SERMON, April 23

My husband Ronald and I have been coming to St. Paul’s for almost two years, so a lot of you know me, but not everyone knows my story. About six weeks after we moved here in late 2014, I was rushed to the emergency room one day with critically high blood pressure. By the time Ronald followed the ambulance, parked the car, and got to the emergency room, they already had me on a breathing tube. I was in acute respiratory distress. That scared him to death. But that’s how I stayed for the next four days. Ronald was afraid I was going to die. I guess I almost did.

Almost the first thing I remember after I woke up was finding out that I’d tested HIV+. When Ronald told me, I couldn’t believe it. After all, I’d never done anything to get HIV or AIDS.

At the time, I was seventy years old. As a white heterosexual woman, I was one of the least likely people on the planet to be infected. I’d had a successful legal career. I’d been happily married to my late husband for nearly twenty-five years, and I was never unfaithful. But there it was. I was HIV positive. Or so the doctors said. I was in denial. I didn’t want to believe it. But by that time, I had full-blown AIDS. Although I’d been having health problems for a couple of years, no one had ever thought to test me.

While I was in rehab after I got out of the hospital, I had a visit from my step-daughter. While she was there, she stated unequivocally that I must have gotten HIV from her father, my late husband. I remember wanting to slap her for being so disrespectful of him.

Once I was home, it took a few weeks for me to pretty much get back on my feet, although I still needed Ronald’s help for another month or so. I couldn’t even get in and out of the bathtub without his help. I felt like some kind of an invalid, being pushed around in a wheelchair. Even worse was using the walker. I mostly stayed in bed sleeping for the first couple of weeks. I had plenty of time to wonder how this awful thing had happened.

Slowly, it began to dawn on me that my stepdaughter had to be right: I must have gotten HIV from my late husband. There just isn’t any other plausible explanation. But while my mind acknowledged it, I guess my heart didn’t, so I rarely thought about it, much less talked about it. I still have no idea where he got it and I don’t really want to know.

For the first month or so after I got home, I was in a fog. It felt like I was drowning in a deep mysterious pool. I couldn’t find any place to go in Bakersfield to deal with my misery. So I turned inward—not the best place to go when you’re in pain. And I was still in denial about the HIV diagnosis. To say I was scared would be an understatement. I was terrified. My life was shattered. I was afraid I might never recover.

Ronald and his daughter did some research, and they told me there were two more tests I’d need to take to confirm that I didn’t have HIV. They’d checked around and determined that Planned Parenthood was probably the best place to get the other two tests. Who knew? I’m not one of those people who thinks Planned Parenthood is just about abortions. But HIV and AIDS? So, I made an appointment and had the second test done. Much to my dismay, it also came back positive. So did the third. I started to cry again. How had this happened? I still had no idea.

The counselor at Planned Parenthood spent a long time with us, talking about what my diagnosis meant and how I might have acquired HIV. They tested Ronald a second time and, again, the results were negative. I obviously hadn’t gotten it from him. Planned Parenthood was a life-saver for both of us. It’s just one of the reasons why I will demonstrate, at any opportunity, in opposition to de-funding Planned Parenthood. But don’t get me started on that.

I’d like my story to serve as a wake-up call to everyone. The test for HIV is simple and it isn’t expensive. So please get tested. Even if you don’t think you could have been exposed—without getting tested, you don’t know for sure. But since HIV/AIDS has become a manageable disease—kind of like diabetes—people have become complacent. Please don’t be. It’s still a nasty and sometimes fatal disease. The epidemic is definitely NOT over.

But, more important, I hope my story also serves as a wake-up call for doctors. If you have a patient who is sick, no matter what age, and you can’t figure out what’s wrong, test them for HIV. My late husband died because no one thought to test him, probably because he was in his late seventies at the time. I nearly died because the same thing happened to me. Don’t let this happen to you or anyone else. There are so many indicators for HIV, it simply doesn’t make sense for doctors not to test for it.

I can’t describe the tsunami of emotions that I was going through in those first few months. I still spent a lot of time worrying about what was going to happen. I would lie awake at night picturing all kinds of terrible things.

