In the Eye of the Storm

Danelle van Daalen 2 April 2019



The date was 21 September 2018, and we had just received the exciting news that we were pregnant! It was the beginning of a new chapter in our lives, and outside of a crackling feeling in my lungs during my first trimester of pregnancy, I didn't really have any concerns at all. My gynaecologist said the crackling feeling was probably just as a result of postnasal drip. However, a while later, I contracted a severe cold that left me with a bad cough that simply would not heal.

On the night of the 13th of January 2019, I felt a searing pain shoot up the left side of my body towards my neck, and I knew that something wasn't right. I was booked into the hospital the following day, with the doctor thinking it was a possible blood clot, but soon we were to discover that there was a huge tumour situated between my lung and the membrane around it (pleura), measuring 13cm x 8.5cm x 6.5cm. It was compressing my left lung to less than half capacity. Soon thereafter it was confirmed to be a malignant, cancerous growth.

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The news came as a shock. I had been diagnosed with cancer before, in 2010, in a different part of my body – a very rare type of cancer called Synovial Sarcoma. That experience was instrumental in my recommitment to Jesus, and He did an incredibly deep work in my life over that time. Interestingly enough, since then I had had the conviction that if the cancer ever reoccurred, it would be because the Lord wanted to do more work in and through me.

The days after my diagnosis were marked by faith in the face of adversity as the medical facts stacked up against us. Psalm 91 says, 'Those who live in the shelter of the Most High will find rest in the shadow of the Almighty. This I declare about the Lord: He alone is my refuge, my place of safety; he is my God, and I trust him. For he will rescue you from every trap and protect you from deadly disease. He will cover you with his feathers. He will shelter you with his wings. His faithful promises are your armour and protection.' This Psalm was given to us repeatedly as a constant reminder that Jesus was lovingly lifting us above the storm. I realise now that we were learning to hold onto and stand on God's promises and to have faith in His character and absolute goodness. We were witnesses of His power and might fighting on our behalf!

The new growth in my lung was the same type of cancer (Synovial Sarcoma), which had spread from the original site. We were swamped with a whirlwind of information and had to learn a lot in a very short space of time! Having cancer again was tough on its own, but being 21 weeks pregnant at the same time made the situation even more complicated and extremely dangerous. It would have been best to have the tumour removed immediately, but that presented a very high risk for our baby. Hoping to delay this massive operation for as long as possible (for our little one's sake) we opted, in faith, to wait. We would carefully monitor baby, myself and the tumour's growth-rate week by week.

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I saw God's hand once again in our referral to one of the very best thoracic surgeons available, an incredibly lovely man who made us feel safe and secure. Sadly, our next scan 3 weeks later was disheartening. The tumour had grown about 25% in 3 weeks, was taking up most of my lung space and was close to pressing against my heart. Gratefully, however, the scan also revealed that the two spots on my right lung had disappeared – an answer to prayer! We understood then that we had no choice but to operate and remove the growth as soon as possible to save both mine and our baby's lives. The neonatologist informed us that surgery held a significant risk for our baby, who would be 25 weeks (around 6 months) at the time.

A month after first discovering the cancer, and 4 days before my operation to attempt to remove it, I felt God prompt me to lead worship at church that Sunday. God was so faithful! Despite having struggled so much with my voice, thanks to growth in my chest, I managed to sing out strongly, every note a miracle of faith. The Holy Spirit was very present as I led. It was a night of spiritual warfare, in unity with the congregation as they prayed for us once again. I knew that God was going ahead of us, that He would always be present.

The surgery fell on Valentine's day 2019, and I would be lying if I said that I wasn't scared! A team

of specialists were involved in the operation – our thoracic surgeon, the sarcoma specialist from 2010, his assistant, two anaesthetists, and my obstetrician. Everything had to be calculated perfectly.

Steadying our hearts, we listened to the whole list of possible complications. The head anaesthetist explained that they would monitor my blood pressure carefully during surgery, as any significant drop could starve our little girl of blood flow and oxygen. She would be monitored throughout the operation for any signs of distress or early labour. Their biggest concern was loss of blood – usually for open heart surgery bleeding they have 3 units of blood on standby, but for me they would have 4 units of blood! This surgery would put me at very real risk of death. We (my husband, Frits, and I) listened carefully, whilst holding on to the truth that God had it all in His hands! I knew the doctors were saying that there was a chance that I would not wake up, but God had spoken promises over us as a family– including our little girl! We were holding onto His promises, and as I was wheeled into surgery I focused on that and tried not to cry as I said what could possibly be my last goodbye to Frits.

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Our God is faithful. He was with me through every bit of the operation, just as He had promised! As I woke up after the surgery, they told me that it went very well and that my baby had miraculously slept through most of the procedure. The good news washed over me and refreshed my soul. God had performed a massive miracle…just how big of a miracle we would only realise later when meeting with the obstetrician!

The first 24 hours after the surgery were the most crucial for baby and they continued to monitor her carefully. My blood pressure stabilized (eventually), and it took a while for my left lung to fully expand again. Severe pain marked my 4 nights in ICU, and 2 nights in the general ward after the operation. God sent incredibly kind nurses to take care of me, as well as loving church members to pray with me. I managed to walk around within 5 days, a milestone in my recovery. Our little girl was also being monitored every morning and every evening, and we delighted to see her become livelier and livelier as time passed. In less than a week after my operation, I was happy to be released to go home.

At our baby girl's first check-up post-surgery, the obstetrician told us that we were on the receiving end of many miracles and that we must have had many people praying for us. The miracles included: our baby's brain being completely healthy despite the real risk of haemorrhaging during the operation, with no indications of any complications with the placenta or amniotic fluid. She had also gained about 300g in less than 2 weeks after the removal of the

tumour, where before she had only gained 10 – 20g a week due to the tumour stealing all her nutrients. We realised afresh that I, and our baby, could have died. But God had faithfully carried us both safely through this incredibly dangerous time – our miracle-working God!

> I have a plan for you. It's gonna be wild, it's gonna be great, it's gonna be full of Me.

Now, almost six weeks after that operation, we find ourselves in the middle of this God-story. Our baby girl will be born via Caesarean section at about 32 weeks on the 2nd of April 2019, and thereafter I will begin with radiation therapy. They will do a CT scan of my entire body to ensure that there are no further growths, as that would mean that I may need to undergo chemotherapy (we are praying and trusting that this will not be necessary). We are both hopeful and yet realistic, knowing that the next season will be challenging with 6 – 8 weeks of daily radiation therapy for myself at a hospital, about 30 minutes from our home, as well as our little girl receiving premature baby care in the NICU at a different hospital, about 15 minutes from our home. God continues to reassure me from Joshua 1:9 with this: 'This is My command – be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid or discouraged. For the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.' This may not be the road I would have chosen, yet I now walk it knowing that He is with me!

A word was sent to me on the 26th of January 2019 saying that God would use our situation to break open a flood of the supernatural in the wider church; an overflow of the work of His Spirit. That the breakthrough would come, not only for us, but for the whole body of believers. We believe that our circumstances are an opportunity to glorify God's name, and seeing how people are touched by our story makes it all worth it. It's a humbling yet wonderful experience!

I recall how the Lord dropped the song 'Come away with Me' (United Pursuit)[1] into my heart, even before we were certain that the growth was indeed cancerous. He said to me, 'Come away with Me. Come away with Me. I have a plan for you. It's gonna be wild, it's gonna be great, it's gonna be full of Me. So open up your heart and let me in.'

I have done so. I am walking with Him, my hand in His strong, almighty one, and I am trusting Him, step by step, to see us through.

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[1] Come Away With Me