

# ***I AM HIS***

## ***[My MACEDONIA Experience]***

### ***by Dr. Erlinda G. Tan***

*‘The Lord is my strength and my shield; in Him my heart trusts, and I am helped’. (Psalm 28:7)*

*“I will come to you in the silence; I will lift you from all your fear.  
You will hear my voice, I claim you as my choice – Be still, and know I am here.  
I am hope for all who are hopeless; I am eyes for all who long to see.  
In the shadow of the night, I will be your light. Come and rest in Me.*

*Chorus: Do not be afraid, I am with you. I have called you each by name;  
Come and follow me, I will bring you home, **I love you and you are mine.**”*

These are the first verse and chorus from a familiar song that our choir sings (mostly during memorial services) to comfort and assure the living about God’s kindness and merciful love. Lyricist David Haas must have his inspiration from Isaiah 43:

*“I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;  
and when you pass through the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you  
will not be burned . . . For I am the Lord your God”.*

I find myself humming the hymn often, and claiming His assurance, even in faraway Macedonia. **Yes, The LORD loves me, and I am His!**

Our Lord’s steadfast love never ceases; great is His faithfulness. On midnight of March 28, 2014, some friends and I flew out of Manila to start a 3-week tour of Greece, some Eastern Europe countries. The tour would end in Austria and we would be home by April 19, in time for Easter Sunday.

I joined this trip because of the interesting itinerary. We were to visit countries that have been in the international news for various reasons: Croatia, Montenegro, Sarajevo, Bosnia, Bulgaria, etc. Among these, I looked forward to a few places that are significant places in the New Testament: Athens, Corinth, Berea, Thessalonica, and MACEDONIA.

The first week quickly went by around Athens, its suburbs, the Greek islands, and a day’s tour of the port city of Thessaloniki. After six days, we were in Macedonia on a casual tour around Bitola and vicinity, and then on to the lakeside City of Ohrid.

In the evening of April 04, we checked into the hotel and enjoyed a leisurely dinner. Back in our room, I felt a bit tired, so was eager to jump into bed. I, then, started coughing. The cough grew more intense and at closer interval with some phlegm. Worried, my roommate, Priscilla, quickly called the Tour leader, Nenita, who in turn contacted **911**. An ambulance arrived quickly from the Cardiology Institute (Sv.Stefan) which was practically next door to the hotel.

By then, I was gasping for breath. I was immediately administered intravenous therapy and medication given. Diagnosis: heart attack, with pulmonary edema. I was told that there were three possibilities:  
a) If the medication works, I can leave in the morning, b) If not, do a Stent, or c) undergo a bypass.

Of course, I was hoping for the easy way out - yet, what if . . .? Time to call for help, but, what am I to ask for? Thoughts from some readings came to mind: when we cannot put our prayers into words, God hears our heart; and when troubles come our way, reach out for power before reacting to the problem. I held on to His assurance given in Romans 8:26-27, *".. the spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will"*.

Morning came. The tour group left without me for the next city, Skopje, capital of Macedonia. The Guide wanted to call home to inform the family about my confinement. Knowing that a call from a stranger with such bad news might be odd or cause great panic, I called my sister about the pulmonary edema. The heart diagnosis was not yet conclusive then.

A coronography (angiogram) was performed, with findings that the left main artery was 95-99% blocked, plus two other areas. A CABG (Coronary Artery Bypass Graft) was necessary. My primary concern was my being so far away from home and I did not know what would happen from there on.

Remembering Jeremiah 33:3, *"... Call to me and I will answer you and tell you great and unsearchable things you do not know"*. To Him I called, to lead as He sees fit, and committed everything to the Lord. *"Let the beloved of the Lord rest secure in Him, for He shields him all day long, and the One the Lord loves rests between His shoulders"*. (Deut33:12)

The Sv. Stefan hospital, even if it was a heart Institute, could only do stents, not bypass. So the next day, I was brought by ambulance to Skopje, some two hours away. I was also assured by the local Guide that his mother had a bypass there two years ago, performed by a competent and renowned Jewish heart surgeon, Dr. Salis Tager.

