

Tuesday, April 15: Holocene (On Not Being Magnificent)

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<https://open.spotify.com/track/4fbvXwMTXPWaFyaMWUm9CR>

“And at once, I knew I was not magnificent.”

I was born and raised in Fairfax County, a place that runs on achievement and exceptionalism. And whether being formed in a place that demands excellence or simply because it was how I was wired, I find myself a deeply competitive person.

As a kid, before I played enough sports to know I was not magnificent, I was obsessed with my stats, my team's record, and where we stood relative to the league (and where my .896 pitching machine batting average stood in relation to MLB All Stars).

In school I was a fairly high achiever. And competition fueled my motivation. I didn't just want to make the grade; I wanted the highest grade in the class.

School and sports always made sense to me. There are goals and objectives and your ability to meet those objectives is measured and could be compared relative to others.

While the scorecard wasn't quite so straightforward, often competition and performance have been my basic outlook on life. Get into a good college. Find success in my career. Get married and have (good) kids and live in nice homes and save money. And this performative, achievement oriented mindset served me well. Until I was diagnosed with stage 3 colon cancer.

“And at once, I knew I was not magnificent.”

Cancer doesn't care where you went to college or what your SAT scores were. Cancer doesn't care how much money you have in the bank account. Cancer doesn't care how successful you are. Cancer just is. And cancer was in me.

One of the tropes in cancer stories is someone heroically battling and overcoming disease. And if anyone should have had that mentality, it would have been the guy who relishes competition and achievement. I would have thought my reaction to the diagnosis would be to see cancer as my next thing to beat; remission my latest thing to achieve.

But for some reason, that wasn't my reaction. Rather, I acknowledged that I was not magnificent. I did not have anything within me to overcome the disease; my healing, my salvation would not be my own work. It would have to come from elsewhere, it would have to come from beyond. I surrendered to my doctors and their care plan. I surrendered to whatever work God might do through them. The initial hope was that I would not need any chemotherapy; when further testing revealed that I would need a short course of chemo I surrendered to that outcome.

I was fortunate. After a short course of chemo, I was declared in remission and I got to ring the bell. There are others whose journeys are longer and more difficult than mine. Of course, there's no guarantee that I remain cancer free. I get regular tests and at any point could find out it has returned. I've surrendered to that outcome too.

People have described me as brave or that they are proud of me for how I fought. Those descriptors never resonated with me. Because I was not magnificent. My doctors were! My God was! But I was not magnificent. I was fallible. I was vulnerable. I was fragile. I was human.

Lent teaches us and reminds us that life is fragile. What we can be gone in an instant. Our imagined magnificence cannot inoculate us from tragedy. Our imagined magnificence cannot sustain a lasting hope.

Only a living God working in this world for our good can do that. Only a living God who, for us and for our salvation, came down from heaven to become one of us, subject to our fallibility and fragility, who defeats sin and death and rises victorious, the first fruits of eternity can be the cornerstone of our longings, the bedrock of our belief, the foundation of our forever. Only God in Jesus Christ can secure for us an inheritance which is imperishable and unfailing. Only God in Jesus Christ can create for us a magnificent future.

And at once, I knew I was not magnificent. But Jesus is.