

## INTRODUCTION

*“Keep company with me and you’ll learn to live freely and lightly.”*

—Matthew 11:30, *The Message*

It was the most embarrassing moment of my life. Within the first minute, I knew something was off. I had preached a thousand sermons before and some while feeling under the weather. This time, at a funeral no less, something was different, something was off. I woke up not feeling well that morning, but a pastor doesn’t get to fall ill when he or she has to minister to a grieving family. As I prepared for the day, I knew I was feeling tired, fatigued, like this was another thing I would just have to power through.

I remember clearly, I was preaching from Psalm 23, talking about valley experiences. The irony, although I didn’t realize it at the time, is that I was approaching a valley of my own. I preached that the Lord provides quiet places and is our shepherd, he leads us by quiet streams and restores our souls. Words of comfort came out of my mouth, but my mind was reeling and fighting to stay present. This grieving family was looking to me for support, much like in my life as a spiritual leader week-in and week-out, and all I wanted to do was be a help to people in need.

I stood in the pulpit, looked at the congregation gathered, and I quickly realized I was not going to make it through the sermon. As I hurried my way through it, looking at this grieving family, in mid-sentence I felt light-headed and disoriented, and then, I went down. The next thing I knew, paramedics were putting me into an ambulance.

On my way to the hospital, I felt embarrassed and ashamed, like a failure. I had let down a family and a community that was depending on me. For a long time, whenever I saw that family, the humiliation I felt about that experience would wash over me. What kind of pastor passes out while preaching a funeral? What could be so wrong with me that it would come to such an extreme example of breakdown? When I got to the hospital, the doctors examined me and gave me a diagnosis I had never heard of: I had “extreme fatigue.”

Extreme fatigue. From all outward appearances, things were fine. My new church start, Genesis United Methodist Church, was growing at a rapid pace. We were adding staff to accomplish all the work and ministry to be done. Some of the innovative things our ministry was doing were featured on local news channels. Newspapers were writing about us. We were featured on a segment of the nationally syndicated radio show *The Osgood File*. Because of all the outward appearances of success of my new church, you would think that I was living on a mountaintop. I was telling everyone who would listen about the great things that were going on at Genesis.

But the news didn't tell the story of the pressure I had put on myself to keep the ministry going. I didn't realize it, but I had set

such a high standard and expectation for myself that there would be no way to maintain that pace of work. I didn't take time off. I preached every Sunday. I was the spiritual CEO. I was the decision-maker. I was leading this ministry, and that meant 24/7 availability. Outwardly it looked like I was on a mountaintop, and I felt like I was on a mountaintop—for a short while. But then there I was, lying in the back of an ambulance with extreme fatigue. Sadly, what should have been a red light I treated as a yellow light, slowing down only to assess the situation but going right back to work at the same pace that would not be sustainable for me or for any one person.

## **Mountains and Valleys**

The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.

He makes me lie down in green pastures,  
he leads me beside quiet waters,  
he refreshes my soul.

He guides me along the right paths  
for his name's sake.

Even though I walk  
through the darkest valley,

I will fear no evil,  
for you are with me;  
your rod and your staff,  
they comfort me.

You prepare a table before me  
in the presence of my enemies.

You anoint my head with oil;  
 my cup overflows.  
 Surely your goodness and love will follow me  
 all the days of my life,  
 and I will dwell in the house of the LORD  
 forever. (Ps. 23)

Psalm 23 became a metaphor for the type of shift I would need to make in my own life. I was on a mountaintop, but I was quickly headed toward the valley. At the beginning of Psalm 23 David describes God, telling us who God is. *The Lord* is my shepherd. *He* makes me lie down in green pastures. *He* leads me beside quiet waters. *He* refreshes me. *He* guides me. David is talking *about* God. But when he gets to his valley, David changes from talking about God and starts talking *to* God. *You* are with me. *Your* rod and staff comfort me. *You* prepare a table for me. *You* anoint my head. *Your* goodness and love will follow me. On the mountaintop, it's *easier* to talk about God, isn't it? We shout out that the Lord is good. The Lord has done this for me! But when we find ourselves in the valley, we come face-to-face with God, and our language shifts. We need an intimacy with God deeper than we've known before. We need to rehearse to ourselves and say out loud to God, "You are with me, God. You comfort me, God. You defend me, God. You bless me, God." This is how we take each step through the valley. I had to stop talking *about* God and start talking *right to* God.

