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St. Andrews Lutheran Church, Bellevue, Washington

February 1, 2026

Notes on the homily: This homily weaves together two streams. The bigger print is “the story” and the smaller print are the “comments.” There are four parts to this story and each part is followed by comments.

“Where is God?”

Psalm 42:1-3

PART I: WHERE IS GOD?

This is how the crisis began. 24 months ago on February 10, I received an urgent call from Panama. Misty, my wife, had been visiting daughter Hilary, her husband Noah, five children—all part of the State Department in Panama. After unbearable abdominal pain, Misty had been taken to the hospital. She couldn’t eat. Tests, labs, imaging, everything—showed an intestinal obstruction. She was hurting badly. Then she was told “You have Stage IV abdominal cancer.” She refused to accept the diagnosis.

Immediately, Jon (my son) and I flew down to Panama and brought her back to Seattle in less than 24 hours. We had only just begun. The swirling, perilous path of prayer, pain and possibility, fatigue and fear stretched before us into the vast unknown. Back to this story in a moment.

The first three verses of Psalm 42 are a snapshot of our lives. Like a deer panting for water, we yearn and pray for a safe life, guarded by the Good Shepherd. Then, before we know it, our lives can shatter apart. You might live right, but crises ignore your resume. What you counted on or thought you deserved, disappears. What you enjoyed vanishes. What gave you security, crumbles. The Psalmist writes, “our tears become our food” and our cries pour out, “Where is God!” In our pain, we dial “God 911” and there is silence. But as Helmut Thielicke once reminded us, “We should never interpret the silence of God as the indifference of God.”

We might be caught in a web of feelings—shock, sadness, regret, resentment, hope, hell, faith, fatigue, anger, despair. Some may reprimand you: “If you fear or are angry, you are not faithful.” To that I would say, “Hogwash!” God wants all of you! Not part of you. Not only your faithful self, but your filthy self as well. Not just your pretty self, but also your painful self. Don’t pretend. Don’t hide. A loving God wants the truth of all of you. We hear in I Peter chapter 5: “Cast all your fears on God for God cares for you.” The problem is not your feelings; it’s who you take them to. On the cross, Jesus directs his cries to his Father, crying out his anger, his despair, his abandonment: “Why have you forsaken me!” He knew where to direct his despair and anger. This is the direction of faith. Back to the story.

PART II: GOD’S SUFFERING

We returned to Seattle fearful, confused, hopeful. Misty began treatment at the Fred Hutch Cancer Center. She suffered unbelievable pain, day by day, and her suffering was shared by all of us as if her cancer invaded us as well. Shared suffering is the heart of the cross and it is the way of the cross. Misty felt this blessing and she felt the treasure of God’s mercy holding all of us.

Misty had a mass in her upper colon near the pancreatic tail. She began chemotherapy with the Hutch—grueling visits, ports inserted, dreadful nights at home, loss of weight, trouble eating, frail bones. Yes there were sparkling moments--She delighted in the little she could eat. Phone chatter lifted her. Short walks relaxed her. Jane Austen books distracted her. And she continued to write “love letters” to many around the globe who were hurting and needed to hear the love and comfort of the Lord.

But comforts were short lived. Prayers held us together as her little world was slowly shrinking. Chemotherapy was ravaging her weakened body. The Hutch tried to work with her, but to avail. She sampled it and quit. She moved onto Complementary Medicine—more intermittent chemotherapy. She sampled that and quit. Friends showered her with buckets of suggestions and stories of miracle resurrections. The monster of cancer was slowly eating her

alive with no plan in sight. There is the world of cure—we were not in this world. The word “care” comes from the Gothic word “kara” which means “to suffer with.” This was the world we were in. But care needs prayer. Doing the work of care was beyond all our capacities. Care needs prayer and the powerful presence of the Spirit of God day after day. Back to this story in a moment.

It's unbearable to see someone you love suffer. Our little comforts could not hold back the unrelenting assault on Misty's life. It all seemed wrong. At times it seemed unreal. And I was angry, angry inside not toward Misty, not toward God, but toward life and the destructive forces in all our living which threaten to rob life of life. We can only embrace our suffering when we put ourselves into the merciful hands of our suffering God. People don't want gods who suffer. We want heroes full of power and strength who show a lot of muscle and little mercy.

