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Refreshment at the Waterhole (Isaiah 30.15)

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Being a part of the ecosystem that is the Benedictus church has become a significant feature in my journey over these past few years. Since the passing of my husband in 2014 and then my own diagnosis with advanced breast cancer in 2016, there have been many twists and turns in the path that I have taken. Finding Benedictus and having the opportunity to arrive at this water hole of truth, week after week provides me with the refreshment that I need. I was thirsty and I drank. Sustained now, I am more than happy to share with you, something of the journey that has led me here.

Several years ago, back in 2016, I took it upon myself to write my life story after being completely overwhelmed by my diagnosis of advanced breast cancer. At the time, though I didn't know it, the writing was like therapy. I was in shock for several months and when that dissipated, I drifted into melancholia. It was as if my memories were all that I had and I discovered that if I immersed myself completely in them, and re-lived my life, all over again, perhaps it might take away some of the sadness. This was my escape back then and at the time it proved to be a soothing salve.

But it never lasted long. During that period, I recall looking about for what else I might do to resolve the sense of gloom that continued to overwhelm me, what could I immerse myself in to stop the pain of the anticipated grief of letting go of my children and how could I block the hopelessness of the present and any future that might be left to me. And so I picked up painting and tai chi and qigong, I watched movies and documentaries and tried to do all these things even all at once as a way of blocking the sadness. I prayed of course – I had been raised as a Christian, but I didn't really have a sense of who I was praying to. I felt remote from God and

continually overwhelmed by my grief. The harder I tried the more anxious I became; I was getting nowhere.

On a Gawler Foundation cancer retreat, I discovered what it felt like to take control, or in their terms, get back into the driver's seat. I learned that if I adopted a whole food plant-based diet, undertook an exercise program, surrounded myself with positive people, managed my emotions and meditated, then perhaps I could ward off this disease, be an outlier on that statistical curve or better still, be cured. It was the beginnings of hope. I read voraciously about spontaneous remissions, could that really ever happen to me I wondered.

Not long after that I went on a silent Meditation retreat. It was held in a Tibetan Buddhist temple outside Melbourne and it was, I was told, open to people of all faiths. What I loved most of all was the gentle tones of the retreat leader and I recall taking great comfort from his words – let yourself go, there is no future, there is no past, there is only the present moment. Over three days, we sat in silence, and I found a measure of peace in the gentleness of that routine. But on the final night, I was disturbed by a dream – as I opened the door from my room that led into the corridor, I found myself looking down into an abyss; fear enveloped me – what was this place? The next day in the session, the same black fear wrapped itself around me again. I was terrified. In the break, the retreat leader explained to me that it was a dark night experience and knowing that I was a Christian he went on to tell me how Jesus had died on the cross and that he had suffered just as I was suffering now and yet had risen again. All I needed to do was look to him. As we returned for the final session, Christian music flooded the temple. I recognised the songs and my spirit began to soar. I could feel the fear losing its grip on me, I was discovering a truth, a consciousness beyond myself, my cancer didn't seem relevant anymore. I wanted to know God.

As I returned to Melbourne there was something profound changing within me. I began to develop my meditation practice and I devoured Christian books one of which was Sarah's book on "Experiencing God in a Time of Crisis". I felt as though it was written for me. God was meeting me in the midst of my suffering. I recognised the illusions that I had been living, the way in which I had been clinging to my past story, I saw through my inability to let go of who I thought I was and I began to discover, over time, what it might be like to live a more authentic life, to place my trust in God, and to hope not necessarily for a cure but for living abundantly in the present moment, for freedom and joy in spite of my circumstances, for renewal in this world and beyond, whatever that might mean.

On reflection now, I know that I was becoming who I was meant to be, and it was the Melbourne lock downs, with the removal of so many distractions in life, that seemed to open the way for me. The longer I sat, the more peace I felt. In my mind, I began calling it the knowing place, a place where I could go in my silent moments where I could feel Christ's presence wash over me. My fear of dying, slowly fell away and began to be replaced by the assurance that God is real, that the spirit of Christ dwells within me and in all of us; all I need to do is let go and provide the space.

In April last year, I was fortunate enough to travel with some members of this church to Cradle Mountain in Tasmania. I'm really glad I took that trip because as gruelling as it was, it left me with an image that I still reflect on today. Unbeknownst to us, a blizzard had set in on Cradle Mountain just as we set out on our pilgrimage, and so for much of the journey, the challenge we all faced was to remain upright on a wooden boardwalk that stretched for miles on into the snowy landscape. As we set out on the second day, a metre of snow meant that the boardwalk was barely visible. I recall continually falling off, as we made our way very slowly through the blizzardous conditions. Every time I fell, sinking deep into the snow, sometimes to the left, or sometimes to the right, there was someone behind just picking me up and setting me upright again. I have no idea how many times this happened, but over and

over again I was picked up from where I fell, put back on the boardwalk and in that way, I just kept on going.

There have been many ups and downs on the journey I am now travelling. My weekly IV chemo treatment often leaves me feeling exhausted and emotionally depleted. Sometimes I struggle with juggling all the various activities I get involved in. I get anxious, I lose sight of the truth, I find myself driven by egocentric ambitions about being productive, about the need to perform, I do too much, I worry about others' perceptions of me, I get irritable, I take it out on family, my meditation practice falls away and so I fall off the boardwalk again.

But by now I have discovered it doesn't take much for me to get back on track. A walk along the Maribyrnong can sometimes be all that is needed, time to still my soul, quieten my spirit and find myself back in that knowing place – where God meets me, where what I bring is enough and where even in spite of my circumstances – I can find once more that freedom, that inexplicable joy that comes from holding a relationship with Christ and entering into a new experience of reality that is beyond what I thought I knew.

A few months ago, a group of Benedictus members living in Melbourne sought to come together as a group to seek fellowship with likeminded others who perhaps might be sharing the same path. It has been heartening to be a part of this web of relationships that has sprung to life so quickly and with such enthusiasm over this short time. Hearing the stories from fellow travellers at our recent gathering has greatly enriched my otherwise on-line journey with the Benedictus community.

Coming to the waterhole of Benedictus for me is knowing that here I will be satisfied. At Benedictus, I can find rest, peace and refreshment, along with thoughtful interpretations of biblical passages that always leave me changed. Indeed, I am glad to be a part of the ecosystem that brings life in abundance for us all. Thank you for allowing me to share with you.