You might wonder why I would want you to know about my story. Why would I want to share my journey when it means admitting that I don't have it all together? The reason is because

I believe with all my heart that vulnerability and authenticity are the only way to find wholeness in Jesus Christ. We're not meant to gloss over or skim the surface, pretending our way through life. Jesus invites us to be real with him and with one another. Within the following pages are stories of my depression, despair, burnout, and shame. I'm not here to tell you that followers of Jesus will always have big houses, pain-free living, and all the happiness in the world. It's just not true. I'm not here to tell you that leaders, regardless of the scope of their public platforms, have it all together and never suffer pain, loss, or sadness. I am here to tell you that I believe in the holistic, healing love and salvation in Jesus Christ, who walks with us in the valleys and brings beauty from ash heaps again and again and again. I am here to tell you that I have been on the mountaintops and in the valleys, and I have discovered that we need a reset in our souls. We need to share stories so that others will too. When we're free to be real, that's when the real joy comes.

I have to tell this story because there are so many people who are suffering in silence. It's not just people who lead churches. I've sat in secular leadership training groups with business leaders, heads of universities, civic leaders, and executives of non-profit organizations. I've sat on boards of directors with many public leaders who in private moments can't wait to share with me the pain they are feeling in their own lives. Many of these persons are members of some church. We haven't done a good enough job in the church of being a safe place for vulnerability and authenticity. We put on our church clothes and paint on our smiles, pretending that we're all okay as we praise and worship,

only to drive away with the same heavy burdens and struggles we walked in with.

I believe that until we create churches that allow for more authenticity and transparency—where it’s okay to not be okay—and people can honestly tell their stories, we’ll continue to hear about burnout, stress, depression, anxiety, suicides, exhaustion, and breakdowns. I’m sharing my story because I want to chip away at the stigma around mental health in the church and faith communities. I want you to know my story, to know where I’ve been and where I’m at now so that we can begin a journey of healing together. I believe that healthy congregations create healthy people and healthy people create healthy congregations. I believe that the core of discipleship is wholeness. I believe in a God of holistic salvation, that God is concerned with saving every aspect of our being—our bodies, our souls, and our minds. I hope my story inspires you to recognize where you are right now, where you want to be, and how to avoid the pitfalls of trying to be everything to everybody. I’ve discovered that people need a place to be vulnerable and authentic, to know that they are not alone, whatever they may be going through, and that all of us play a role in helping to make churches that kind of safe space.

This runs counter to what we expect and experience in most churches. We think success looks like lots of people showing up, prominence, an environment free of conflict and baggage, tons of programs and activities, where everyone is happy all the time. That was true for Genesis UMC. We were a celebratory place, full of joy and exuberance—new and fresh. I remember a Genesis church member who approached me once to tell me that she was

leaving our ministry because our worship experience was too joyful. She didn't feel like there was a place for her to express her sadness, so she had to leave. We need places where we can name where we are. We need to create spaces for people to say out loud they are feeling sadness or fatigue, brokenness, or whatever valley they are walking through.

The Bible gives us a roadmap to wholeness. It starts and ends with Jesus, just as this book will. I've discovered that there are many examples of persons in scripture who have found their way through depression, anxiety, and burnout—who have walked through a valley—and found themselves in the embrace of God's relentless love for them and who have lived into God's vision for their lives. We'll look at the experiences of David and what he has to teach us about depression. We'll look at the actions of Mary and Martha to see what they can teach us about stress and feeling overwhelmed. We'll look to Elijah for an examination of exhaustion and burnout. We'll study Job's life to learn about grief. We'll explore Judas's and Peter's responses to Jesus' arrest to see what they might teach us about shame, fear, and vulnerability.

This book is a call to reset and regroup. It's an opportunity to name that we're exhausted, overcommitted, chronically fatigued, and depressed; we're working too much; we're ashamed; we're afraid; we feel alone; and we need Jesus. Jesus shows us how to live and how to live life abundantly. I must confess that as a leader, there have been times in my ministry when I've drifted and gone off course. I've carried burdens that didn't belong to me; they belonged to God. I've carried people's problems that didn't belong to me; they belonged to God. I've carried unrealistic views

of how others thought a leader should behave, think, and act that didn't belong to me; they belonged to God. I've carried hurt that I should have given to God. I've carried the weight of unrealistic expectations when I should have given them to God. I was operating in my own strength instead of accessing the kingdom resources that are available to me.

Jesus says in Matthew 11:28-30, "Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly" (*The Message*).

My prayer for you is that you will slow down long enough to discover Jesus' unforced rhythms of grace. Jesus offers us a way to live, to lead, and to love that does not end in burnout. I'm convinced that wherever you are on your journey, this book will empower you to allow the work of God's transformation to become a reality in your life.