Having no knowledge at all about bypasses and its implications, I could only commit to the Lord, and let Him take control. I found great comfort in Psalm 91:9-10: *“If you say, ‘The Lord is my refuge’ and make the most High your Dwelling, no harm will overtake you, no disaster will come near your tent”*.

Meanwhile, in Manila, the family decided that my two sisters would fly over ASAP!

*Monday:* A-chi (older sister) Mary had to quickly contact the travel agency, prepare documents for visas applications and inquire about available flight schedules. Sio-be (younger sister) Charity, who resides in Iloilo, flew to Manila. Her renewed passport was just released a couple of weeks earlier.

*Tuesday:* Greek Consulate interview. *Wednesday:* April 09 was a holiday.

*Thursday:* Back to Consulate for the approved visas; plane tickets confirmed.

*Friday:* Flight out in the evening.

*Saturday:* Arrived at the hospital 10 P.M. Eastern Europe time. They traveled close to 30 hours of trans-ocean journey.

What a reunion! What a relief for them to see me ‘alive and conscious’. For me, kindred faces! Praise God!

In the middle of the night, they had to go around a strange city, lacking in language skills, to look for a place to stay. It was a challenging time for my sisters; all these and the difficulty of remote phone service links. But thanks to emails and ‘Viber’ connections, a 24/7 contact became convenient, particularly as there is a 6-hour time difference between the two continents. These also served as communication links between our family doctor and the local cardiac surgeon, as well as concerned parties back home, including my intercessory warriors.

The double bypass was done April 14, three days from the initial schedule, giving time to stop effects of blood thinning medicines. I was back in my ICU bed by mid-afternoon, very aware of the 15 centimeter stitches and lacerations on my chest and 25 centimeters on my right leg. The wounds restricted movements. I had to lie flat on my back, no crossing of legs, no stretching of arms and back, etc), I sensed my ribs cracking and twisting every time I shifted my body.

Recuperation of 10 more days was necessary to decrease urine sediments, evacuate lungs effusions and settle other post-operative worries. On April 24, I was discharged in good general condition, with a list of advices on wounds therapy and post-op medications and control. Before this, I asked the medical team if I could stay in the hospital until my flight was confirmed. They advised against it as there was high risk of catching other viruses or hospital-related illness.

I moved in with my sisters at a homey bed and breakfast hotel, the Vergina. For the next 10 days, I returned to the hospital twice for checkups. Pending finalizations of travel details, the Vergina Hotel became my convalesce place, to recuperate, to get used to a 'laid-back' routine and to regain back some confidence. Finally, after 24 travel hours, we arrived. Home, sweet home, it was! This concludes my full month's stay in Macedonia, my "adopted" country by now.

In the letters of the apostle Paul in Romans 15:26 and 2 Corinthians. 8:1-5, he praised the Macedonian saints for their generosity in giving to him and to the poor in spite of their own poverty. I may not be Paul, but I definitely experienced and appreciated their kindness and warmth! So here, I tell my story and affirm that my Father, my Shepherd, my Lord, loves me and cares for me – for I am His!

Amidst so many blessings, three main precepts are worth reflecting on to show His sovereignty: Yes, we have a God that is always present to walk us through; who answers prayers and appreciates intercessors; He enables, and He provides.

**THE FAITHFUL LOVE OF THE LORD NEVER ENDS.** *"Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness"* (Lamentations 3:22-23). Once again, as in uncountable times in the past, in big and small matters, serious and casual events, joyous and gloomy moments, His loving hands are always there. During this trying period, especially at times when I was by myself, I felt His tender arms around me. As events arose sequentially, some complicated, some long distance, the Lord led every step of the way. Surely, God's love can be found in our suffering as well as our blessings. Indeed, I am a loved and cared for sheep of my Father, the Shepherd. The 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm became my constant hymn.

**JEHOVAH SHALOM, THE LORD IS PEACE.** *"Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives, do I give you. Let not your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful"* (John 14:17). During such moments of seeming helplessness, what comfort to have such calmness that comes only from our Lord. I confess, He is my **Shalom**! I had peace within and without. My family also accepted His guidance and assurance that things will fall in place and turn out alright. "... *'Do not be afraid of them for I am with you and will rescue you'*", declares the Lord" (Jeremiah 1:8).

