

God Uses Trials to Bless Us

Yes, it is cancer," the doctor told me. Devastating words for a 32-year-old husband, father and pastor. A biopsy showed that I had a malignant tumor in the middle of my tongue. All of a sudden, the future seemed uncertain. In a flash, the reality of sickness and the possibility of death stared me in the face.

My surgeon at MD Anderson Cancer Center in Houston said there was a high probability he would have to remove most or all of my tongue. I asked, "What could have caused this? I have never used tobacco, drank alcohol excessively, and I have been healthy up to this point." One oncologist told me, "You basically are the one out of millions who won the bad luck lottery. It's baffling. Something must have gone haywire in your immune system." Not very comforting words.

Unsettling questions raced through my mind:

If doctors removed my tongue, would I be able to preach again? Would I be able to lead the liturgy and sing? Would I be able to tell my family that I love them? Would I be able to swallow? Has the

cancer spread beyond my tongue into lymph nodes or elsewhere? Am I going to see my children grow up?

My comfort came from the same words I have used countless times to comfort others: "I am a baptized, redeemed, and dearly loved child of God. Nothing can take me out of His hands. Jesus forgives my sins, gives me new life, and promises me life eternal!" Familiar Scripture passages and promises suddenly took on new depth and meaning. My final feast before my glossectomy was the Lord's Supper.

The most frustrating factor after surgery was that not a single word would come out—not even a grunt. Thoughts were whirling around in my

head, but a large breathing hole in my throat prevented me from expressing them. In order to communicate, I used hand signals, frantically wrote out messages, smiled, blinked my eyes, and



Rev. Scott Schmieding at his church in Baton Rouge, La.

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Scott was diagnosed with cancer of the tongue in October of 1997. On Nov. 7 he underwent 11 hours of surgery at MD

Anderson Cancer Center in Houston. Doctors conducted the entire operation through his neck. They took out lymph nodes, removed his entire visible tongue, extracted all four wisdom teeth, installed a breathing tube (tracheotomy) and reconstructed a tongue flap using a muscle from his abdomen. The reconstructed tongue flap is sewn to the bottom of his mouth and assists with speech and swallowing. Scott then received seven weeks of radiation to his mouth and throat area

during December 1997 and January 1998 with the hope of killing any stray cancer cells which may have survived the surgery. Doctors currently classify him as "free of disease." He continues to undergo speech and physical therapy.

When people ask, "How can I best pray for you?," Scott requests specific petitions that God would keep him cancer free, further improve his speech and swallowing and restore some of his saliva which was dried up from radiation treatments.

answered questions on the phone by responding with one tap for “yes,” two taps for “no,” and three taps for “I love you.”

Then, after one week, my surgeon came in and gave me a “morale boost.” He pulled out the larger

plastic breathing tube in my throat and replaced it with a smaller metal tracheotomy. As I was gasping and coughing violently, he said, “Scott, cover the hole and say, ‘one, two, three.’” I froze and looked up at him with terror in my eyes as I was choking. He said sternly, “Do it.”

I gargled out, “One, two, three.” Words! Yes, beautiful words! Then I hummed a few musical notes.

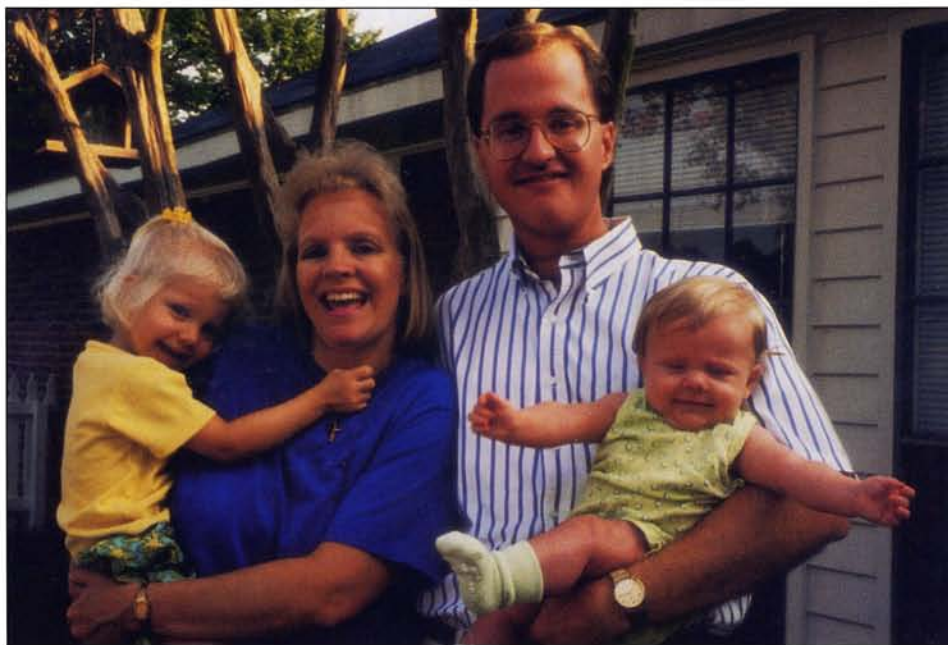
As the weeks passed, my condition steadily improved. Radiation treatments were very difficult, but the removal of my trach and intense therapy greatly improved my speech. My goal during my recovery was that I wanted to baptize our baby boy due in April. That wonderful day came on May 24th when I baptized Paul Andrew and also took the step of delivering my first sermon since the removal of my tongue.

Throughout my ordeal I have learned firsthand that God uses our trials to bless us. For example:

- My illness has taught me anew to treasure God’s treasures: Holy Baptism, Holy Scripture, the forgiveness of sins, Holy Communion. They provide the true meaning of life. They alone last forever.

- My illness has stressed to me the importance of family. They were my primary caregivers and cheerleaders. Too often I confess that the busyness of parish life has caused me to neglect my family.

- My illness has given me more empathy



Rev. Scott Schmieding and his wife, Susan, hold their children Jenna, left, and Paul in the backyard of their home in Baton Rouge, La.

and compassion as I care for those who are battling various sicknesses. We all know we are going to die one day, but facing a serious illness caused me to deal with the reality of my mortality and totally rely on the forgiveness, hope and love of Christ.

- My illness is providing me with countless new opportunities to share the hope we have in Christ with others. I have been invited to speak at numerous churches, National Cancer Survivor Day observances, United Way meetings and Cancer patient support groups.

- My illness has shown me the loving care of the body of Christ. I have been overwhelmed with prayers, notes, financial support and encouragement from people and churches all over the United States.

- My illness has provided my congregation with a unique “benefit.” Because it is difficult for me to speak for long periods of time, I have had to shorten the length of my sermons (not one person has objected).

- My illness has shown me how much people can love their pastor. The support of my congregation has been amazing. I thank God they continue to embrace me even though I have a major speech handicap. Many have said my impediment forces them to listen to my preaching and teaching more attentively (another blessing!). My speech therapist said, “With a name like Schmieding, just tell people you have a German accent.”

Experiencing cancer has been an unwelcome intrusion on life, but I rejoice I am still able to proclaim God’s Law and Gospel, to lead worship, to swallow Christ’s body and blood, to sing to my children, and to tell my family, “I love you.”

by Rev. Scott Schmieding