

Multiplying Leaders

Gil and Denise Thomas

June 2022

Dear Praying Friends,



May 25th was Denise's appointment at Cleveland Clinic in Ohio. After taking a picture outside the building and entering, Denise burst into tears and began to sob. After gaining her composure she expressed that we were finally arriving where she felt there was HOPE and HELP. We could see God's hand in making it possible. Your prayers leading up to this point were certainly felt and appreciated.

To better help you understand why Denise was so emotional we would like to start at the beginning of her heart issues.

Denise was born with what is called a coarctation of the aorta. This type of defect involves a partially blocked or pinched aorta that is just outside the heart. A defective aortic valve is part of this congenital condition. She had surgery at age 6 to correct this area, however, the aortic valve was not addressed at that time. It has two flaps instead of three and had been functioning relatively well until a few years ago when it entered the severe stenosis stage. Another defect Denise has is called non-compaction cardiomyopathy in which the lower part of the heart, from birth, never completely formed into a firm muscle. Her heart has continued to weaken through the years and is now completely regulated or paced by her pacemaker/defibrillator. Arrhythmias beginning at age 18 have also been a struggle through the years.

For over 14 years, we've known that a valve replacement was in the future. Three years ago, a heart catheterization was done to take measurements inside the heart and move forward with the valve replacement. After the exam many of the doctors at Penn State Hershey agreed: with the oval shape of the valve, weakness of the heart, and high likelihood of a new valve not taking, their advice was to wait for the heart to weaken more and then begin moving towards a heart transplant when needed.

This past fall Denise began to feel that the Holy Spirit was stirring her to get a second opinion. As we were working on that, her bi-annual appointment with the congenital cardiologist came up in December. Her former doctor retired, and she had a new doctor. Dr. Bradley came into the exam room and declared that she did not want to pursue a transplant but wanted to "think outside the box". We felt that was the first ray of hope we were seeing in a long time. Dr.

Bradley was concerned that Denise's heart would be too weak to replace the valve through open heart surgery and thought it might need to be done through the upper right side of the chest, which is a newer procedure. She was from Ohio and had contacts at the Cleveland Clinic, so we decided to pursue getting a consultation.

On May 25th, the congenital cardiologist, Dr. Margaret Fuchs, was very attentive and wanted to answer all our questions. She explained that she had just received a text from Denise's congenital cardiologist, Dr. Bradley, who was checking up to make sure that all was in order. Dr. Fuchs had been mentored by Dr. Bradley and we could tell that they had a close friendship. God was so good in using this friendship to get us there. She believed that we needed to move forward with the valve replacement, but that it would be up to the thoracic surgeon to help determine which approach we would take.

As we began to talk with the thoracic surgeon, Dr. Najm, Denise expressed how blessed we felt to be there. He chimed right in that he felt the same way. Five years ago, he was recruited from Saudi Arabia and greatly enjoys working at the Cleveland Clinic. His specialty is in congenital heart defects. Dr. Najm just chuckled when Gil asked about whether Denise's weak heart could handle open heart surgery. He said he has worked on worse hearts. The valve, which is now 19 mm wide will be taken out and the opening will be made larger to put in a 23 mm tissue valve. He assured us that Denise should be feeling so much better, though the weak heart might continue to give her fatigue. However, the larger valve would allow better and greater blood flow.

We know God is going before us in all these things. The heart catheterization is scheduled for July 5th and the surgery will be August 3rd.

We are encouraged by Psalm 73:25 & 26:

“Whom have I in heaven but you? I desire you more than anything on earth. My health may fail, and my spirit may grow weak, but God remains the strength of my heart; he is mine FOREVER!! Praise God.”

Serving the Master hand in hand, *Gil & Denise*
Thomas