I tried meditation and yoga. I even read a book about Job in the Bible, hoping to understand why such a horrible thing had happened to me. If you’ve ever tried to figure the story of Job out, you know there’s no easy answer. Essentially, it’s a battle between God and the devil; good and evil. That’s a battle that still goes on every day.

I’ve never thought of myself as much of a person of faith. I was raised as a Christian Scientist, but when I was old enough to realize that my parents weren’t practicing the basic tenet of the religion—no doctors—I looked for another church. I joined the Methodist Church when I was in junior high school, mainly because that’s where all my friends went. When I married my first husband, who was Catholic, I attended mass with him for most of the nearly ten years we were married. After our divorce, I quit going. I didn’t even go on Easter Sundays.

It stayed that way until Ronald and I got married. He’d gone to the Unitarian Church when he lived here in years ago, but his wife “got the church” as part of the divorce, so we don’t go there now.

We had to search for a church when we moved here. We tried the Unity Church—another independent-thinking place of worship—but it was just too small. Then we tried the local AME church. We liked it, but after a couple of months, when we hadn’t made any friends, we moved on.

About that time, we met a couple about our age one day at the movies. When the movie was over, we chatted for a few minutes. When we realized we were like-minded liberals (a rare breed in Bakersfield), we picked a time and got together. They invited us to St. Paul’s. Their names are Margaret and Nils and they’ll be back in a few weeks. We’ve been coming here ever since.

I found myself turning to God in the predicament I’m in. It’s been very helpful, obviously. Although it sounds funny, I feel blessed. Among other things, I’m blessed to have contracted HIV/AIDS at the time I did. Not only did the fact that I discovered my positive status in 2014, rather than the 80s or 90s, save my life, but by the time I was infected, much of the stigma was just a distant memory. Once again, I can’t imagine what I might have gone through emotionally if I’d contracted it earlier. In the beginning, I didn’t talk about it much. Lots of people knew I’d been very sick, but they were polite enough not to ask what was wrong.

As I’ve gotten stronger, both emotionally and physically, I’ve been able to talk openly about it. I not only started talking about it, I wrote a memoir about my struggles – *A Rough Season*. It’s available on Amazon.

On the other hand, because there is so little stigma these days, support services are few and far between, particularly in a place like Bakersfield. Because I am strong, however, I was able to do it on my own—with a little help from God, of course—without too much difficulty. Or at least that’s the way it feels now.

Today, it’s been almost two and a half years since my close brush with death, and I have fully recovered (except for the one pill a day I’ll have to take for the rest of my life).

But I *have* made it. I feel really good, although I still have my moments. I realized recently that I haven’t finished with the grieving process. Even though I’m happy with my current life, and I’ve long since forgiven my late husband, I’m still mourning the life I once had and there are still days when I still wonder how in the world all this could have happened to me. Again, I’ve turned to God. One of the hymns we sang a few weeks ago spoke to me: “I am the light of the world! You people come and follow me! If you follow me, you’ll learn the mystery of what you were meant to do and be.” Until this happened to me, I had no idea what my purpose in life was. I was simply drifting. Now I do. I was meant to educate people about HIV/AIDS and to urge them to get tested.

We heard today from Psalms:

“Protect me, O God, for I take refuge in you; I have said to the Lord, ‘You are my Lord, my good above all other.’

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“My heart, therefore, is glad, and my spirit rejoices; my body also shall rest in hope. For you will not abandon me to the grave, nor let your holy one see the Pit. You will show me the path of life; in your presence, there is fullness of joy, and in your right hand are pleasures for evermore.”

From the day that Ronald and I walked into St. Paul’s, we’ve felt at home. Thanks to him, and our wonderful marriage, I’m happier than I ever imagined I could be. I’m now seventy-two years old, so I still think about what’s to come—what might get me in the end. But I no longer stress about it. And I no longer worry that it might be HIV/AIDS.

As I struggled through the darkest days after my diagnosis, I began to hear a still small voice. I now know that it was God’s voice telling me that there *is* a light at the end of the tunnel. The light is hope. When all seemed lost, the voice told me that there is still hope. That I can get through this. And I have. I am finally at peace.

Thank you.