

Defrocked

*Good News from a Bad Pastor
for a Better Church*

LILLIAN DANIEL

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“Lillian Daniel offers readers an unvarnished view of the pain of ministry coupled with a beautiful narrative of spiritual discovery; with a preacher’s voice, a writer’s ear for language, and dashes of poetic reflection, *Defrocked* is a masterful account of agony standing next to amazing grace.”

—**Otis Moss III**, senior pastor of Trinity United Church of Christ
and author of *Blue Note Preaching in a Post-Soul World:*
Finding Hope in an Age of Despair

“Sometimes, we do things of which we are deeply ashamed. Sometimes, we get publicly exposed for what we’ve done. Sometimes, others, whether through malice or incompetence, make mistakes that deeply hurt us in response to our mistakes. Sometimes, things like this happen to a person who is an excellent and honest writer with the courage to tell their story in hopes it will help others. Only very rarely do all these things come together in one person who happens to be a pastor. That’s what makes *Defrocked* so special. I think this story will be important for you to read, not to mention engaging and instructive, just as it was for me.”

—**Brian D. McLaren**, author of *Faith after Doubt:*
Why Your Beliefs Stopped Working and
What to Do about It and *The Last Voyage*

“*Defrocked* offers a perspective often missing from institutional religious discourse: that the ‘ditch’—the place of failure and public scandal—is actually where one core tenet of the gospel resides. Church isn’t just a place for the ‘whole’ to help the ‘broken’ but a community of the broken, where surprising grace often comes in unexpected moments.”

—**Jacqui Lewis**, senior minister and public theologian at Middle Church
and author of *Fierce Love: A Bold Path to Ferocious Courage and*
Rule-Breaking Kindness That Can Heal the World

“Daniel’s *Defrocked* tells a story of mistake, loss, betrayal, and down-in-the-ditch disappointment followed by (so typical of Jesus) redemption, rediscovery, and rejoicing in pastoral vocation. Of course, the quite wonderful preacher, Daniel, tells her tale with confessional honesty and yet (so typical of Daniel) with wit, grace, and charity. Here’s the heartfelt, intimate, candid-to-the-point-of-uncomfortable testimony of a pastor who stumbles, is defrocked, and (by God’s grace working through the bumbling, beloved, and lovable church) is raised and restored to ministry. You heard it first

from me: *Defrocked* is sure to be one of the most well-received and widely read books on Christian ministry in our time.”

—**Will Willimon**, retired bishop in the United Methodist Church
and author of *Accidental Preacher: A Memoir*

“The best communities of faith understand their leaders as the vulnerable and flawed people we all are. With wit and a generous vulnerability, Daniel reminds us that no one is forever defined by the worst thing they’ve ever done and that we must build and nurture lives and communities where there is always opportunity for redemption and healing.”

—**Amy Butler**, senior minister of Community Church of Honolulu
and author of *Beautiful and Terrible Things: Faith, Doubt,
and Discovering a Way Back to Each Other*

“*Defrocked* is a brave and generous as well as deeply faithful book—one that tells the truth without rushing toward easy redemption. In this memoir, Daniel reflects on failure and exile, vulnerability and restoration in ministry, offering an unflinching account of what happens when the church itself ends up in the ditch. ‘Our stories are gifts, not ransom,’ Daniel writes, insisting that confession and grace must never be coerced but received as holy, human practices. This book is a vital resource for the church today, inviting so many to imagine forms of accountability, restoration, and belonging that are honest enough to name harm and hopeful enough to trust that God is still at work among imperfect people.”

