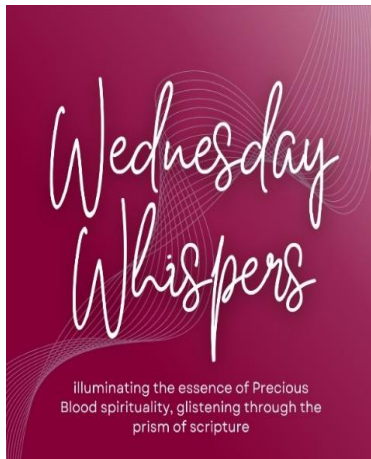




A weekly reflection by members
of the Precious Blood Community

December 10, 2025

Craig and Julie Armstrong

**"Come to me, all you who labor and are
burdened, and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28)**



Two years ago, on December 5th, my family's burden was heavy. Our youngest daughter, 8 year-old Mary Sela, was scheduled for her fourth open heart surgery. She was born with complex congenital heart defects, palliated through 3 staged surgeries before the age of 4. This new need for surgery was a surprise to us all, as Mary seemed to be in great health for the last five years. To add to our pain, our family was already weary from my wife's cancer treatments a year prior to this. Each question, each thought hung heavily around us. What would Mary remember from this surgery? How might her age at surgery create lasting trauma? Would recovery be as tough as it was when she was three, when we spent 50 plus days inpatient after her third scheduled surgery? Would Mary need a pacemaker as a consequence of this surgery—a risk we were told to

expect? Would we miss many days of work and take on an additional financial burden? How much would we tell our oldest, deeply feeling daughter about this surgery and the risks? Would we be home for Christmas? And one of the hardest questions to bear, the one I'm not sure any of us was willing to ask out loud, "would the surgery be successful?"

In today's Gospel, Jesus tells his disciples, "Come to me, all you who labor and are burdened, and I will give you rest." (Matthew 11:28) Although in our hearts we know when hard things happen it is not God who casts this worldly challenge upon us, but rather God who is by our side through these burdens, who helps lighten the load and carry the yoke, who gives us the faith and fortitude to walk treacherous roads. But when your family has been dealt challenge after challenge, our weary minds can easily wonder—can't God just make this go away? Why does my eight-year old's tiny body and innocent heart have to go through this? But also, if our faith in God's mercy is never tested by the challenges of this world, do we even know if our faith exists? If we never have a load heavy enough that only divine grace would get us through, how far away from God might we stray? What are the blessings of these challenges?

Although we may know that there will be blessings, accepting these tests with complete grace is another story. My wife was particularly challenged by the prospect of yet another medical issue for our family. Though we do not wish this upon anybody, she wondered and proclaimed— it just doesn't seem fair that our family, and this time our precious daughter, was once again thrust into a serious medical procedure and extended recovery. But Advent, the season of preparing our hearts to welcome Jesus into the world, was upon us and we considered the Holy Family and how they must have felt. As we know, Mary and Joseph went on a journey with many unknowns. They were thrust into a life they did not yet fully understand, but their weary and worried souls found rest in God's assurance through the angel Gabriel's words— "Do not be afraid, you are in favor with God." (Luke 1:30) Could we place the burden of our weary souls onto the Lord as well?

With no choice but to carry on, we did. We prayed that God gave us the innocence of a child to trust fully that we will all be okay, and that our rest lies in our faith in God. My wife found enough peace to put each foot in front of the other, her faith in God's tender love wavering but not gone. I prayed the rosary and went to mass and found solace in the prayers of our faith communities. We did pre-op testing, we reserved our spot at Ronald McDonald House, we made arrangements for our oldest daughter, and we even found the time to hang Christmas lights and take our annual family outing to pick a tree. When

friends and family wondered what they could do to help, we got creative and assigned them jobs to do a makeover of Mary's bedroom while we were away. And on the fourth of December, we drove that all-too-familiar road to our hospital, did our surgery eve ritual of braiding hair, and set our alarms for our 5:00am call to the hospital.

Mary's surgery was successful and her recovery nothing short of miraculous. Less than 24 hours after an 8 hour, open chest surgery, she walked a lap around the cardiac ICU. We went home five days later, celebrated Christmas at home as a family, and then on January 14th, just as her chest precautions were lifted, she participated in her first dance competition. Unless you could notice her tiny scar popping out of the sequined neckline, you would never know the story this smiling face and energetic body held of God's love and mercy. When our family was faced with a burden that truly felt too heavy to bear, we found rest in God's promise. Although we are never promised that our prayers are answered exactly how we want them to be answered, Mary's recovery felt like a blessing of perfect design. To be loved by God when our hearts are the weariest is a gift we wish all to know.

Today's reflection is from Craig and Julie Armstrong who live in Dayton, Ohio with their daughter Ellis (12) and Mary (10) along with their cat, Francis, and three fish. Craig spent three years in formation with Missionaries of the Precious Blood from 1998-2001.

This weekly reflection is made available to everyone in our Precious Blood family.
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