

Der Fluss—The River

*“When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee;
and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee.”*
(Isaiah 43:2)

I had never wondered before if I would see another summer. Yet on that day the question crossed my mind. Even as spring seemed to approach, winter had descended again. As I began my solitary journey, the dark, bare arms of the oaks lifted their supplications to the brooding skies, and the bronze prairie grass bowed to the endless, ever-deepening cold wind. The full impact of where I was, and how isolated my existence had become, hit me on that day in 1875. Northwestern Minnesota was a lonely and desolate place. There were no roads to encourage my travel as I made my own trails through tall grass and weaved paths through the trees. My only lifeline lay beside me on the wagon seat, undulating to the rhythmic plodding of my horse. The Word lay upon my wagon seat; its impact had brought me here. The words of God traveled with me into the wilderness of a seemingly godless and unending winter. Yet I knew that someday the steel tracks of the railroads would stretch their arms to embrace this land. Someday the bells of

steeped churches would ring across this place, calling the faithful to worship. God had sent me here to make a difference.

Even as a young man of thirty-one years, I had been worn by the loneliness, desolation, and brutality of my first winter. Chronic bronchitis still tormented my sometimes-frail body. Clinging to the Word of Life, I was still besieged with doubts of my continued existence in this godforsaken land. Thankfully, I was now at least blessed with a horse and wagon; feeling it would have been very difficult to reach my destination on foot, my usual mode of transportation, especially with the travel conditions as they were.

As a young missionary-pastor, I had set out early on that Saturday morning, heading for my preaching station in Perham. I had stopped at Hermann Petermann's place on the way. He was one of my parishioners who had opened his home to me while my cabin was being built.

Pushing back his fur hat, the sleeves of his wool plaid shirt stained with grease from preparing beaver pelts for market, he had warned, "The bridge across the Ottertail River is gone, burned by the prairie fire in late summer. Go to Otto Luedke's, he'll put you up for the night; try to cross the river in the morning." I had crossed the river on the winter ice, but now I knew the stream would need to be forded.

"Do I cross where the trail crosses?"

"Go up toward the lake; there is a shallow spot there. Remember, some places are over fifteen feet deep."

I wanted to reach Luedke's by evening. The day blew gently from the southeast, the old horse blew steam into the cold day. I had never experienced weather that would thaw and seem like spring and then turn around and freeze back up like winter. The earlier signs of spring had all disappeared.

Leaves were piled across the earlier traces of my route, deep and crisp in the freezing day, and where I crossed prairies, the grasses were bronze and steeled from the winter cold. Fields

were stark and brown and had either been harvested months ago or had been consumed by the locusts the previous summer. The wooden-spoked wheels of my wagon seemed to find every bump and hole. My back ached from the rough, unforgiving ride on the wooden seat.

With the warming days, I thought the winter had passed. Now it had returned with a vengeance and sapped my spirit. I could only pray that somehow I might survive the seemingly endless winter. I had only the stories of the homesteaders: “*Solches wetter!*” Such weather! Weather so cold it froze spit before it hit the ground. Snow so deep, all travel stopped. Now I wondered if winter ever stopped. How would I get to my preaching stations? The river crossing loomed in my mind and the thought of it tested my faith. Only God knew. He would let me know. This land could not be godforsaken.

Petermann’s shotgun lay under the seat, “You should see some grouse along the way; a little fresh meat would be good.” He had been enfolded by this land. He had adapted to its emptiness and also its fullness. He was like the growing legions. This place, so empty yet so full. So giving, yet in such need. For all the “Petermanns” on this long trail, I knew I must find my voice; I knew I must raise my voice above the lonely howl of the wolf. I knew I must be a rock, even as the winds cut me like a knife and rent my courage asunder.

God had called me here. The souls of my native Deutschland sought their future here, and I knew I had to put God into that future. Like sheep without a shepherd, they looked to me. Oh, those poor sheep! I, so weak, so lost in my newfound emptiness. My only lifeline bounced upon that wagon seat beside me: the Word of Life.

I had never seen such a harsh winter or one that came so early or stayed so long. The day had changed, the wind had turned, and the clouds rushed in once again. Now the northeast wind began to swirl snow behind the wagon wheels, and even my buffalo

robe could not keep the wind from prying its cold, steely fingers into my worn and thin black suit. Ropes of steam rolled from the old mare's nostrils as she plodded along, my only saving grace, keeping me from going alone, afoot.

Snowflakes stuck to the back of the stalwart horse as I prodded her onward. I was fearful of this trip, and the apprehension had not gone away. Even with my heavy buffalo robe, I shivered, both from the cold and because of the tense feeling within me.