—**Mihee Kim-Kort**, copastor of First Presbyterian Church
in Annapolis, Maryland, and author of *Outside the Lines:
How Embracing Queerness Will Transform Your Faith*

“In an age when the church is hemorrhaging trust and when too many of our institutions respond to failure with silence and shame, Daniel does something prophetic: she tells the truth. *Defrocked* is a book the church desperately needs but is too afraid to ask for. With searing honesty, dark humor, and unflinching grace, she takes us into the ditch, where our carefully constructed lives fall apart, and shows us that God meets us there. The church talks a lot about grace but rarely shows us what it looks like when we actually need it. Daniel shows us. This is not a self-help book about bouncing back; it’s a resurrection story about being broken open. *Defrocked* is both a personal confession and a prophetic critique, a love letter to the church and a lament

over its failures. If you love the church enough to tell the truth about it, then get some company and pick up *Defrocked*.”

—**Tripp Fuller**, host of the *Homebrewed Christianity* podcast and Visiting Professor of Theology and Culture at Luther Seminary

“I teach ethics under what Wendell Berry called a ‘Methodist Cathedral.’ I grew up in parsonages hearing, with ear cupped to keyhole, excruciating problems facing good church people. Some were big, gaudy Texas transgressions. Others were imperceptible, hidden under layers of decorum. People training for ministry want a road map to resilient leadership. Thankfully, Daniel’s book is not a road map. It is a truth. And her words are more helpful than most purportedly cartographical lessons of leadership dispensed from above. Highly recommended for seminarians, whether wizened or blissfully ignorant.”

—**Amy Laura Hall**, Associate Professor of Christian Ethics and Gender, Sexuality, and Feminist Studies at Duke Divinity School and author of *Erecting the Pulpit: Muscular Christianity from Teddy Roosevelt to Donald Trump*

“*Defrocked* puts us in the hands of a keenly observant master of wordcraft. Daniel broaches the difficult and fraught subject of how we, as a church, deal with our own and our leaders’ missteps. Scrubbed of self-pity, her book not only offers a grueling firsthand account of a pastor struggling through the disciplinary ‘process’ but also suggests how that necessary practice might be marked more by human (rather than bureaucratic) sensitivity and a deeper faithfulness to a God who has already decided not to give up on any one of us. Somehow, Daniel never loses her sense of humor so that her book exhibits wryness throughout. Truly edifying (that is, upbuilding), *Defrocked* is essential reading for church administrators, ‘bad’ and good pastors, and laypersons who may be drafted onto disciplinary committees.”

—**Rodney Clapp**, author of *Living Out of Control: Political and Personal Faith in Waning Christendom*

“With costly generosity, Daniel invites us on her journey from transgression to transformation. It is a compelling personal story told with painful honesty. The book also contends with difficult questions facing church bodies. Can we firmly address the errors of the past that ignored the gravity of clergy abuses while also responding with compassion and care for those who cross a boundary yet pose no ongoing threat? Daniel’s story details how a

fall from grace can become a fall into grace. It is an illuminating narrative of struggle, insight, and ultimately hope for individuals, communities, and denominations.”

—**Heidi Neumark**, former pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church of Manhattan and author of *Breathing Space: A Spiritual Journey in the South Bronx*

“In *Defrocked*, Daniel recounts her harrowing ecclesiastical exile and her eventual restoration to ministry as a different pastor—perhaps even a different person. The person writing this book knows what it feels like to hurt people and be hurt by people, to desperately need grace, and to generously give grace. She knows fury, and she knows forgiveness. While she emerged on the other side of this experience with sturdy boundaries, we are lucky Daniel’s boundaries don’t preclude the telling of her tale and the sharing of her wisdom. This book is a gift to imperfect people, which is to say this book is a gift to all of us.”

—**Katherine Willis Pershey**, copastor of First Congregational Church United Church of Christ, Appleton, Wisconsin, and coauthor of *Love Letters to God*

“No one goes into ministry thinking that we’ll end up in the Bad Pastors’ Club. But, since we’re human, some of us do. What almost no one does is talk about it. In *Defrocked*, Daniel bravely and candidly does. No spin. No punches pulled. She tells the truth, and truth-telling is the hallmark of great writing. This book took courage to write, and it will help a lot of sinners—in other words, human beings.”

