

Christmas, 2008

Dear Family and Friends:

I've heard the Christmas story so many times I can recite it by rote, even in my memory's present state of disability. The angels appear to shepherds tending their flocks in the Palestinian fields and proclaim the message: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom His favor rests." This past year, the meaning of this peace was underscored by the rhythm of His grace in our lives.

At a routine checkup in early July, the doctors found masses on Dottie's ovaries and three larger masses near her liver, colon, and stomach. Tests aplenty followed in rapid succession leading up to an exploratory surgery on July 30. The doctors suspected an advanced stage of ovarian cancer but did not find that to be the case. They diagnosed it as pseudomyxoma peritonei (PMP). It took me three weeks to learn how to spell that. More tests followed preparing for a larger, more regional surgery on September 4. It turned out that Dottie had appendix cancer with peritoneal diffusion (closely related to PMP). It was a very extensive surgery, lasting many hours and entailing an 11-day stay in the hospital.

I wish I could say that we found resting in His peace to be an easy assignment. What a pile of false bravado that would be! The doctors had to assume the worst and that was grim indeed. A support group (PMP Pals), however well-meaning, reinforced that picture. Our mood was one of pervading anxiety interrupted at times by stark, raw fear.

Dottie is doing quite well. It will be a good while before she's back to anything near normal, but her prognosis is very good, and we are hopeful of a complete recovery. God has been incredibly good to us in an early detection of an extremely rare condition, in the excellent care that we have received, and in the many prayers and expressions of concern of family and friends.

More than any of these, our greatest blessing has been the opportunity to preach the gospel of peace to ourselves afresh and anew when our complete dependence on God became so very apparent. That brings us to the Christmas message that I have heard so often and have understood so poorly.

In the Old Testament, the concept of peace is often conveyed by the Hebrew word *shalom*. It is such a rich term that when a group of scholars translated the Old Testament into Greek two millennia ago, they used three different words to capture its nuance. One was *eirene*, a word meaning peace in the sense of an absence of, or transcendence over, conflict. *Shalom* certainly conveys that sense, but far more. Another term they used was *telios*, which means bringing a thing to its intended end or purpose. *Shalom* accompanies fulfilling one's essence. The third word they used was *soteria*. This Greek word is commonly translated salvation and means to be delivered and made whole.

He came that we might have peace—despite conflict with disease, or people, or hard-edged circumstances. He brought peace in redeeming us to our intended end despite ourselves and our silly and self-centered detours. He preached peace in His gracious provision of salvation, in His offer to make us whole amid our brokenness.

RV stockpiled the following quote long before cut and paste were buttons on a computer screen:

Let me but live my life from year to year,
With forward face and unreluctant soul;
No hurrying to, nor turning from the goal;
Not mourning for the things that disappear in the dim past,
Nor holding back in fear from what the future veils;
But with whole and happy heart,
That pays its toll to youth and age
And travels on with cheer.

The quote radiates what the Hebrews meant by *shalom* and what Jesus came to give us. The years have sobered me out of my youthful glibness. Just how do you live that way when you stare into the void? This year we experienced a deep sense of our brokenness and in our anxiety and fear found peace an elusive thing except in the hands of the Peacemaker.

Christmas speaks to the presence of the Peacemaker. This is a visited planet; we are not left home alone. Our journey is not a purposeless, meandering pathway. There is a God who is there every step of the way, and He took on human skin to show the way. We are so thankful for a season to celebrate that reality.

From our family to yours: Merry Christmas and Happy New Year.