"Lord be with me," the breath of the cold north wind touched my face as God either reassured me or warned me of the danger. The services in Perham and Frazee were scheduled, my parishioners would be there. I reached the Luedke farm and their warm hospitality. My night's rest was fitful at best. I felt alone, overcome by desolation. My mind was tormented with fear of the next day's crossing. My faith waned, and the relentless thought that now I, too, was godforsaken, chased sleep from my night.

Otto Luedke helped me early in the morning to get the horse hitched and ready. In his broken mix of English and German I was again warned, "You don't want to cross the river in the dark. You must find the right spot to cross; there are some deep spots that are impossible to cross." So Otto helped me hitch up the horse long before daylight, with the idea that I could get to the river about sunrise. After a bit of food for both myself and the horse, we were plodding for the river. On that early Sunday morning the snow lay before me, untouched and level. Its whiteness and innocent smoothness was deceiving. Previous thaws had left mud beneath the snow, and my old gray labored as she heaved against the harness. It was supposed to be the beginning of spring, yet the snow lay as thick as I had ever seen! The way was icy and no one had broken the trail before me. The river bank would be slippery, but with the bridge burned out, I knew we would have to negotiate our way into the water to make the crossing. Half-light greeted me at the Ottertail River, the water having risen from snowmelt and recent rain.

“Cross near the lake,” Otto had advised. The idea was to stay away from the deep water where the river channeled after leaving the lake. The land lay dark, yet the snow reflected some light, and as my eyes adjusted, I could see rather clearly. The sound of the water as it flowed past the old burned stubs of the bridge pilings gave me a good gauge of how far I had to go to reach the river. I heard the flow of water past the shoreline, tinkling the ice shards as they moved in the current. The charred posts protruded eerily above the flowing water. My toes stung from the cold, and my tattered mittens allowed the cold breath of frosty air to stiffen my fingers. A few stubborn leaves still clung to the oak trees, determined to make the winter without falling to the frozen ground. Yet my mind imagined the ringing church bells of my youth in Germany, now calling us to worship here in Minnesota, and I smelled the green and flourishing crops that I knew would overtake this land.

As I approached the river, I became uncertain of the exact place to cross. Otto’s instructions were probably clear to anyone who had forded before, but I had only ever crossed on the old bridge, and on the winter’s ice. Now with the snow and high water, I could not be sure of the exact spot. I surveyed the whole shore, searching for a level point to enter the water. The old gray knew better, as evidenced by her reluctance to wet her feet, even as I prodded her with the whip. The remains of the burned bridge were fifty yards downstream, and I was advised to cross upstream from the old bridge, so it seemed like the correct place to enter the water. This was the only logical route with the only probable crossing point. Upstream was Rush Lake and downstream was a stretch of the river that was wide and marshy before it entered Ottertail Lake. Ice rimed the edge of the bank, the wagon slid sideways as the old horse hesitated, knowing better, but submissive to my command—whipped into submission as my very soul felt whipped into the submission of service, weighed with the

burden of souls hungry for the Word and Sacrament that I carried to them now.

Crossing the river, such a fearful thing! The other side was indeed tranquil and offered peace, but the crossing terrified me. Even as I had come to trust in the other side and witnessed to my faith in the eternal peace of heaven, I now understood the fear that we all harbor about that eternal crossing. I knew I must press onward with all the faithful. I tentatively coaxed my horse into the water. She was reluctant and took considerable urging to head for the far shore. She finally entered the water and all was well for a considerable distance. I felt I had chosen the correct route. I was still well above the water as the horse plodded belly-deep in the current.

Suddenly the horse plunged deeper and was swimming courageously for the far shore. Just as suddenly, I felt the wagon begin to list and sink deeper, and in a moment's time, it had sunk from beneath me. I clung to the back wheel, since I could not swim. The wagon sank completely, and I released it from my grasp. My breath left me as the water penetrated my clothes. The cold pierced through me like cold steel nails. I was pulled downstream by the icy current, losing all control in the treacherous flow. Only by God's grace did I remain above the water. The words of the Catechism rang in my intellect. "Thee I floated, as though born up by the very wings of angels." With my heavy cold-weather clothes, I felt I was lost yet I stayed afloat. The burnt, black stubs of the pilings of the old bridge stared at me like black demons. Yet they caught my attention, and again, by nothing less than a miracle, I was swept into one of the burned bridge supports. I clung to it with every ounce of effort left in my cold-shocked body and was able to stay above water. My fingers stiffened and became numb from the cold. I knew that I must get out of the icy water and make it to shore. I released my grip from the piling and reached for the next part of the old bridge. By some supernatural power from above, I was able to creep from piling to piling and

reach shore where I could walk. “God, You are here! You bear me up.” My coat and buffalo robe were so heavy with water that I could not stand as I neared shore. I struggled to get out of the soaked clothes and fought my way out of the water. Shedding the waterlogged garments, I was able to reach solid land.