—**Tony Jones**, author of *The God of Wild Places: Rediscovering the Divine in the Untamed Outdoors*

“With amazing courage, riveting prose, prophetic truthfulness, terrific questions, blessed retrospection, piercing confession, and even occasional humor, Daniel candidly examines from several agonizing angles the ecclesiastical process that led to her yearlong exile from ministry and the unexpected resurrection that followed. This unforgettable book will assist any synodical or diocesan committee tasked with examination of clergy misconduct to acknowledge that well-intended (and historically overdue) church policy can sometimes become enamored with a legally obsessed secularism, forgetful of the gospel, and is perhaps incapable of arriving at a one-size-fits-all outcome

of discipline and fairness. Unique in perspective among other books of its kind, *Defrocked* is written by a pastor who messed up in the past and who now oversees hundreds of pastors and congregations, sometimes leading similar misconduct reviews. Daniel's writing is a gift to the church and a ringing challenge for its leaders to discern truth and grace, openly where possible, caring for the body of Christ's many wounded ones in a culture where blame, shame, and silence so often hold sway. Buy this book! Any reader will discover the purpose of the church and the God who, as she puts it, 'uses the wilderness to change us and . . . exile to find us.'"

—**Frank G. Honeycutt**, Evangelical Lutheran Church
in America pastor and author of *Genealogy Theology:
Exploring Family Lines and Spiritual Legacies*

"All of Daniel's work is funny and wise. This new book achieves its profundity by being vulnerable and honest. Perhaps God does his best work with us once we give up our illusions of righteousness and join the Bad Pastors' Club."

—**Jason Byassee**, senior minister of Timothy Eaton
Memorial Church, Toronto, Ontario

"Salvador Dali observed that 'Mistakes are almost always of a sacred nature.' In this powerful book, Daniel courageously reveals a period and process in her life when mistakes (her own and those of ecclesiastical structures) helped her discover the sacredness of the mortal journey. She is one of the most engaging and eloquent voices in contemporary Christianity. *Defrocked* confesses in an open, honest, and encouraging way the beauty of Paul's words: 'We have this treasure in earthen vessels.' Once picked up, this book is almost impossible to put down."

—**Michael B. Brown**, former senior minister of
Marble Collegiate Church and cohort leader of the
Preaching Initiative at Duke Divinity School

To my husband, Jim

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Author's Note

As with any work of creative nonfiction that has been allowed to cook for a good long time, this book contains ingredients, like wisdom, that may improve with time passed, and others that were pulled off the old spice rack of my imperfect memory—such as the dialogue, which is exactly as I remember it but probably different from what was actually spoken—and other ingredients that may not be fit for dinner with human company. These include the thoughts and feelings I experienced in the moment, which I have tried to display unflinchingly, no matter how distant from or even embarrassed I feel about them a decade later. This is the soup I serve to you now.

If you want a story told from a wise victor's perspective of the person who has already learned the lessons, this book is not for you. My own character in this story is on a journey. Stay with that hubristic and humbled person as best you can through the first half of the book, and tell me, after you read the second half, what we need to work on next. Every book I write is shaped by what I learned from the questions I got about the one before it. This book is different in that I try to tell the story not from an intellectual distance but from the perspective of how it felt as I went through it, recalling the book I was looking for back when I was in the ditch—not an answer key but the questions that I think we are all asking, if we are honest.

In order to protect the privacy of others and myself, many names, places, and details have been changed, and in some cases characters

are a compilation of more than one person, including volunteer leaders, staff in the church, denominational officials, and parishioners. For example, the two clergy friends who appear in the book as Mark and Shannon actually represent a larger circle of minister friends that I could count on one-and-a-half hands. Despite the many connections I thought I had, during the process I describe in the book, I learned in the ditch that my circle was much smaller and more transactional than I knew, so when it comes to the friends who took the risk of connecting with me during that time, I agreed to keep their names a secret, which I do to this day.

