

26 November 2023, Last Pentecost (Proper 29) – Reign of Christ
St. John's Parish of Newtonville

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

Psalm 100

Ephesians 1:15-23

Matthew 25:31-46

Christ's Reign Revealed

The Rev'd Michael Thompson, Esq.

Let us pray.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts beating as one be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer, and set our hearts on fire with your love. Amen.

In September 2007, I started my final year of law school, and I got very sick. It began like a stomach bug. I had had plenty of them as a kid, so this was familiar.

Then it felt like the flu. This was bad. I had no energy. I couldn't keep any food down. I was very overweight, but I was also only 23, so I figured I'd be alright.

Then I noticed a rash on both my thighs. I called urgent care and described my symptoms. The nurse said it was likely a flu rash. She told me if it got worse or didn't improve in a few days to come in.

The flu-like symptoms subsided, but I didn't really feel any better. I just felt crummy: no energy, couldn't really eat. I could barely keep down a nutrition shake.

The next five months – the Fall semester and some of the Spring – consisted of me trying to keep up with course work while undergoing lots of medical tests, skipping through many potential diagnoses, and visiting an army of specialists. My doctors were no slouches. These were among the most brilliant medical minds in the world. Yet, they had no clue what was wrong with me.

This was a weird place for me to be. Science and medicine didn't provide an immediate answer. And, as a person of faith, I vacillated between the conviction that God would sustain me, anger at God for making and not healing this frail body, and the need for God to comfort me. What had I done wrong? Why did I deserve this?

New symptoms popped up. I developed ulcers on my knuckles that eventually bored through my skin. I had to walk around with bandages around my hands that, of course, brought questions. Many days, I couldn't get out of bed. Getting to the bathroom was a chore. On the days I could get out of bed, I struggled to get down the block to class, let alone down Mass

Ave to University Health Services. More than once, Patrick had to take me to urgent care.

Each new symptom brought a new specialist, but still no definitive diagnosis. My primary care physician even told me he came in on a Saturday, spread my medical file across the table, and worked methodically through it trying to discern a diagnosis. Still, nothing.

This was a period of a lot of prayer for me. I was trying to keep up with school and graduate. I had a job lined up, but would I be able to do it? I was afraid I was going to die. Even if I survived, would I have any quality of life? I had, at least in my mind, become a burden to my then-boyfriend Patrick and everyone around me. Despair doesn't capture it. I felt both that God was so very near, and that God was so very far. I struggled with these words from 1 Corinthians: "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." God had indeed triumphed over sin and death, and yet the sting of illness and of the grave felt just as sting-y.

Joint pain then appeared. After having seen a gastroenterologist, a hepatologist, a hematologist, an oncologist, a dermatologist, and probably

some I'm forgetting, it was time to see a rheumatologist. On February 14, 2008, five months after my symptoms began, the rheumatologist said something I'd heard before: "I think I know what you have." He named an exceedingly rare disease whose name I couldn't make out until I saw it written down: dermatomyositis.

Dermatomyositis is an autoimmune disease in which an overactive immune system attacks the skin and muscles. Get this: there are estimated to be 9.63 cases per million people – an incidence rate of 0.00096%. Even better, it is typically seen in women aged 40 to 60, who have survived cancer. It also comes up in a group of men in their 20s with no history of cancer.

A muscle biopsy confirmed that was it. I have dermatomyositis. I wish I could say that a definitive diagnosis set everything on an upswing, but it didn't. The first-line treatment is very high doses of steroids, but that is not a long-term solution. After the steroids, different treatments work for different people.

I graduated law school. Over the summer, I dragged myself to bar review classes with Patrick motivating me each step down the five blocks and back. I took and passed the bar exam and began working. Miraculous, but I wasn't healed.

That whole time and for several years after, I went through five different treatments and ended up in the hospital on a chemotherapy drug before finding a medication that worked for me. I also went through several surgeries. The ulcer over my left middle knuckle became so deep, it got down to the tendon. After the surgery to repair it, the surgeon told me he wasn't sure if I would have full use of my left hand again.

