

Isaiah 35:1-8a  
James 5:7-10

St. John's Presbyterian Church  
Devon, Pennsylvania, 19333  
Victor M. Wilson, D.Min., Pastor

Third Sunday in Advent  
December 16, 2007

## Why We Pray

"Strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of fearful heart,  
'Be strong, do not fear. Here is your God'." *Isaiah 35:3-4a*

There are three "Isaiah's" in the book of that name, each writing respectively through the invasion of Judah, then people's exile in Babylon, and ultimately their return to their homeland.

Our reading comes from the first of them, "Isaiah of Jerusalem," when terror in the form of the Babylonians threatened their nation's very existence. Isaiah knew full well what the people, especially their leaders, had been reluctant to hear: predictions that they would be driven into exile. For seventy years virtually none of the original captives would return, including Isaiah. But God promised that they *would* return. But for the interim, God said, "Strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of fearful heart, 'Be strong, do not fear. Here is your God'." This is from the assigned lectionary text for the day that Liz Ward read earlier. It is a text with a special reference for me insofar as I did not choose it; this Sunday, it chose me. It is a text that speaks of darkness, exile and return to the light.

This past week for my family was on an emotional, physical, and spiritual roller-coaster. We moved from crisis to joy to crisis and finally to joy again. We journeyed from anticipating our first grandchild some five and a half week hence, to an emergency C-section when Carolyn's blood pressure soared above 180 over 120. Then from the birth of Ellie McKay, a beautiful, healthy preemie girl of 4lb 9oz, to Carolyn's spiraling through preeclampsia into a very scary condition called HELLP Syndrome where the liver shuts-down, blood pressure soars, and the body stops making platelets when it most needs them, so there are no clotting resources to counter even a slight hemorrhage. Blissfully, Carolyn and Michael had chosen an exceptional medical center in Washington D.C., Sibley Memorial Hospital near Georgetown. Even so, while we were there, soon after Ellie's birth we came within a couple of hours of losing Carolyn.

We got the initial news of the need for an emergency C-section a little after midnight on Monday night, and by 1 a.m. were speeding down to D.C. In a scary part of Baltimore, just off Interstate 95, looking for gas in an area that would give Hell's Angels the eebie jeebies, we got Michael's call that Ellie McKay had arrived. We stayed up that night. Then as the situation eased into Tuesday I drove home late afternoon. But at 9 p.m. Tuesday night Jane called to say that things were looking very grave for Carolyn as her body was going into a toxic shock.

That solo drive back to D.C. was at first a nightmare. I drove hunched over the steering wheel, praying with an urgency bordering on desperation, then falling into scenarios that imagined only the worst: the loss of our beloved Carolyn, Michael having to raise their only

child alone, Ellie never knowing her mother, Carolyn never knowing her firstborn. As it was, Carolyn would not see or hold Ellie until the fourth day. I struggled to comprehend how my faith could stand up to a loss so wrenchingly personal. How would I interpret such things for myself, to my family, to my St. John's family? What if prayer and all the resources of medical science were not enough to reclaim Carolyn, even to reasonable health.

With each scenario came fear and dread and a terrible emptiness. And with each emptiness on that endless, dark meandering highway came the quiet invitation back to prayer. But as my mind careened back and forth between hope and loss, despair and acceptance, gradually I came to an equilibrium, a quieting of the soul. Nothing so high as confidence—which claims, it seems, principally a human outcome—but *trust* that, no matter what, God would provide.

And so I come to *why we pray?*

We pray because we are at a loss. We pray because we do not know how things will be, or how they can be changed. We pray because we desperately want to secure those we love. We pray because we are afraid and want to be embraced by a love that is stronger than our fear. We pray because faith compels us to speak, to cry out, and so we plead to the highest power we can imagine, to God the faith-giver. We pray because we cannot comprehend such a loss as one so full of prospect, so full of loving, so brimming with life, so quick to laugh, to embrace, so rich in sheer goodness, so creative. We pray because our great need convicts us of our great neediness, our staggering impotence in the face of life's lightening fast curve balls. We pray because coming face to face with our own frailty hurls us upon the hope of God's magisterial grace and infinite possibilities. We pray, perhaps at first because we fear, but better, after our experience, because we discover that the one whom we sometimes feared is full to overflowing with love for us. We pray because for all the phenomenal resources of medical science, so many times in answer to our questions the doctors would drop their voice in a kind of apology, and say, "We just don't know."

During that drive I came eventually to a point of understanding (if still trembling at the thought) that if Carolyn were to die, death would not claim her. I know, that so basic to our faith, but in such a time such basics get temporarily lost in the fog of despair. Death would not hold her. It would only claim our grief. Our loss is death's only reward, if such a thing has any meaning. Hers would be God's intimate and lasting companionship, while we are left to feel merely the eddies of God's passing, light the rustling of leaves in the Eden story. Ellie would not die or suffer greatly for lack of love. Jane's father and my father each lost their mother in infancy. Other's would not replace a mother's love but would still contribute from their own rich store.

For two days in ICU, while Ellie on the floor above stared opaquely through squinting eyes at the bright plastic of her new womb, we sat by Carolyn's bed among purring IV's, the muted chimes of cardio monitors, and the dribble of distant staff conversations. We ate cafeteria meals, checked messages, held hands, and now and then managed to hold Ellie in the NICU. And between repeated readings of the same magazine paragraph—prayed, especially for Carolyn. We prayed not just to ask, but to pour out our thank you's. We prayed "Thank you!" for each snippet of encouragement, each call, each text message, each voice mail, each prayer promised in solidarity. We prayed "Thank you!" for each morsel of hope and progress delivered from the superb medical staff, each piece like a fiber mended in the frayed rope on which

Carolyn's life, for a time, seemed to hang. On the first night when they gave Carolyn a platelet transfusion, her body chewed them up as some sort of alien intrusion leaving a zero count. Had she had some slight interior hemorrhage from the incision—who knows!

Slowly the miracle unfolded, the platelet count came up into the thousands, and by day five to over 100,000; not normal yet but ever closer. Then, late yesterday (Saturday) they let her go home, then to make twice daily trips to the hospital for that blissful warmth against warmth bonding and feeding of Ellie.

Now, when we join hands before a meal, or in the early morning, my prayer is the same—simply, “Thank you, thank you, thank you, Lord Jesus!” over and over. Thank you for the gift of Ellie, our Christmas child. For Carolyn's journey through exile to safety and return to home. For Michael's faith and strength for Carolyn. Thank you for my family. Thank you for skilled and loving hands. For our church family and the ring of prayer with which you surrounded Carolyn, Ellie, Michael and our family. When I told Carolyn, after the worst was over, how many people had been praying for her, she got very wide-eyed, her face suddenly bright with a burst of intimate recollection, and she said “*I felt it, Daddy, I felt it!*”

And most especially to our God through Jesus Christ, “Thank you!” to the One who “Strengthens weak hands, makes firm the feeble knees,” and who reminds us “who are of fearful heart, ‘Be strong, do not fear. *Here* is your God.”

Amen.