In some ways, this story is about who owns a story—and the telling of it, and the timeline, and the audience—and what I learned along the way. So in order to protect the privacy of my extended family, my children, their father, and more, I have left them out almost entirely, although perhaps this is another way of protecting my own privacy. There were times I could have been forced to tell my story too early during the process and didn't and waited. I would like for my own family to have this space as well.

As for denominational personnel, processes, and structures, I have described them as generally and charitably as possible. For church officials, I have decided to use ecclesiastical titles that are more expansive than my own tiny branch of the Christian church's family tree because this is not about any one particular system or denomination, but more about finding grace amid the human frailties we all share as the body of Christ.

Acknowledgments

Thank you to my speaking agent Jim Chaffee, who before, during, and after the fall continues to broker the awkwardly extroverted events in my introverted life. I'm grateful to BBH Literary agents Laura Bardolph and David Bratt whose greatest gift to me was the editor they found in Julie Mullins at Westminster John Knox, willing to reform this mess of a book without making it overly decent or too in order.

As for my wonderful and wild United Church of Christ family, the characters, stories, and procedures in this book represent both the worst and the best of us, and that includes myself. Three decades after being ordained I still feel like we are the church I have been looking for. I have pastored four remarkable UCC congregations, and today, I am humbled to be a conference minister entrusted with the care and oversight of our diverse churches and pastors in Michigan, and yet I remain, at heart, an aspirational convert, just one more itchy scratchy member of a weird herd of cats.

One of the blessings of the driftless region was the Iowa Summer Writing Festival in Iowa City, where each year I got closer to learning how to write creative nonfiction. My teachers told me to resist getting inside the heads of other characters, whose inner life stories are not ours to tell because we all want someone to sit next to at the next family reunion. So, I would like to take this opportunity to ask my two grown kids, Ab and Calvin, to acknowledge how hard it was

to resist telling their stories, as much as I wanted to because I am so proud of them both.

As for my husband, Jim, who would like even less to be said about himself, I'm grateful he let me tell you just a bit about the raw and new relationship that was barely beginning at the time this book begins. That fragile little love story could easily have been crushed by both the past and present that year, but instead it persisted and became a marriage whose story will not be told here, because it is both too delicious and still cooking.

Introduction

It was all over the news: A young pastor at a suburban church, just down the road from my church, had been arrested. I had been his mentor and his pastor, back when he was a high school football player, a member of the high school youth group, then a college religion major who went on to study liberation theology at an elite seminary. Now he had a dream job as an associate pastor at a thriving congregation nearby, conferred in a tear-filled ordination service at his home church.

At that ordination service, I had marked the change in our relationship. We would now be coequal clergy colleagues, two pastors united in a calling so gloriously weird that the better it's done, the more quietly it ends, with a sheet cake on a final Sunday. Sheet cakes aren't just for pastors, of course. We all want that last sheet cake when we retire. Some of us may want more, but none of us want less. We all want to end up in the Sheet Cake Club.

But just two years after his ordination, this pastor was in the news for being arrested, not for a stand on social justice, but accused of theft. The charge was incomprehensible to everyone who knew him at the church he served and the church he was raised in, but all attempts to reach him went nowhere. All we knew was that he was immediately pulled out of his pastoral position and that members of his church were told that they were not to reach out to him in any

way, for fear of tampering with either the legal or ecclesiastical procedures, apparently ongoing.

None of that applied to the church he grew up in, so people stepped up, sent their love, and offered to help, but none of the messages to him or his family got a response, either. He was incommunicado. But I knew his loneliness was only just beginning, and that no one from his church or ours would be hearing anything from him anytime soon. Having entered the same exile, I guessed that he had been warned by the ecclesiastical powers to ignore the texts, the calls, the notes, and the knocks on the door, instructed to refrain from any human connection with anyone who had so much as walked by the church he served, because to respond to anyone in that community or even the town would be perceived as disobedience. His future as a minister hung in the balance in a mysterious process he did not yet understand.