But God's world is much different. Our God suffers willingly, lovingly in Jesus of the manger and Christ of the cross. From wood to wood, from manger to cross, God becomes flesh and deep dives into our broken lives unstoppable—sits with us, stays with us, cries with us, grieves with us as he did with Mary and Martha when their brother died. Joy is not the absence of suffering; it is the presence of the suffering God with us. In Romans 8 St. Paul proclaims that nothing—the heights or depths, tears or fears, weary or weak, will separate us from the suffering love of God. Suffering may clear the deck from all the distractions of life. It may feel like everything you knew vanishes and your suffering consumes you and what you counted on is stripped away from you. Tim Keller, a well known pastor in New York who died of pancreatic cancer a couple of years ago once said, “You don't really know Jesus is all you need, until Jesus is all you have.” He knew that deep in his heart, and we were all in that place. Back to the story.

PART III: GOD'S WILL

Misty firmly believed it was not God's will for her to die. We prayed together for healing. A friend called me and suggested that we were all in a state of denial. We were not naïve. We knew the gravity of it all. Nevertheless, we trusted the invitation to lay everything into the merciful arms of God—boldly, unapologetically, confidently. Our prayers often seem like they are directed to a small god like a vending machine instead of God of the Gospel who is beyond all measure and who welcomes the full measure of ourselves. God

invites us all to enter a much bigger and imaginative world than we would dare believe. We were bold in our prayers and we also trusted God's will.

We prayed that the Spirit would show us the way. What treatment? What direction? What provider? We prayed together, but often had divided opinions. You can pray together when you are divided not just with ones who agree with you. Give your dividedness back to God. With my five aortic surgeries, I had been saved by God through the miracles of modern or allopathic medicine, integrating alternative resources when useful. But I wasn't the patient. Misty's community, by contrast, proclaimed a more natural approach mixed with a disdain and aversion for big medicine, big business, big pharm. Others said we were naïve or nuts or idiots and should enter hospice immediately. In the first week of June, it all came to a head. Back to this story in a moment.

One of Misty's constant commitments was, she said, "to be in God's will." And she was more than ready to tell me when I was not in God's will. God's will often is uncertain, but God's heart is certain. And we surrendered to the heart we knew. We embodied Thomas Merton's mantra "to have the desire to desire the desires of God." But because of our medical history, we had "evidence" of God's power that can mightily disrupts all our circumstances. And so we were bold in proclaiming our desires for healing and guidance. Then we waited and watched and listened. Prayer invites us to come with bold desires mixed with bold trust in God's heart.

Nicholas Wolterstorff in his book "Lament for a Son," grieving his son's sudden death, writes--"When I look at the world through tears, perhaps I shall see things that, dry-eyed, I could not see." Suffering may open sight. We took action and prayed that God would open doors and close doors to guide us. We prayed that the Spirit would enable all our "receptor sites" to be turned on so we could discern the movement of God in our lives. Trust God to write your story. Remember Corrie Ten Boom's guidance in the horrific camps of WW II. She said, "Never be afraid to trust your unknown future to a known God." Trust God to write your story, but boldly let your desires known, then listen. We found peace in Oscar Romero's "Eleven words simple prayer when he was at the end of his rope: "I can't. You must. I am yours. Show me the way." These 11 words encapsulates the Christian faith. When you pray "I am yours," you will be able to listen and surrender. This the heartbeat of prayer. Back to the story.

PART IV: GOD'S WONDER

In Proverbs chapter 29, it is written, “Without a vision the people perish.” Misty yearned for a vision. Then, in the first week of June, out of the blue came this. Chris, our son, called about a possibility in Arizona after talking with his old friend. His friend said she knew a healer who did wonders with her, her mother-in-law, and other stories. Misty perked up. She felt God pulling her to go. I was disturbed. The healer didn’t want to give his name. No website. No evidence, only stories. But God spoke to me a different word: “Tim, shut up!” Things shifted. God was loud! I told Misty I would fully support her 100% and that never changed. She said that was the best gift I could give her.

