

“A Lyric of Abundance”
Rev. Dr. Scott Paczkowski

Now both women suffered at this moment, that Chris read about, between Mary and Elizabeth. Mary had suffered, of course, because she was an unwed mother who was pregnant. She suffered because of Joseph - her betrothed's - confusion and inability sometimes to even trust, until he heard from an angel.

And Elizabeth, who was barren, and in that society for a woman to go without a child was to go without meaning in her life - to be lost forever. All of a sudden, God blessed Elizabeth with this child, showing that she was of value, but even more than that, after having been without value for so many years, she was valued - over and over again - and she recognized the value in Mary.

For as the two of them came together and the child left in Elizabeth's womb, it signified not only was Mary special, carrying the Messiah, as Mary understood by the angel; but, someone else knew, and now God had become known to two women - no man - two women, and when that baby left, Elizabeth became a prophet in recognizing Mary. The infant unborn in her womb became a prophet - in that moment - and throughout his life, until his death.

One of the amazing impacts of that was the two of them - when no one else would in that society - the two of them gave each other community and helped them realize they were valued, respected, and made whole. That is the aspect that community is intended to make in our world.

Now, I want to tell you about another example of how community makes us whole and someone who was beaten down can be lifted up.

This is the story of Jessica Rees. Jessica, who was just this very normal, little 11-year-old girl, had an older sister named Shaya and a younger brother named J.T. And, J.T., Shaya and Jessica were swimmers. They were very athletic, and their mother, Stacy, and their father, Erik, were very physical parents, who wanted to raise their children to be athletic, healthy and strong, in a society where they felt obesity and everything else was tearing children down.

They had everything going for them and, while they were not rich financially, they were rich in other ways. Erik was an associate pastor at Saddleback Church - that mega-church in California, so they had a lot of friends and family.

Everything was going great in their lives, until one day when Erik was walking along, with his middle daughter Jessie, he noticed that Jessie's head was tilted slightly to the side. He kind of looked at her and he knew something wasn't right - it just felt off. So he went up to her and said, "Jess, straighten up."

She tried and said, "I really can't."

He took her head and said, “Let me.” He straightened it out, and she said, “Whoa. Everything is blurry, Dad.”

So, she kind of went back to that position and he tried it again. He moved it [her head] up, and she said, “I’m seeing two of you, Dad. This is weird.”

So he knew something was kind of off, but didn’t think too much of it. The next day they took her to the doctor. The doctor sent them to a specialist because the doctor couldn’t quite figure it out, either.

So, they scheduled an MRI. Now, Jessie was a very tough little girl, but she was scared to death of needles. (I wouldn’t know what that is like. [Laughter.] I’m the biggest scaredy cat ever!)

They got it scheduled and the worst part of the MRI, for Jessie, was the fact they had to shoot the dye into her to get the MRI. So they did that and they got the machine, and it came over her face. That didn’t even intimidate her, because she was so relieved that the shot was over.

They get the MRI [results] back and go in to meet with the doctor. In that moment their lives changed forever – there was a turning, because they found a tumor on her spinal cord.

So mom and dad asked, “What does that mean?”

“Well,” the doctor said, “it is not in a good place.”

“Well, what does that mean?”

The doctor said, “It means that you will need to spend as much time with her as you can, in the time that she has left.”

The parents asked, “What does that mean?”

“It is inoperable.”

They kind of got mad. That was the first response that Erik and Stacy had to hearing about their daughter’s tumor: “Why would you say something like that to us?”

So, they went out the next day and got a second opinion. That opinion was the same as the first: That there was a 99 percent chance that their child will die within 18 months.

Now, they were people of faith and they felt that this was ridiculous. They would take care of this. They would use doctors, but they would also use prayer and they would do whatever they could, because there always needs to be hope.

The doctor turned to them and said something I thought [about] later - and they thought later - was profound to them. They asked, “How much will this hurt?” And, he said, “It will hurt some physically, but emotionally it will hurt to the extent that she sees pain in your eyes.”

So mom and dad sat down with Jessica and said a prayer before they said the words to her: "Don't let her see the fear in our eyes."

Jessie took it like most 11-year-olds do; better than her parents.

They decided that what they would do is start the process quickly, because if they didn't, she would have just a couple of months left. So they started the process. The process was not only a huge amount of radiation but a large amount of chemo. Beyond that, they needed another plan - which was a prayer plan - so they started putting things out on Facebook. She started a website. She had a huge church family, so they started prayers and that seemed to help.

But, very quickly she realized that this little girl, who was scared of shots, was in for a very difficult time. It started out, and those of you who have had radiation on your head will realize just how difficult that is. It isn't physically painful immediately, but it is extraordinarily painful to go through the process; because first of all they heat up - almost to boiling - plastic or wax, to build the mask that fits over your face, and it almost burns, and they frame it around your head. So, then, they poke the holes in the exact spot - not a millimeter off - because that is the difference between hitting the radiation into the right spots or not.