**JEHOVAH JIREH, OUR PROVIDER.** *"Because the Sovereign Lord helps me, I will not be disgraced"* (Isaiah 50:7). There is a quote from John Calvin: "However many blessings we expect from God, His infinite liberality will always exceed all our wishes and our thoughts". That was how I felt under a critical and complicated situation: My **Jireh** surrounded me and the family with appropriate people and timely conditions to carry us through.

We thank Him unreservedly for (the list does not end here, though):

- A good and alert roommate and an experienced tour guide. They had the concern and presence of mind to call for help. If I were alone then, I may have just ignored the symptoms and waited until morning. I recall what the 911 doctor told me the next morning, “If it were some two minutes later, you probably will not be here anymore!” Our Guide was quite efficient, ensuring complete travel insurance documents and keeping them ready when needed.
- That it happened in Macedonia (and not in the inner countries), that a heart center was beside the hotel, and there was a very efficient Acibadem Hospital in Skopje. Apparently, their medical care program is well set-up.
- A competent, trustworthy medical team and hospital staff. Chief surgeon, Dr. Tager, and his assistants were truly experienced, making careful, timely tests and decisions. He was unassuming, willingly accepting long distance phone conversations with our family doctor back home to discuss the procedure and give updates on my conditions. Staff in both hospitals were very kind and accommodating, even with a language gap with some of them.
- Facilitating arrangements such as visas and flight schedules. Through the intercession of some friends and the Greek Consulate staff, visas for my sisters were processed in record time. The same thing for the flight schedules to and from Skopje / Manila.
- Providing good accommodations and other local arrangements. After going around the city, my sisters found a cozy, family Bed and Breakfast hotel with a pleasant garden (where I took my daily arm and leg stretching exercises), just 10-minute walk to the hospital. It was raining most days, though, so short taxi rides for us who were not used to walking in the rain was the option. The staff were most helpful, too – including the owners’ son who went out of his way to find me a phone battery for replacement.
- PRAYER Brigades. The support groups from my home church, Jubilee Evangelical Church (Thank you, JEC, for the special Friday Prayer meeting), the Jubilee Christian Academy community, associates and friends at Asian Theological Seminary, and special groups at Greenhills Christian Fellowship and Makati Gospel Church, who individually and corporately interceded earnestly. *“In my trouble, I (we) cried to the Lord, and He answered me (us)”* (Psalm 120:1).
- Friends (here and elsewhere). Their support and encouraging messages via Viber, facebook and email, fed me with positive thoughts. A concerned pal facilitated having a wheelchair ready by the planeside. Upon my return, many came to offer assistance and wishes.
- Caring FAMILY. At full force, family members stood by and aptly supplied all necessary essentials (concessions, as well). The sisters had to leave their respective families at short notice, to keep me company in “secluded” Macedonia for three long weeks. Mary even quietly celebrated her birthday with just Charity with her. While A-chi M took care of arrangements and documentations, Sio-be C was caregiver par excellence, assisting me in moving around and with bathroom chores (she had never done such service in all her life!). In Manila, the brothers made sure the family doctor was in-sync with the doctors-

in-charge; while in-laws, nephews and nieces kept communication lines open, feeding important information, as well as “entertaining” news about the fuss I had created. Yes, even the faithful domestic helpers (two maids and a driver) cried with relief upon seeing me home.

With God’s guidance, I am now getting back to my ‘old’ self. Just as His eye is on the tiny sparrow, so will it be on me. *“Be at rest once more, O my soul, for the Lord has been good to you.”* (Psalm 116:7). In gratitude for such bountiful blessings, I re-dedicate myself to God and lift my heart – reconditioned and overhauled as it is – in praise and thanksgiving to Him! I echo this reflection from the blessed Mother Teresa, who incidentally was born in the town of Skopje, Macedonia, “I know God will not give me anything I can’t handle. I just wish that He didn’t trust me so much”.

*“He has given me a new song to sing, a hymn of praise to our God. Many will see what He has done, and be amazed. They will put their trust in the Lord”* (Psalm 40:3).

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