there was indeed some brain changes and damage due to the excessive pressure. All I wanted to do was retire and come home and be able to do things with him to help make his life easier and just go out on a weekend and have fun, see the countryside, do the things I was doing at my church and to continue to try to make the very best of our lives and serve Jesus. Evidently God was ready with Plan B while I watched my plan A fall apart.

So much for a little bit of history as I try to tell you about how God is carrying me through a six-month journey which has so far turned into over 900+ days. I was blessed enough to work with one of my very best friends who help me in those first days to stop and prioritize where I was and what needed to be done. You see, even though the spiritual part of this journey is the most important part, there was still the practical part of taking care of my family. After all, over the past 30 years I have been a caregiver by trade, and I was not about to let something like cancer stop me in my tracks.

I had decided that I would postpone my retirement and try to help get through the initial unknowns of Covid. Virtual telemedicine was just getting into place when I received a call from my primary care doctor that I was behind having my diabetes checked and if I be interested in a telemedicine visit. When the secretary called to scheduled us, I must say I laughed and thought they needed practice before they went out with the general public so I agreed. The next morning bright and early my doctor phoned in to my iPhone since I've known him for a very long time. We chatted for a moment before he asked me, Vicki what's the matter you don't seem right. How much weight have you lost? Those were the words that changed my life that day.

I complained a bit about abdominal pain that went to my back and told him that I probably hadn't been taking the very best care of myself, so he ordered a bunch of tests. This was miracle number one - there was no reason for his office to call me and looking at a tiny telephone screen was hardly reason to order some tests. Working at the hospital sometimes did have its quirks and I was able to schedule my lab work as well as my CT scan. The scan had to be approved so that was a day of waiting. No big deal for me. I was there working anyway so I waited for the call from Registration, and I was finally told that I had been approved. So, at 4 o'clock, I went down to radiology and had my scan done. It was right after that that they called me from Registration and said there's been a mistake, and that the scan had

not been approved by my insurance. What do you do now? I did not have the thousands of dollars it was going to cost with my private insurance. Scans done, lab work completed, and the day's work finished.

I left for home at 4:30 PM. I barely got in the door when my phone rang. It was my primary care doctor. My recollection is that he was crying and I immediately sat down in my chair to wait to hear the news and see. I didn't think it could be good. The words came at me like a brick, 'Vicki, do you have pancreatic cancer?' We have to get a rush on this because most people don't survive very long. I called my daughter Kristin who lived across the street and ask her to please come as quickly as she could to my house. I didn't want to put things off. I had to have a plan.

The next two to three months seemed a blur. Kristin had run across the street knowing something wasn't quite right by the tone of my voice when she walked in and I told her honey just please sit down. I need your help with something. I was crying she knew that there was something unusually wrong and I asked her if she knew how to set up a zoom call because that technology for me was also new. We did and we called her brother and her sister as it was important to me that everybody was on the same page at the same time. With that I told them what the suspicion was of pancreatic cancer and that my primary care physician had already set up for me to have a biopsy done to confirm. That indeed was another miracle because as any of you know when you're trying to get a test scheduled, it doesn't always happen as quickly as we think it should. The confirmation from my biopsy was pancreatic cancer. All we could do now was pray that it had not spread. In just a matter of a few weeks I was on an aggressive pathway of chemo hoping it would respond and buy me some time! I was told I was not a candidate for surgery. So with love, prayers, and support from my family, church family and friends I tried to make sense out of what was happening. How much life can you jam in six months? The first thing is to realize that you were just given the gift of six months.

The next few days were quite surreal. I couldn't believe that this was happening to me, and like so many of us do, I questioned and I prayed to "God! God, why me! Why me!", with tears in my eyes. The answer was easy, why not you Vicki? You're no different than anyone else...and then the peace that came with it...I Am with you. I learned long ago that everyone has something that is burdensome to them. This would be mine if I allowed it to be. However, I had decided that I was going to fight this cancer and beat the odds.

My family and I went through the practical parts of having a terminal illness. We got second opinions. We went to the lawyer to make sure we had wills and power of attorney'. We even went to the funeral home because I did not want to leave that burden on my children. We went to the extreme of selling our homes, and buying one that would accommodate all seven of us. As I mentioned before, Bubba would not be able to live by himself, and he needed to be in a place where he was comfortable and safe. Things moved quickly, and by the first week of July, I was already receiving my chemotherapy. I had received a nice new port-a-Cath and medication was infusing hopefully to kill my cancer. Unfortunately, what happened next was not what we expected.

I became gravely ill from the chemotherapy and was hospitalized. Those days are a blur and quite honestly, I don't believe I would want to remember them. My oncologist, hospitalist, and primary care physician all thought the only thing that would bring me back from the brink would be a miracle. My

prayer warriors did not give up on me nor did my family. Kristin would sit by my bedside and sing, and as she sang, she was saying, come on mom, sing with me. I felt peace. Peace. Only the peace that God can bring. I spent my birthday that year of 2020 looking out the window to the best surprise ever! It is one of the few things I remember of that hospitalization, but my family and my church choir, all of whom I love so dearly, stood outside my hospital window to sing me happy birthday! I loved you all then and I love you all now!