The illness affected my lungs. It got so bad that I had to walk to and from the T one block or even half a block at a time. One day, I arrived at Back Bay Station and, instead of going to work, got in a cab to go to the hospital because I had so much trouble breathing. Ultimately, my doctors advised that a lung transplant might become necessary.

Science and God had finally given me a diagnosis, but there was no clear treatment and there were more complications. Even with progress, I did not seem to have that victory Paul wrote about.

Well, I could tell you much more of this story, and perhaps some time I will, but I'll fast forward. We finally got this thing under control, no lung transplant, and, while I still have some challenges, I am stable. Thanks be to God for that.

Throughout this whole period, I had some moments of profound faith. After the surgeon said he wasn't sure if I would have full use of my hand, I remember saying, "God is my doctor." Everyone thought I was still loopy from the anesthesia, but I was right.

Despite those moments of faith, I also remember having some stern conversations with God about what was going on here. Where was God's triumph over all things? Where was the promise of the shepherd who will traverse anything to find the sheep? Where was the shepherd to bind up my injuries and strengthen me in my weakness?

This story and my relationship with God in it speak to a significant challenge our faith presents, a challenge that comes to the fore as we reflect on these readings about the Reign of Christ. As Christians, we proclaim that Christ has triumphed over everything, including death. In our prayers, we are so bold as to declare that Christ lives now and reigns now. This feast celebrates that Christ reigns over all creation. We declare that salvation has been accomplished. Our readings speak of people fed and tended by God, all things being under Christ's feet, and us standing before Christ returned in glory.

Yet, the world around us doesn't look like this. We can dismiss much of the dissonance between the world we proclaim and the world we experience by saying that it is the result of people not embracing Jesus, but what about the sick guy in his 20s with a rare disease whose cause is still unknown? Our faith challenges us to live in the in between. We proclaim triumph as we await fulfilment in Christ's second coming and as we exist in a reality that looks far from redeemed. I have to think that early readers of Matthew and other early Christians really struggled with this. Where is Jesus? Where is this heaven he promised? Where is the Reign of Christ?

Thinking about the story of my illness, I find myself looking at the reading from Matthew differently. Matthew tells us of a final accounting in which the sheep and the goats have similar but different discussions with Jesus. Jesus tells the sheep that they fed him, gave him drink, welcomed him, clothed him, took care of him, and visited him. The goats did not. Both the sheep and the goats have a similar question: when did that happen? And Jesus responds with the familiar, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it [or did not] to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it [or did not] to me."

I absolutely think Jesus is talking about taking care of one another's temporal needs, but I also think there is more. I mentioned that in my illness I had

times of profound faith and others where my faith was fragile. Sometimes, I could see and proclaim the Reign of Christ in the midst of my illness. Other times, I wondered what sort of reign this was. Why did God lead me this far only to watch me die? During those times, I needed others to reveal the Reign of Christ to me. I needed Patrick, my in-laws, and many others to take care of me and reassure me even as they had their own doubts. I needed people on the T to let me sit even as they perhaps didn't realize I struggled to stand. I needed doctors who were relentless in their care of my body and my mind.

The help with my physical needs – feeding me, helping me dress, helping me get around – were very much needed, but they also made the Reign of Christ real and alive in my life. That's what we do when we take care of one another. We provide for immediate needs, but we also point toward Christ's reign here and now as we anticipate the fulfillment of that reign in a realignment between heaven and our present reality. Our care for one another offers hope. When we feed, clothe, house, welcome, and visit, we reveal Christ's reign to all people. We bring heaven and earth together.

In the end, the Eternal Sovereign will say to his followers, 'Come, inherit the kingdom prepared for

you from the foundation of the world; for you have revealed my reign in a world where it was obscured. I was hungry and you fed me, thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me, naked and you clothed me, sick and you cared for me, in prison and you visited me.' Then they will ask him, 'When did we do any of that for you?' And he will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are my beloved, you did it to me.'

Amen.