That was horrific enough, but then they had to explain to Jessie that they were going to have to screw the mask onto the table, so that her head and the rest of her body would not move during the treatments. Now, think about an 11-year-old strapped, without being able to move one's head even a millimeter. And, they found out, as the first treatment happened, that she would lay like that, pinned to the table for 30-40 minutes for each treatment - and that was just the radiation.

They shared prayers. People were struggling to figure out what to do. All of a sudden, one of the days after one of the treatments, while she was still in the hospital, she was walking back with her dad, because she still felt good at this point (radiation doesn't get you right away and they did the radiation part a few days before the chemo). As they were walking back to their room after one of the treatments, after being free from 30-40 minutes on the table, she looked past (and this was a huge hospital in California, and there were all of these windows), at all of these kids on the floor where she was on - all of these other children - and she said, "Daddy, are all of these children going to die?"

And he said, "No." He said, "Some will live and others will struggle, and some will die, but we have to pray that they and their families are able to get through this, the same way that you and the rest of us are going to get through yours."

Well, that was an awful lot for an 11-year-old to take in. So, she thought about it and in a few days she went home, and she started chemo. It was easier to be sick at home - and they could do the radiation out-treatment and do the chemo at the same time - and they got up the next morning after her first treatment and she was very sick from the chemo. She got up and mom, Stacy, walked out into the kitchen, and here was Jessie with paper lunch bags everywhere. Stacy wondered, "What are you doing?"

Now Jessie has radiation and chemo, so there is only so much you can holler at your daughter for making a mess in the kitchen. Jessie was putting together little rubber letters onto the bags and markers and writing things like “praying for you,” “you’ll get better,” “hang in there.” All of these things. And she was putting candy or anything she could find in the cupboards - and all her Beanie Babies - and she was putting each one in a bag.

Her mom was sitting there, thinking, “What in the world??” And Jessie said, “Well, I wanted to make these goody bags, because I saw all of those other kids who need it more than me.”

Now, how do you argue with that? So, mom starts helping, and dad comes in, and the older sister. Of course, they all had to get the explanation. They all did it until they kind of ran out of bags, or Beanie Babies, or the kitchen was empty.

So the next day, she went in and delivered the bags. The little kids and their parents were overwhelmed by how meaningful that was. So, Jessie got to thinking, as she was going through her treatments and getting sick, “I want to do more.”

She realized that the bags were not quite strong enough so she got these plastic jugs. There was one they had in their basement that the family had used to have pretzels in - if you go to Costco or Sam’s Club you see these big plastic jugs full of pretzels.

“Well, tell everybody at church to save me these plastic jugs. Empty them out and give them to me, I need them for my goody bags.”

Then she got to thinking, “I don’t like the name ‘goody’ bags. I have a better name. We have these jars and my middle name is Joy - Jessica Joy Rees. I’m going to call them ‘Joy’ Jars.”

So she wrote on the jars in marker, and she stuck things on them. She continued to put things in them. Then she asked her dad, “Could you please have the other kids come? And, if they would each bring me a Beanie Baby, I could continue to put Beanie Babies and other things in the jars, and give them to the kids.”

Now, that was so meaningful because it took the focus off her being ill. She went through this whole period. Finally, it was done.

When you go through something like this - with this unique type of cancer - the tumor tends to get worse before it gets better. As the radiation hits it and the chemo goes on, the first temporary reaction is for the swelling of the tumor to actually get worse before it gets better. It affected her so that her eye wouldn’t quite shut. It was so swollen that so her eye would dry out. Light was damaging it, so she had to wear glasses. She refused to wear a patch. Finally, as it got worse, the pressure and swelling continued and her face became paralyzed. She was dragging her limbs. It was a struggle.

The worst thing about it was that it swelled her esophagus and, while she was eating one day, all of the food got trapped and she began to choke, and her father had to perform the Heimlich maneuver. Erik did the Heimlich on his own daughter, to get the food out. The

problem with that was, after that she was scared to eat and when you have chemo, you are losing all of your strength and energy, anyway.

As time went on, she was getting weaker, but Jessie was working every bit of energy she has to make these Joy Jars - and she was so excited, because she was up to 1000 people on her Facebook site. Then it went up to 2500 and it was just great.

Her dad got to thinking, "You know I'm not rich financially, but I am 'people' rich. I know a lot of people who know a lot of people." And, she started to feel better - as the chemo and radiation were working - and the tumor started now to shrink and the swelling went down. Her face got a little better. Her eye never really shut, but the paralysis improved and she wasn't dragging quite as much.

As she started to feel better, they had this wonderful opportunity. One of the people in California worked on a TV station, who knew somebody, who knew somebody, who worked at "American Idol," which was Jessie's favorite show. They got her into the audience that night and they were all wearing these new t-shirts they had received.