Sitting here on my couch, and looking back at that time, it's difficult to believe that I actually survived during that time frame. The chemotherapy caused me to be neutropenic with high fevers, and no white count to fight off whatever was attacking my body but once again, the prayer warriors came through. Prayer wins. Slowly I began to recover from the chemotherapy and gave my body a break. My oncologist and I discussed things and decided that we would go a different route with a different chemotherapy. Fortunately for me, this would be a much better formula. The chemotherapy shrunk my tumor and put me in a category where I was eligible to have surgery to have the tumor removed. We were very excited with the prospect of being able to get that cancer out of my body.

During this time, I was set up and began having radiation treatments on the radiation oncology department at VCU. But of course, with every move forward there, it is a chance of two steps back. I became eligible for a clinical trial that they were offering at VCU and luckily for me I was eligible to participate. The clinical trial consisted of having tiny radiation seeds, implanted around the surgical site to kill any remaining cancer cells that may have not been seen. The only setback would be if they found metastasis anywhere which would then bring the surgery to a halt.

My surgeon had on his superman socks, which I had provided for him before the surgery, and as we wheeled out of the room into the suite, I told him if he didn't mind before he closed me up after the surgery, "Would you please fix that baseball size hernia just above the surgery site?" All looked good and we were closing things up, hernia was repaired, and a sample sent to the lab. Lord, thank you for allowing them at that point to find the metastasis so that we could further address it.

Recovering from the surgery wasn't so bad I was just anxious to get home. But aren't we all, when we have to have something done, and we are away from those folks that love us and who are there to take care of us? This surgery was done on St. Patrick's Day, 2022. The surgeon was very hopeful that all the cancer had been removed. We did repeat CT scans, which showed no evidence of disease. That's what everybody wants to hear when they have cancer. No evidence of disease continuing on because now I busted the record of that six-month amount of time to live, I was moving on into my second year again, one of God's miracles.

My first scan was done in April. It was followed by a second scan the first part of June. That was when I got the phone call from my Radiology Oncology's saying she just couldn't believe it but that my cancer had spread to the peritoneal lining of my abdomen. What did that mean? The peritoneal lining is the fabric if you will which holds in all of your abdominal organs. Anywhere the lining touched had the potential to be a new site for a cancerous tumor. This is where my struggle took on a whole new level.

This news was certainly not welcomed but just another challenge in this walk with cancer. I was back on chemo and experiencing the challenges that came along with that. Every two weeks I would go back to the wonderful girls at OPIC at RGH. I was disappointed but continued to take every day as a

blessing from God that I had another day to be with my family and friends; and if you know me well to also enjoy another day with my new hobby of chicken farming!

Another twist was that instead of me retiring to stay home and take care of Bubba, he took over taking care of me. Our love for one another grew stronger as our dependency on each other became more evident. God had provided us another opportunity to share our love. This wasn't easy for me. As a longtime caregiver, it isn't easy to turn loose and let someone else take over some of those duties. The days I had been given past that six-month deadline (excuse the pun) were filled with illness, chemo, scans, doctor visits, good news and bad news but the one thing that stood out above the rest was the prayers of the people and God's peace and hope. I was able to attend my granddaughter's wedding, attend competition gymnastics meets, enjoy many visits from my family, church family, work family and meet new friends. Another Christmas has come and gone filling me with the joy of Christ's birth. None of these things and many more have not been taken for granted.

About six weeks ago my oncologist approached me with news that I wasn't ready to hear. The chemo we were using to hold the cancer at bay was no longer effective. He was stopping it because the cancer was growing and spreading and not responding to the treatment. He had one more treatment up his sleeve for us to try but this would take another one of God's miracles. This medication would be used as an off-label treatment. As an off-label treatment, my insurance would not cover any of the expense. As you all know, chemotherapy and immunotherapy, and all of these therapies are quite expensive. So, I had to make a decision as to whether or not to pursue having the medication available to me. We were able to apply for compassionate care for this medicine and then, if approved, it would not cost me anything and I would be able to receive the medicine based on the fact that I was unable to pay for it.

Several weeks went by and I heard nothing. The day I was supposed to receive the first treatment nothing was approved so my friend and I spent several hours doing follow up work and paperwork and by the end of that day the approval came through, and I was able to receive the medication the very next morning. God works all the time. He saw my need, he knew my desires. He heard my cry, and he answered me. I have currently received two doses of this medication called Enhurtu which is designed to attack the cancer cell genetically. I'm not sure of all of those details. We will see with this spring through as we continue on our journey. However, it turns out one thing's for sure. God has got this.