We left Seattle for Phoenix to check out the healer. We met him. He said he was too busy, but he would do it for Chris’ friend. He said he never lost anyone. He said the chemo toxicity was the problem, not the cancer. Misty was hopeful and I joined her. Although vapors of suspicion boiled within me, my vote did not come between us and our love. The healer’s treatment began in Phoenix for two weeks, then continued in Palm Desert, California. The healer’s protocol was rigorous and painful—hour by hour for weeks—endless powders, tinctures, drops of this mixed with drops of that, strange foods with strange names--- Beet Kavass, Liver Vitality Greens, Atlantic Dulse Extract, MCT Oil, Chocolate Protein, Superfood Powder, bark oil from Canada and much more. The schedule was demanding. Misty hated it, her taste buds screamed. Her stomach rebelled, but she gave it her all. Her courage was stunning. Her commitment summoned every ounce of energy in her shrinking body. Moments of relief were brief-- a chair in the sun, a moment in the pool, a taste of carrot cake, her favorite. The healer showed up about once a week to adjust the protocol. His entire approach focused only on foot manipulation. Diagnosis was by the

foot. Treatment was by the foot. “Surgery” as he called it, was by the foot. Nothing else. Modern medicine would only set us back, he declared. Meanwhile, Misty was disappearing before us—bones protruding, her flesh bruising, infections filling her body while the healer warned us of the danger of antibiotics. Her hope, our hope was flickering in the storm of her suffering.

In the midst of all this, something else powerful was stirring. Misty was invaded by cancer, but she was surrounded by love—a love exceeding anything imaginable. Misty’s entire extended family, all of us—children, their spouses, brothers, sisters, cousins, grandchildren. All of us were instruments of the Good Shepherd as we all walked together through the valley of the shadow—Psalm 23. Day after day she was baptized in massive doses of love. We descended into our souls for deeper conversations like never before. Old questions were addressed. New insights were born. Misty had some long standing prayers that were realized. Gratitudes were recollected. Hugs became tighter, touches more tender. Back to this story in a moment..

Was there a miracle healing here? No. Her body was giving way to the jaws of cancer. But, yes, there were massive miracles of healing. If the healing of the body is the litmus test for God’s faithfulness, then God is a miserable failure. Indeed, Jesus healed the body. There are stories of healing throughout Jesus’ ministry. But miracles of the body were minimized and miracles of the Spirit were amplified as so many lives with so many suffering people were made new in remarkable ways. The healing of the body is temporary, but the healing of the Spirit is eternal. We think of a “miracle” as some magical reversal of nature. But the word “miracle” actually means “awe and wonder.” Abraham Heschel a well known Jewish philosopher, forcefully states, “What we lack is not a will to believe, but a will to wonder.” Pray to be much more open to God’s joy and awe and wonder and surprise. This is the center. Don’t be enslaved by the circumstances. Miracles of love mixed with our tears rained down upon us. The story now concludes.

Shortly before Misty entered hospice, she told us in her weakening voice “The table is set.” This was her benediction to us all, and behind these words, her blessing “All will be well.” She went into hospice..for a few hours on Saturday, July 27. She was transported

from Eisenhower Hospital to the home in Palm Desert, arriving at 7 pm. For five hours, I and our children—Chris, Hilary, and Jon surrounded her bed on all four sides in prayers, in tears, in love--hands clasped together, hands holding Misty. It was a holy five hours beyond all words, a sacred time between earth and heaven that lifted us all to a different place. A few minutes after midnight, as the arms of God held us all, Misty breathed her last and she ascended fully into the heart of God's love.

I will conclude with this strange story. A week later the immediate family—all 15 of us—gathered in Palm Desert for time together. One afternoon most of us took a trip up the Palm Springs Cable Car and we hiked around the forest at the top. Jon and I returned to the visitor center taking a separate trail. We were alone, far away from everyone...Jon in front, I a few steps behind. We spoke about Misty and in our sadness I was crying as we talked. We were alone.

Suddenly I felt a tap on my shoulder and then the words, “It will be OK.” Shocked, I turned around. An Afro-American woman in her 50s, hiking alone—dressed in brilliant hiking colors from head to toe like a sparkling rainbow—stood by me. She said “My husband died 7 years ago from cancer. I know.” I asked, “How have you managed?” She pointed at her eyes and said, “I am his eyes to the world. He sees the world through me. It will be OK for you.” Then she started to walk away. She then stopped, turned around, and said “Can I give you a hug?” She came back, we hugged, and then she left before us. Jon and I were stunned. We never saw her again. She was not at the visitor’s center. She was not on the cable car. She disappeared. Jon asked me, “Do you think she was mom?” I said, “Maybe.” Jon and I had experienced the mystery of God’s awe and wonder and surprise.

Remember this from Deuteronomy 31: “The Lord himself goes before you and will be with you. He will never leave you nor forsake you.”

Stay awake! Watch and listen! You might be awed by God’s wonder if you are ready to be surprised by God’s joy.