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This story is a doozy! One of those situations in life where things were going from bad to way worse. And how our Good Shepherd brought the amazing blessings of peace and reconciliation into my life!

In July of 2020 my father was diagnosed with Leukemia and along with his prostate cancer and diabetes, his health began to decline rapidly. He was living in Bemidji. I was living in Frazee. Not too far away but far enough apart to make daily care impossible.

My dad agreed to try chemo. Next was to find living arrangements near his treatments in Fargo. Where was he going to live? How was I going to move his belongings? How was I going to get him to his daily treatments? All while still working, no other family support, and during Covid!

Even as I share this story, my body still remembers the stress and fear and worry. I couldn't see much hope, only dark clouds on the horizon. One of the biggest storms I had ever experienced had slammed into our lives.

I couldn't breathe. Where was the Lord at work in this situation? Was the Lord at work in this situation? And that's still hard for me to admit to myself, let alone out loud to you. My faith had deserted me? And I am a pastor?

Storms hit all our lives. That's true for each one of us. Just live long enough. Situations very similar to mine, seasons in our lives, that were or maybe are very challenging. When we cannot see a way to navigate it, white knuckling it, wondering IF we are going to survive.

Times when we have or are deeply, desperately, and secretly asking, "Where are you God!?! Do you care about me?"

And then we come to Psalm 23. Probably the most familiar psalm of all the psalms, the most intimate, and possibly the most familiar passage in the whole Bible. Many have it memorized? Anyone?

All of that makes this psalm a bit challenging. It is so well-known it makes it hard to hear it in a new way. It is so personal and powerful, it almost makes talking about it unnecessary. Almost.

And have you noticed how it has almost become exclusively associated with funerals?

I even noticed how I subconsciously drew upon the story of my dad and his eventual passing when thinking about this psalm. Especially **"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me."** This psalm calms our fears, we are not alone, evil won't win. Such comfort.

This verse names perhaps our biggest universal fear, our biggest enemy...death. Making it such a beloved psalm of encouragement and comfort. But as much as all of that is true, it is true, we really need to rescue this psalm from funerals only.

We need to pull it out of wherever it has gotten mothballed, pull it out of wherever we have stored it until someone passes. We need to bring it back into our everyday lives. The needs the good shepherd meets in this psalm and meets in our lives are after all daily needs. That uh...we need!

If we were to grab our calendars, what day this week works for you to...go without eating, to go without water to drink, without time to rest? Does Wednesday work for you to go without the Lord's guidance, protection, and feeling deeply loved and secure?

Wednesday doesn't work for me. Because I need the Lord Monday thru Saturday and twice on Sunday! Amen?! Amen!

Another reason we need to pull this psalm out of storage and figure out how to re-establish it into our daily lives, is that it can save us from schmaltzifying our faith. You know schmaltz? It's that fun Yiddish slang word that means being overly sentimental, overly cute, overly sappy.

Think Hallmark movies, cross-stitch pillows, endless warm fuzzy. This psalm protects us from having a sappy saccharine shallow kind of faith. This psalm anchors us deeply in the nitty gritty of life, in what is real, authentic, true, and genuinely helpful. This psalm keeps it real.

And we hit a whole other level of real as we come to verse five, "**You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies**". That phrase stopped me in my tracks this week, knocked me back on my heels.

I didn't want to think about this verse, process the emotions this verse stirs up, and I certainly do NOT want to preach about this. So, I was mad at God for at least a day.

Because who wants to talk about enemies? Or rather, I don't mind talking about enemies in a metaphorical sense. My dad's health crisis was an enemy of a sorts. When walking through the valley of the shadow of death, where death lurks. Death is an enemy.

I also understand other metaphorical enemies that may be lurking, waiting to attack. Enemies like insecurity, famine, spiritual thirst, burnout, emotional brokenness, dying, isolation, even lack of direction in life or moral failings. Those are enemies to our well-being and sense of security. Those enemies make sense to me.

And I believe Psalm 23 delivers what we need in facing those kinds of enemies. Its six short verses remind us of the Lord's Presence, his love, his ultimate authority and all-powerful strength to protect and save us. We do NOT need to fear any of those kinds of enemies. The Lord will take care of us.

