

Let's Go Deeper
Wednesday, June 21, 2017
David Shirey



I'm at the Montreat (NC) Worship & Music Conference this week with Jennie, John and Brenda Peterson, Bill and Jane Johnson, and Janet Scott. A week of workshops, worship, and evening musical presentations, the brochure for the event billed the week as follows:

Together we will explore the many dimensions of this amazing affirmation: God is with us in the one we call Jesus, Emmanuel; our baptism is a sign that we belong to God; God is with us even when we don't recognize it; God is close enough to wipe away every tear; God's comforting presence is with us even in the valley of the shadow of death; God is with us always, even to the ends of the earth.

The Rev. John Wurster, the Conference Preacher, told a story about coming home from a church meeting one night to find out that Florence, a church member, had been taken to the hospital. He went right away and met Florence's daughter, June, in the intensive care unit. It was about 11:00 p.m. and they were about to take Florence into surgery. They went into her room, said a prayer, and away she went. John and June then went to the waiting area outside the ICU.

It was a long night, occasionally interrupted by reports from the operating room about how things were going: Bleeding stopped. Tumor found. Tumor removed. More tumors found. Meanwhile, the hours went by as pastor and parishioner talked. John remembered the long night as one of uncertainty and anxiety. The hours went by slowly as they talked in the waiting area.

Opposite them was a large window. It looked to be stained glass, but because it was dark outside and light inside and because of the angle, it was impossible to detect what was depicted in the glass.

About 4:30 a.m., Florence returned from the recovery room. They saw her briefly, then John and June went home.

Later that day, he went to the hospital. He passed through the waiting area where he had spent much of the night. As he walked through, he glanced over to the window and stopped in his tracks at what he saw. Now brightly illumined by the mid-day sun, the window shone brightly-- a brilliant rendering of Jesus, praying on his knees.

When John got back to the church, he called June to check in. The first thing she said to him was, "Did you see the window in the daylight? The picture of Jesus? We couldn't see it during the night, yet it was still there the entire time."

Said the preacher, "Isn't it something that we couldn't see Jesus during the long night we kept vigil for Florence, yet he was there the entire time?"

I attended an afternoon preaching workshop later that day with John and a couple dozen other pastors. As we talked about the sermon, one of the class members named Bill said, “I’m glad it turned out all right for Florence. I was in a serious car accident a few years ago and my family sat up all night as I underwent surgery. It turned out all right for me, too, but as we know, it doesn’t always.”

He continued, “Several years ago I visited one of my members, an early middle-aged single mother in our church who had been diagnosed with skin cancer. During the time period she was going through biopsies to determine what type of cancer it was, she said to me, ‘It’s gonna be all right. I have a twelve-year-old daughter to raise.’ I nodded my head in support of her hope. We prayed.”

The next week she learned the cancer was malignant and aggressive. Bill said he shook his head at the thought of his parishioner, far too young to die, and her twelve-year-old daughter. He confessed he dreaded going to see the woman. What would he say? What *could* he say? What could he pray?

He made an appointment to visit her at home. She welcomed him into the front room. He sat down. As he hemmed and hawed for an appropriate word, he saw a framed photograph of a father and mother with an adolescent girl.

“Is that you?” Bill asked the woman.

“Yes,” she said, “That’s me and my parents before my daddy died. I was twelve.”

Bill said, I thought to myself, “She lost her father when she was twelve and now she’s dying and has a twelve-year-old daughter. Dear Lord, have mercy.”

Before I could say a word, she said to me, “Pastor Bill, it’s gonna be all right.”

“Oh boy,” I thought to myself, “She’s holding fast to a hope in a miraculous cure.”

Then she said, “Though I lost my daddy when I was twelve, everything turned out all right for me after all. Our church surrounded my mother and me with so much love and support. And over the years, all the things I was taught at church sustained me and strengthened me. I know my daughter will have the same embrace by our church. Her faith will sustain her, too. It’s gonna be all right.”

Bill said, “It was that day I saw how God can transform our prayers and hopes in ways beyond our imagining or understanding. I would never say to someone, ‘It’s gonna be all right’ because that phrase sounds too Pollyannaish-- a cheap cliché. But that day I heard and understood that phrase in a whole new light. When that fiercely faithful woman said, “It’s gonna be all right,” she spoke with an indisputable authority that I have never, ever forgotten.”

Nor will those of us who heard Bill’s story.

Even in the darkest moments when we cannot make out the presence of a loving God, Christ is present on bended knee alongside us.

She told her preacher, “It’s gonna be all right.” He told me and now I’ve told you.