

“Hope in Suffering”

Psalm 55:22; Galatians 6:2, Psalm 6:12, 2 Timothy 1:7

Series: Hope Rising Week 6

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Good morning. Happy Mother’s Day! Congregation, my name is Nicole and I so grateful to be here with you. Today, I would like to take this time to share my testimonial with all of you on how God is working in my life. And since it is Mother’s Day, I cannot pass up the opportunity to praise the Lord for my own mother Lisa. Happy Mother’s Day mom, I love you.

My intention today, is to honor our Lord through this testimonial and to encourage you all. My hope is that we can accept the struggles in life and place our burdens through prayer on our savior. When doing so, we allow the holy spirit to work through us, that our human viewpoints can be lifted and a new lens could be seen through, a lens of hope in the Lord’s promises.

One of my favorite preachers, besides Pastor Doug of course, is John Piper. In a recent sermon he said this catchy phrase, “*Magnify his sovereign grace and put us in our humble place*”. I just love that because it’s what God wants and does!

I don’t know about you but it feels like everywhere I turn there is suffering. From the mind-blowing number of deaths from Covid 19, to another cancer diagnosis, or another act of hate. Suffering is a reality of our fallen world. Today, I want to bring you hope in your suffering by sharing my story.

At the age of 34, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. In the last three years I have been diagnosed with cancer, twice. I have found myself in some very humbling places. I remember finding my cancer clearly like it was yesterday. I was reading with my oldest son Rocco when out of nowhere, I placed my hand directly on a lump. Friends, I do not think it was by accident that I found this lump. It’s what I believe to be the Holy Spirit. As I felt this lump, the room seemed to quiet in a way which was unnatural to me like a zooming inward, and although I could still hear Rocco reading, a voice (not like someone is talking to me) but an inner voice, was saying, *pay attention to this Nicole*. My heart pounded at what I had found, but my mind was clear. This small lump is serious, it needs attention.

The next day, I called my doctor and was told not to be concerned. Again, this internal voice of urgency pushed me to call a different doctor and seek guidance elsewhere, which fortunately I did. On December 22, 2017 just 3 days before Christmas, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. When I got the call, I was working from home as a deaf advocate for children in Bucks and Philadelphia Counties, I was doing this part-time while primarily caring for our family of 3 small boys under 6. Life was very busy to say the least. It’s odd to me looking back, but I didn’t cry or weep as one would expect when I got the call. Instead I swallowed the news, focused in on the situation at hand and asked for next steps.

This is a consistent theme in my life, a pull yourself up by your boot straps mentality which I was a witness to growing up. A keep your chin up, push forward, keep striving, this mentality at its core is wonderful, but is ultimately unsustainable without the divine. You see friends, when I’m

reliant on my own understanding and strength, I lose hope and worry about everything. I derail and have self-doubts, I'm impatient, quick tempered, and quite honestly ungrateful. I lose focus. This isn't what the Lord wants for us.

Psalm 55:22 "Cast your care on the Lord and he will sustain you".

That Christmas when I was first diagnosed, was very difficult to say the least. We kept my diagnosis to ourselves till the holiday had passed. And as you can imagine, that Christmas I spent more time being present with my children rather than worrying about the presents. In private, I allowed myself to weep and, in those moments, I begged God to forgive me, I kept thinking what had I done to deserve this?

I proposed deals and "what if scenarios" right alongside prayers for strength, for the words to speak to my family, words to sooth them, words to explain what mommy was possibly facing without scaring these 3 beautiful innocent boys. Fortunately, at the time of my diagnosis, I was on a spiritual journey to grow closer to the Lord. I had literally just joined my first ever bible study. I was in week two. I was also attending a women's group for moms with children in preschool. I was seeking answers by attending service and most importantly, incorporating prayer into my daily routine. I didn't know that this yearning to grow closer to Jesus was in preparation for life altering news.

