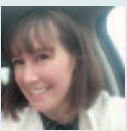




I KNOW MY PLACE: IN THE WAITING ROOM

Bex Lawton recounts the agony and the hope of waiting for her husband, James, to come out of theatre after his liver transplant operation.



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There's no stained glass here. No daylight streaming through a serene Jesus looking down from his cross. In fact, there's no natural light at all. Just four windowless walls boxing me into the belly of the hospital. An artificial glow hums and flickers, making night and day indistinguishable to its inhabitants. No, there's not the usual narrow pew or plastic chairs that link to form a row. Only plastic chairs chosen for their compatibility with Clinell wipes. But it's here that I sit, the bare skin on my thighs sticking to the seat, one uncomfortably hot summer night in July. And I pray, like so many before me. Because, whilst there may not be candlelight or soft Hillsong music playing, and there are *Hello* magazines rather than hymn books, I am in no doubt that this intensive care waiting room is a holy place.

These pale walls, with their unobtrusive and forgettable art, have witnessed countless events now etched in its visitors' memories. This room is not for the bored. Oh, what a novelty that would be! To wait for a routine appointment in the clinic that's running over. Or to wait for take home meds outside pharmacy on a Saturday morning before discharge. No, in this room we wait for life. Or possibly even death. Time teases the weary. Whole days are lost in the blink of an eye, yet hours stretch out for those who have nothing to do but watch the smallest hand tick slowly around that clock face.

'I was told I'd get an update around two o'clock, it's four now! What does that mean?' The English may be known for our stiff upper lips, but here they wobble and our reserve crumbles. Here, we are at our most vulnerable, our most fragile. Listen. These walls echo with the prayers of the desperate. Some will call upon

a God they know loves them, with a fluent prayer language practiced on ordinary days, in quiet times before the world wakes. Others try it out for the first time. Pleading, begging, bargaining with a deity they're not sure exists, but now need to believe in as everything they know and trust crumbles. 'If you're out there...' or 'can you hear me?' and 'If you can save her, I'll do anything'.

I wonder if that box of tissues sat on the table was bought in here by a nurse, like me. Was it strategically placed there as bad news was broken to someone, to stem a tide of tears? It's my turn to use them now, as I dab my eyes. I've seen so many visitors pace up and down in rooms like these. Phones permanently grasped in trembling hands. High pitched and highly charged updates going out to family and loved ones. Like them, my body is in flight-or-fight mode. Adrenaline courses through me in response to trauma. But I'm unable to do either. Fleeing isn't an option for those who have vowed 'in sickness and in health'. And where could I possibly go when half of me is being wheeled through from recovery? I twiddle the band of gold on my left hand nervously, whilst its pair lies motionless in 'patient's belongings'.

It's not my fight this time either. That's a challenge for all of us are used to being on the frontline. It's usually my responsibility to monitor, to measure, administer, and assess. I normally know everything that's happening in my patient's care, but today I know the least. I won't be receiving handover, and I won't be involved in the decision making, the huddle, or MDT. That's not my place today. Because after all, he is not my patient. He's my husband. And today, my place is to wait here.

I deliberately stay sat down. Early on, when we were added to the transplant waiting list, as his auto-immune disease progressed, a friend messaged me, 'James updated us about his liver – standing with you, perhaps even sitting with you, on his throne'. A reminder of Revelation 3:21, first written to the lukewarm church in Laodicea, *'To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with my Father on his throne.'* What is Jesus doing right now? He is sitting. Temple priests before him had to stand continuously whilst they carried out their duties of worship, prayer, and sacrifices. But Jesus' work is complete. 'Christ Jesus who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.' (Romans 8:34b) My great high priest intercedes for me from his seated 'It is finished!' position. And I will posture myself that way too. I won't pace fervently, as I've seen so many others do. I will wait, sat down. Bum firmly placed on plastic seat. As I choose to trust in Jesus' victory. As I trust in his kingship. I choose to wait in his perfect peace.

'Thank you for your presence here, God. I don't need to ask you to come. You promised to never leave or

forsake me. I'm so thankful for your faithfulness. Thank you for being here with me now. I love you LORD'.

I pray for all the usual things. For healing and protection for my Jim, for his life to be saved, for wisdom for the team working on him, but also for our donor's grieving family, and for the other patients in ITU as well. I'm not on my own, over one hundred people have joined us on a WhatsApp group to pray through this journey, and many more besides. A text comes through now from Georgie, a friend made through CMF. Proof to me again that we truly are a fellowship, not just a membership. 'I'm just imagining seeing my Hubbie intubated and covered in lines and infusions and praying so much peace over you, if you get to see James tonight. Remember he's not in there because something's gone horribly wrong – he's in there because everything has gone right, and our prayers have been answered and he's been given a NEW LIVER from God. Being hooked-up is temporary, just allowing his body to rest a while after an absolutely life-changing day...for the better'.

Time to phone the number I've been given for the cubicle he's going to be admitted to.

'Good evening. My name's Bex, I'm James' wife. I'm sorry to bother you. There's no hurry, I know you'll be busy and need to get him settled. But just to let you know, I'm in the waiting room down the corridor, and I'd love to pop in and eyeball him quickly when you think that's appropriate.'

'Sorry, who did you say you were?'

'Rebecca, Bex. I'm James' wife.'

'Oh I'm sorry, we didn't think he had any next of kin. There's nothing here in the notes.'

'Err, that's a shame!' I laugh a little, 'He very much does. A wife and three kids who love him, to name but a few. Can I give you my details again now, so I can be kept up to date?'

'Yea, sorry. Come on in. Take the first right and we're room nine, third door on your right. You can see him now and we'll get your number'.

'OK, thanks'.

It's not the first time (nor will it be the last) that I choose to laugh something off. My default must be to show grace and forgiveness, otherwise I know I will quickly lose peace and become even more exhausted. This is how God is leading me, how he's teaching me to wait. Prayerfully. Not on my own, but with my brothers and sisters in Christ. Sat down. Even when my body is on the go, flitting between school runs and hospital visits, I will speak to my soul as the Psalmist does. Sit down soul! Choose to trust. Choose to wait peacefully.

At last it's time for me to make my way down the corridor. I take a steadying breath in and push the door open.

I remember Georgie's timely text. 'Don't be scared of what you see. Remember he's not at death's door, he's at life's'. ●

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