As I looked upstream, I saw that my horse had somehow arrived at the shore and was dragging the wagon with her. The old mare stood there, head drooping down and her sides heaving, yet she was like a beacon from God, having made the journey along with me. She gave me hope, and I knew my faith was not in vain. Even my bag of belongings bobbed against the shore, and my trunk lay among a clump of brown reeds. As God declared in Isaiah 43:2, “When thou passest through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee.”

Indeed, this was my Valley of the Shadow. Now I could fear no evil. God was with me, even here. I knew that I was in Minnesota with God’s purpose and he was guiding me. Letting go of the wagon; trusting that I would be borne up by God. Letting go and trusting; a change. Fear had vanished and been replaced by faith. I knew I would survive the winter. The crossing—what a revelation. I understood that He would be with me always. The faith of the eternal crossing was made plain in the reality of a lonely and treacherous river.

Near the river, as my faithful horse slogged along, I saw a wisp of smoke. A humble farm with a sod wall banked into a hillside and a simple log barn loomed in front of me. I was able to arrive at a farm. They took me in and helped me get dry so I could continue. Mrs. Krueger, wrapped in a ragged wool blanket, turned to my horse and exclaimed, “Oh such a wet and cold beast,” and led her to the barn with its relative warmth and a bit of precious grain.

Adolf Krueger, fully bearded, with a soiled wool cap pulled over his ears, walked me to the leather-hinged door of their shelter dug into the side of a hill. The home was dark but warm; small

enough to be heated by a steel-plate stove vented out through the earthen roof.

“And you, wet traveler, we must dry your clothes. Come in by the stove,” Adolf stuffed extra wood into the stove and the added heat crept into me. Praise God I had no lasting effects from my cold dunk in the Ottertail River. The Kruegers’ austere hospitality probably saved my life just as surely as the burned bridge posts saved me in the river.

“I crossed upstream from the old bridge. That’s where it seemed I had been told to cross.”

“You need to get right up by the shore of Rush Lake, where there is shallow water. There are some deep channels just downstream from the lake,” Adolf said, shaking his head.

Adolf then smiled and reached for another log to shove into the stove and said, “Looks like you got your Sunday morning bath.” The extra heat hit me like a wave when he opened the door on the stove. It penetrated my whole body—just like the realization that I had crossed in the wrong spot, yet somehow survived with little more consequence than a cold bath. As he gripped a branch with calloused hands to shut the door on the stove, I read volumes in the dark, soil-stained creases in his hands; Adolf had crossed his share of rivers as well.

“You must be pretty determined to conduct that church service,” Mrs. Krueger commented as I got onto my wagon to continue the trip to the church. “Maybe we’ll venture up to one of your services some time.”

“We would be honored to have you there. May God bless you in your labors.”

They were two souls every bit as far from their native Germany as I was. Both had come to America, just as I had. Their young, strong faces prematurely creased by sun, wind, and hardship looked after me, perhaps holding me in some awe that I didn’t deserve or perhaps shaking silent heads at my utter stupidity. Whether out of pity or respect, they did arrive at my preaching

station, and God led them not only to freedom and a modicum of prosperity, but also to faith. The Kruegers were among the hardy souls who remained in that land and built a future there. God led me to his sheep by various means. How often he worked with people and events that seemed not of God yet worked for the furthering of the kingdom.

As I set down the story of my ministry in northwestern Minnesota, I am compelled to return often to those events of my second baptism that occurred in the Ottertail River, and to my roots, for God indeed brought me to another world when He planted me in Minnesota.

The Ottertail River, where it leaves Rush Lake is quite deep in places. I prayed that God would lead me across that river, and so He did, in His own way. If I had hoped for a parting of the waters, God answered my prayer with some burned posts and a tired old mare with enough tenacity to pull a wagon to shore. Upon my stupidity and inadequacies, God heaped humility. Yet, I sensed God in that early morning sky. "Into Your hands," I prayed and I trusted. The hardships, the elements, and the loneliness were all there, yet that was my most formative crossing, the event that molded my faith and determination.

There also was God.