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Book Review

Hoping for More: Having Cancer, Talking Faith and Accepting Grace

By Deanna A. Thompson

Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2012

After I was diagnosed with prostate cancer, a frequent companion of men my age, I spoke first to those closest to me and promised to keep them informed. In one particular instance I was speaking of my cancer with my former seminary colleague and friend Allen Jorgenson. After a few brief exchanges he brought to my attention a book by Dr. Deanna Thompson called *Hoping for More*. In retrospect I think Allen knew that this book would be a “two-fer” (to use current lingo) for me. He was dead-on correct! He knew that I had read and reviewed her earlier book on Luther, *Crossing the Divide* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), which book I still herald as, by far, the best book on the Reformer’s theology that I have ever read. Knowing that and having told me he was going to have his class read portions of *Hoping for More*, he told me about the content of this book with the suggestion that it might serve as a companion for me in the days ahead.



Knowing that I was going to the annual conference of the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) and the American Academy of Religion (AAR) in Chicago, I discovered that Dr. Thompson was going to be there. So, in the hope of talking with her, I tried desperately to buy the book before I left for the Conference to no avail. On the first day of the conference I was able to buy it at the publisher book stall, but I only had the chance to read about eighteen pages of it before she and I had a chat at the café area near the book stalls. Suffice it to say that, in person, Deanna Thompson echoes the Deanna Thompson in the book to perfection (albeit the kind of Lutheran “simul justus et peccator” that we are required to affirm).

How to review such a book? Virtually impossible, or, at least, most difficult! And, no, I am not talking about any personal stuff having to do with my own cancer. What I am talking about is having neither the time nor space to narrate the richness of this book. Nonetheless, I try in two faltering ways: thematic highlights and ‘tasting the book.’

First, the thematic highlights. After some serious disabling back pain, Deanna Thompson went in for medical tests, only to receive the shocking diagnosis of forth-stage breast cancer, a lethal stage that numerically means that her chance of living beyond five years is slender indeed. Add to that the facts that she is a mom of two girls at the cusp of teen-age-dom, that she and her beloved husband Neal lead active wholesome lives (I recall that somewhere in this book this P.K. called herself “a nice Minnesota girl”) and that the best part of her career lay ahead of her, then one can see how absolutely devastating the news of this monstrous cancer was.

Hoping for More is a journey, Deanna Thompson’s journey from that fateful diagnosis to the present, living with cancer as a constant companion in all facets of her rich life – family, friends, faith and academic life. She invites you into her life with candor and openness to the point where the reader is compelled to feel privileged to share her walk. One becomes her companion (compagnon means “breaking bread with”) whereby Dr. Thompson lays bare her fears, her pain, her faith – indeed, every emotion felt on the roller

coaster ride where faith and doubt collide and embrace, where each day brings joy and sorrow, where anger is displayed and tears abound, where joy soars and faith deepens to be followed yet again by pain and sorrow. She takes her cancer into the classroom where discussion of theodicy brims with life and depth. We come to know and love her family, immediate and wide-ranging as well as the care and giving of friends near and far. Dr. Thompson opens up to her own anger, even pettiness at times. This book is neither one of those excessive Hollywood-ish, “hey look at me” stories nor is it a glitzy Hallmark piece of superficial piety. It towers above both – a masterpiece of openness with dignity, a towering praise to a God against whom she can rage and whom she can love at the same time. It is radical *sola gratia* at a deeply visceral level; a lived theology from day-to-day facing that companion Paul calls “the last enemy.”

Second, “tasting the book.” Were I to list every powerful, gut-wrenching, tear-producing, faith-inspiring quote from this book I would be at my computer for days on end. Hence I give a brief sampling in the hope that you will rush out, purchase the book and get to its reading. Here goes:

On her work and cancer: “Getting paid to talk about God is a pretty sweet deal... This profession of mine affords me the privilege of getting to talk about God in ways that are always informed by the questions, claims and wagers of others. Then cancer came along and interrupted the conversation. I suddenly was no expert at all ... Cancer left me tongue-tied groping for words (p.xiii).”

Receiving a Prayer Shawl after Diagnosis: “My constant clutching of the prayer shawl... offered access to this thing called prayer that suddenly proved elusive to me. My shawl offered tangible assurance that we weren’t facing this life shattering diagnosis alone; instead I was wrapped in the prayers of those who loved me (p. 14).”

On her agnostic Jewish friend’s prayer: “My agnostic Jewish colleague had ... written to tell me that she had prayed to Jesus and asked him for a favor. For me ... Words still elude me when I try to describe what this act of prayer has meant to me. And I’m convinced it has to fit somewhere inside a theology of the church universal. But just where or how it fits I’m not so sure” (p. 61).

God’s silence: “I have also read much theological reflection on the absence of God. But living it is not the same as reading about it. What does it mean to trust in a God who seems to be non-responsive. / “I ache and God is silent. What do I do now (p. 77)?”

A Living Embodied Psalm 23 (re: shifting moods between Deanna & Neal): “Later that week my husband and I talked about his emotional rebound. He told me he recently had a realization: rather than spend his time grieving over a future without me while I was still around he had decided to focus on the present, on the time we had together now.” “While I knew I should be grateful for my husband’s new grip on life, the truth was I didn’t like it. My husband’s spirits were rising just as mine were plummeting. If I was going to walk through the valley of the shadow of cancer, I wanted him there with me, not up ahead, in greener pastures, beside the still waters, with a restored soul (p. 48).”

Some Final Words: I remember one of my seminary professors praising the heroism of Luther scholar Karl Holl as cancer was taking his life (1926). Offered narcotics to reduce the pain from his disease, he exclaimed, “No, I will not be robbed of my death.” At the time I was so impressed with this “gutsy” boldness, an earlier version perhaps of John Wayne’s famous exclamation over against his lung cancer, “I licked the Big C.” Now, in my early seventies I am prepared to give these guys their due but no more. Too long has our society

paid homage to a “testosterone” macho definition of heroism, a heroism fed by militarism, triumphalism and an American notion of “Lone Ranger” individualism. Far more profound and far more Biblical is Deana Thompson’s Hoping for More, with its tears, its fears, its vulnerability, its open searching faith, its claims and needs for community and its sola gratia in the midst of both joy and darkness. It is Crossing the Divide made intensely personal.

Hoping for More is not a book for everybody. It is not for those who know all the mysteries of life, for those who have all the answers, for those who smile 24/7 or for those who maintain their stiff upper lips and perfect (merit-earning) faith in the midst of every adversity. But if you or your loved ones have or have had cancer or know anyone who so suffers under this disease or any other disease, for that matter, then this book is for you. If you struggle with faith or non-faith, if you need the love and support of others, if God seems elusive from time to time and the mysteries of life and death are part of your thoughts and struggles, then I recommend highly Hoping for More. Come to think of it, perhaps this open testimony might very well be for those I excluded above – perhaps they might benefit even more than we the broken and vulnerable. Maybe, just maybe, this book might become a treasured witness for everybody. Thank you, Deanna Thompson, for true courage and truth-telling which bounces to the very throne of God.

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