I shared the news with my growth group and wider community and I put my pain out there not only to you all but most importantly to the Lord. Instead of allowing anxiety to flood over me, I took my struggles to Him. And oh, did he prevail! As I shared my pain and vulnerability with God first, then family and friends, I was able to act as His vessel, allowing others to share their pain with me. And through this sharing, we would carry each other burdens.

In Galatians 6:2 it says "carry each other's burdens, and in this way, you will fulfill the law of Christ."

Sharing with others showed me how much love there is right here in our own community with the people sitting right next to you. The outreach from the community here at Woodside and at Riverstone started to pour upon our family. Meal trains, gifts, calls, cards and text messages, every 'I'm thinking of you', every hug and smile carried us. You might have been one of those people and I want to say thank you, because even the smallest gesture of kindness and love helped me and my family.

In 2018, I started cancer treatment. Some of you with critical illness may relate to this but that hospital become a 2nd home. I went from being an active present mother, playing on the floor, moving freely to one thing to the another, and you know there's lots of that with three small boys, to being well, not there. When I was home, I was an observer, a different mom. A mom in pain, a mom that couldn't pick up or even hold her babies. Hugs hurt. Holding hurt. I, of course, tried to keep this sorrow and pain from my children but I'm sure they felt it and saw it, mama was very different. During the toughest days, crying in secrecy away from my family I struggled with fear that my life was being cut short. That my children may grow up without a mother to feeling exceptionally grateful, I had caught my cancer early, and it hadn't spread.

In those moments my own strength was not and is still isn't sufficient. My mind, body and spirit continue to struggle when I leave God out of the picture. Relying on myself is no longer an

option. In these very humbling places and in moments of despair, I turn to God, honestly, because I cannot hold it all on MY shoulders, anymore. And I don't have too.

Psalm 6:12 "I will call to you when my heart is overwhelmed. Lead me to the rock that is higher than I"

This verse replaced the constant reel of fear-based thoughts playing in my mind and through praying for release from this fear and pain, over time these burdens were lifted. I am here to testify in front of you all, that when I let go of the reliance on myself and other worldly things, it was the turning point for me. It's the reason I am here, healthy and mentally clear.

"For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and a sound mind."
2 Timothy 1:7.

By summer 2019, I was physically healing and thinking the dust was settling. After many surgeries, my body was adjusting, I was regaining strength and had a new sense of purpose in my faith. The day-to-day pain was there but manageable. But that internal voice kept popping up pushing me to focus on how I was *still* not feeling right. I consulted with my oncologist and pushed her to order a PET scan which she assured me was unnecessary. Less than 1% of the population would have a reoccurrence after a double mastectomy. Well, I was that less than 1%. I still don't play the lottery, perhaps I should! With the news of a localized reoccurrence and three opinions from leading cancer facilities, I started chemotherapy followed by radiation.

In March of 2020, I finished my last treatment and rode home that day elated and excited to start living my life, again! I remember thanking the Lord for my life and promising not to take anything for granted. Promises to live a life with purpose as He sees fit. I was thinking my struggles were behind me. Two weeks later a pandemic hit. Ok Lord, put me back in that humble place! Like all of you, this last year has been like none other we have experienced. It has put all of us in a humble place.

Friends, the lesson I'm learning is that there will always be suffering here on this earth, for all of us, but for me I don't question the why anymore. I have a deep understanding that suffering can be used as a tool to wake us up and to accomplish His purpose in our lives. Suffering forces us to turn from trust in ourselves, to living by faith in God's promises.

As of March 2021, I have been a year free of cancer, praise the Lord! If you take anything away from my testimonial today, I hope that its in moments of your own suffering, whether big or small, you turn to our Lord and not earthly things. For our sufferings are meant for growth.

All of the verses I have mentioned today we're given to me in a time of need by other women of faith. As you leave here today, please take an index card from the baskets at the tables with the verses I mentioned. Please share them and place them somewhere to remind you of the promises you are entitled to from our Lord.

Thank you so much for the opportunity to share my story. Happy Mother's Day.