But this psalm shifts in verse five. Shifts from generalized impersonal enemies or difficulties that just happen in life...to now a specific, personal, human threat. To an enemy.

The metaphor is dropped. Enemies as a person or group of people seeking to undercut, harm, and hurt me specifically...with malice and vicious intent. Anxiety and stress.

What is rising in you? With this talk of enemies?

Enemies bring disruption. Enemies stir up stress. Enemies bring confrontation to what is comfortable and assumed. Enemies bring conflict and harm.

We have known conflict as a state and nation. The murder of George Floyd, political unrest, and fall out from the Pandemic. The enemies of racism, power, and a contagious virus. Those powerful and unwelcomed enemies have brought conflict, heated and intense, and cold and cutting, prolonged and confusing.

We have known conflict inside our denomination and inside our churches.

And I find myself silently asking, “Lord, can you handle these enemies and still care for me?” Just trying to picture myself sitting across a table from real enemies makes me lose my appetite. I can’t stomach eating a huge meal now, Lord.

What does it look like for the Lord to prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies? How would I even recognize it in my life?

And I kept cycling back to the storm that hit my dad’s life and mine, over three years ago. It fits the “valley of the shadow of death” verse. But maybe not so much the “preparing a table before me in the presence of my enemies” verse? Ugh! But my mind kept coming back to the storm with my dad.

It was a three-week whirlwind.

Looking back, I can see how God provided wisdom. Wisdom from friends to help me understand our need for transitional care...assisted living connected to rehab connected to a nursing home. And an apartment became available, thank you God!

Found a moving company! Moved my dad in for one day, and then he entered the hospital for two weeks, then hospice for one day, and then he passed. I was hoping to have more time. And yet, he didn’t suffer long, thank you for that too Lord.

When we held his funeral, I invited a long-time pastor friend to officiate because I just wanted to be a daughter that day. We honored him really well, it was a powerful service, still amazes me.

There in the midst of many metaphorical enemies a banquet table had been prepared. A table of blessings, peace, wisdom, provision, and friendship. A banquet of blessings in the presence of death, an enemy. The Lord was a good shepherd.

But I had forgotten something big. And the Lord helped me see it.

What I had forgotten was something about my pastor friend who officiated. I had forgotten that when I was first getting to know her and work with her...we had conflict. A ton of conflict, with mediation and HR. Tension for years...maybe ten years! It was epic!

And yet, as we both allowed the Lord to be our good shepherd, the Lord worked out his peace between us. The Lord brought his perfect peace and healing. To the point I had completely forgotten I had even viewed her as...if not enemy, someone to completely avoid!

So, the story about my dad’s passing WAS on point, I had just forgotten! The Lord did prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. Of death and personal conflict. The Lord brought healing, peace, and reconciliation to our relationship. In his timing.

And for a cherry on top, after the funeral that evening my friend and I went to a lovely restaurant, sat down at a fancy table (maybe not this fancy...point to the alter table/such a beautiful table) and enjoyed a fine meal together.

Just another image of how the Lord prepared a table, brought a meal, and we celebrated the perfect peace he brought in our relationship.

Bringing this back to us, for us to follow the Lord as good shepherd in our church.

When we at Buffalo United Methodist allow the Lord to be our shepherd...when we daily follow and surrender. When we let the Lord lead and guide our lives, he will give us amazing blessings. Blessings that will overflow, “my cup runneth over,” kind of blessings. Overflowing to touch all our lives.

We demonstrate and show others that the Lord is faithful, we show others Jesus is worth following.

Some of the others that will see, witness, receive some blessing specifically...are our Confirmation kids, the Pre-Schoolers, and baby Adler and his parents. We can show all our kids at all ages that Jesus is real and good and faithful. And walking with the Lord is something that is alive and dynamic and brings tremendous blessings!

Making putting Psalm 23 back in to our day and back in to our lives, a truly a good thing to do and experience here, in this new chapter in our church!

As we turn to our time of reflection...

Which verse from Psalm 23 stands out to you? Are you thinking about the peace the Lord brings into our hearts during conflict? How we are never alone in difficulty or death? Or maybe a different verse makes sense right now in your life?

Bring whatever verse from this psalm seems most important to you...to the Lord in prayer.