By not responding to anyone related to the church—including other clergy—he was following the rules, as I had followed the rules. I knew he was holding his breath and that soon he would be suffocating, deprived of the air of human contact with the church he had poured his life into. I predicted that at a certain point he would slip. He would confide in or respond to someone, only to discover that he could be ratted out by either a compassionate church member asking for guidance or another member of the clergy, quoted via forwarded messages in a mysterious process that would fling his own words back to him as proof of his disobedience. I knew that after a few dings and dents like that, the only answer was going to be to isolate from everyone, everywhere, while lurking online to hear people say, “Don’t worry, the pastor is being cared for.”

But it wasn’t true. The young minister was slowly sliding toward a suffocation he couldn’t yet see, a solitude I didn’t want him to bear.

I understood because I was in a similar liminal state of hiding in place.

In an odd twist of fate, at the exact same time my protégé dropped out of his ministry and went underground, refusing to communicate with anyone, I had done the same disappearing act, pulled from my own pulpit without warning in the days leading up to Holy Week. Instead of seeing me on Palm Sunday, my congregation was told that

they were not allowed to reach out to me, because I was forbidden to communicate with anyone during this time of investigation.

Do not communicate with the pastor. There is a process. Better safe than sorry.

From a distance, from amid the huge crowd of people he was trying so hard not to communicate with, I knew my messages would land in the same trash as everyone else's because that is exactly where all the caring messages to me were currently landing. But I knew that I was now the one person he could safely talk to, the one who would not betray him or use his weakness as evidence against him, the one who would hold his confidences not out of honor but out of a shared dishonor. Yet how could I let him know that I was that person?

I worded my next text very carefully, aware that if my trust was misplaced, it would detonate the process I was also in.

But looking back at that text, I now see it really wasn't very carefully worded at all.

"Tonight at 6 p.m.," it read, "you are invited to the first inaugural meeting of the newly founded Bad Pastors' Club."

And he showed up.

Because that's the sort of stupid thing that bad pastors do.

At church conferences, late in the evening, pastors would talk about colleagues who had fallen off the righteous way, who had disgraced their churches, screwed up so badly that they were picked right out of the parish they were serving, plucked out without a party, nary a goodbye.

"What did he do that was that awful?" I would wonder, and only sometimes would I get an answer, steeped in rumor and often not accurate, because these pastors who left their churches under cover of night were not there to tell their stories themselves. Part of the deal was that this was the end of their pastoral road, and therefore the end of clergy meetings and clergy friendships, the end of an ending where you get to tell each other how the story ends. So the remaining pastors, who had not screwed up, were also grieving and angry at the loss of yet another teammate. "Doesn't anyone out there know how

to play this game?” they’d ask. Or, if someone felt braver or perhaps more fragile, they might say, “There but for the grace of God go I.”

“Me, I’m going for the sheet cake,” another would say as a short-hand wrap-up, meaning a quietly wholesome retirement, a farewell in the church social hall. No drama, just a headstone of humility: a simple store-bought sheet cake made by the local grocery store to feed a crowd, not a fancy crowd but the “whoever shows up, we’ll cut the cake into as many pieces as we need to” kind of a crowd. This is the heavenly banquet played out on earth, the celebration of a job well done in a world where many are fed but none too nutritiously. It’s the giant sweet sheet cake emblazoned with “Blessings and Goodspeed” in unnaturally colored aqua icing, and a parish hall full of people whose secrets you have heard, whose people you have buried, whose marriages you have performed not once but twice and maybe three times.

From the small-church pastors to the tall-steeple pastors, from the pastoral hospital bedside hand-holders to the princes of the pulpit, in the end, we all just want the sheet cake.

“Let’s just shoot for the Sheet Cake Club, OK?” became the toast as the pastors parted company. I had my doubts about some of them. But I was sure my own membership would never be in question.