You see, one of the first people on Facebook had sent her something with the phrase "Never, ever give up." So she thought about that, and she would say it every time she was in that radiation mask: "Never, ever give up. Never, ever give up." Then she cut it short, because it got too stressful, and she had "N-E-G-U, N-E-G-U, N-E-G-U." Then it got shortened again [into one word], because it got so stressful, into "Negu."

So she had Negu put on t-shirts and Negu on her Joy Jars and she sent them out. That night she started having a bracelet she would give out to the kids at school and church that said "Negu," on it: "Never, Ever Give Up."

She wore them that night [at "American Idol"] and, after the show, she was introduced to some of the contestants on the show who wanted to know about her shirt. Even Ryan Seacrest asked her about her shirt and then, [in] a couple of other shows, she would see a contestant either wearing a shirt or a bracelet that they had gotten on-line through the web site. Now, all of a sudden, she had a whole lot of followers on her Facebook page and on her website, and it started to grow.

After that happened, Eva Longoria, the actress, called and asked her parents if she could come by. She wanted to meet Jessie. Her parents said, "I guess, OK." But they were not sure. They didn't want to turn Jessie into a photo op.

Eva Longoria came, dressed in almost no makeup, and was in exercise clothes; and, she had nobody with her - not a camera man. They [Jessie's family] were so embarrassed about it, that they just pulled out their phones and took a picture with their phone, she was there about an hour and a half, played with Jessie, made Joy Jars and left.

But, on her way out, Eva Longoria said, "Now, if you are having any trouble, or she is in any trouble at all, and I can help - here is my card. Give me a call."

The next day Jessie had another MRI test. She was feeling better. Everybody thought, "Hey, I think we are going to be alright."

The MRI came back and there was another tumor on the other side of the spinal cord. Of course, everybody broke down. But, Jessie said, "Well, I'm up to 15,000 followers on Facebook. This means [since] I have two tumors I'm going to need twice as many Facebook followers, so I need 30,000. And, I need more money for Joy Jars - we have run out of stuff."

So, they all got to work. This time, though, everything happened again on the other side. The other eye went, so it couldn't close. Now, neither eye could close. Now, the legs started to droop. The face sunk. She didn't have enough energy left.

What started March 3, 2011, was now into October and November, and they realized that she was getting down, because she didn't have the energy to take her Joy Jars out. You see, every time she would take a Joy Jar, she would have to suit up - put on a gown, gloves and mask to go into a child's room - give them a Joy Jar, visit for a minute, then go out then take the gloves, gown and mask off, go to the next room and do it all over again. She would do that over and over again. You get tired.

They knew she needed a little pick me up, so they called Eva Longoria and she said, "Come on, bring her in." So they were on "Desperate House Wives" - of all things. And, they spent this wonderful day together, except mom noticed the picture on the cell phone from a couple of weeks earlier and the new one. Jessie had declined so much.

They made it through Thanksgiving. They were praying for Christmas - make it through Christmas. They made it to Christmas, but Christmas morning, at 2:00 a.m., it just became too much. Jessie was struggling and in a lot of pain, and Stacy said, "I made the worst mistake of my life," Jessie was asking for morphine and they said, "Don't. Don't." Because the nurses in hospice said that morphine is the beginning of the end,

So, they didn't want to give it to her. So, Stacy let her be in pain for several hours. Finally they couldn't get rid of the pain any other way, so they started the morphine.

They got through Christmas with a lot of pain and they got through New Year's. Then, January 5, 2012, they got up at 4:30 a.m. (You do that when you have a sick kid - check on them every couple of hours.) At 4:30 in the morning they couldn't get her up, so they called hospice, who said, turn her on her side, get the oxygen on her. And, of course, in that moment dad couldn't get the oxygen going. Everything was a mess.

Jessie said, "I love you," and that was it. She was gone.

They were so *angry*. They had prayed *so* hard. Jessie would tell people her favorite verse of the Bible, from Joshua 1:9, "Be brave, be strong; do not be afraid, do not despair, the Lord your God is with you wherever you go," She told everybody that. She wrote it on her Joy Jars.

And [now] dad said, "Why?"

Then he realized - she doesn't have cancer anymore. She was healed. It wasn't that easy. It took a lot of faith and a lot of community people holding them to get them through it. She

got the 30,000 people on Facebook. Her goal was to end up with 50,000, because there are 50,000 children in the United States who suffer from cancer. The day she died there were 50,000 on her Facebook page.

What brought mom and dad through this time were people, like ESPN people, who put up an NEGU t-shirt. Jessie continued to give them strength by her Joy Jars and, by the time of the writing of this book in 2014, they had had over 80,000 Joy Jars that are found in 260 children's hospitals, 175 Ronald McDonald houses and thousands of homes in all 50 states and 27 countries. She has 300,000 Facebook fans.

One little 11-year-old girl, sick herself, decided she wanted something a little bit more for someone else.

God takes those who can't take anything to offer. I mean it was just an 11-year-old. What does she have to give? But she does great things - like unwed mothers with babies or older people who are barren; God takes the least of us and does something great. Amen.