And now here I was, on a leave of absence, a member not of the Sheet Cake Club but of the Bad Pastors’ Club.

At this point, I need to jump ahead in the story to tell you that eventually I rejoined the Sheet Cake Club, not at the church in the suburbs where I failed and was defrocked and have never returned to, but years later, at a church in Iowa that called me at the end of that defrocking and refrocking process. After about a year, my credentials were restored and I was allowed to return to the vocation I had taken for granted, with a new appreciation. That year away clarified things that should have been obvious to me. Preaching was and will always be a great gift and privilege, but being a pastor was not and never should have been my core identity and the center of all my relationships.

With that clarity, I began to want to be a pastor again, but I knew I had to do it differently, and I believe I did. I arrived to pastor that new church in Iowa feeling like damaged goods, but by the time I left six years later, I tasted the sheet cake of a sweet goodbye, and I felt once again beloved by God and the church.

The ending to this story was happier than I could have imagined. Not only was I able to return to church work, but somehow God used this experience to shape a calling within me to a new kind of ministry, a pastor to pastors. The fact that, as I write this, I currently serve as a conference minister, a regional leader in my denomination, responsible for the care and oversight of 140 churches and more than 350 clergy in the state of Michigan, is a blessing so big I still cannot believe it. It would be tempting to take only my renewed Sheet Cake Club card with me into the future, but I also carry, and will carry with me always, my membership card in the Bad Pastors' Club.

I carry it not because I am proud of my mistakes but because I want to remember them and learn from them. I also carry it as a diploma of sorts. I learned lessons from that time that I do not want to forget. The people I expected to be there bailed on me, in ways that I now see I have bailed on others. I trusted in the process of the church even when the evidence was clear it was untrustworthy, and I carry with me a sense of caution. The church is made up of human beings, and sometimes our procedures and tribunals bring out our worst, as I am sure it did in me and as it did in people who seemed to have all the power.

As isolating as my inaugural year in the Bad Pastors' Club was, a small group of friends and a surprising group of strangers graced me with goodness and, more importantly, told me the truth about myself, even when I did not want to hear it. I would never have tasted a bite of sheet cake if it were not for them.

At one time or another, we're all in the ditch, like the man who was beaten, robbed, and left for dead in the story of the Good Samaritan. That place in the ditch is for all of us. Whether we get pushed in or we jump in with our own two feet, we all find ourselves there at some point. This book is the story of how I came to understand that life's a ditch. And then, by the grace of God, you live.

And the story isn't just for individuals. Beset by scandals, increasingly unsure of its place in the world, and abandoned by a lot of people who just stopped coming, the institutional church is in the ditch on the side of the road too.

But as I came to find out, maybe that's where the church was supposed to be all along.

Palm Sunday

After a year away from the ministry, my exile would end in the loving arms of a church in Dubuque, Iowa, where the congregation had heard about my sins before I arrived and welcomed me anyway. The next four years were a gradual climb back into trust—mutual trust with my new parishioners and trust in myself. The growing pains of those years in Iowa were real, but so was the slow restoration and healing of my sense of self and calling.

And then, in the winter months of 2020, at the speed of a whiplash, all the memories of my year of exile from years ago—the investigation, the tribunal, being defrocked and later refrocked—came back to me at the start of the pandemic. Suddenly, our churches, schools, and institutions were shut down, and we were all in exile from one another, all isolated. Though I had tried to forget those times in my new pastoral role, it all came back with exquisite clarity. In the early weeks of the 2020 pandemic shut down, I was reliving my year of exile in 2015, both the pain and hope of one who had experienced being in the ditch on the side of the road. I became convinced that I had a weird and hopeful word from the Lord for the collective exile we now found ourselves in. But to speak it out loud in all its truth would compel me to tell a story I had spent the last five years trying to forget. With my heart leaping in my throat, I preached my story of exile for the first time, not to a full church but to a camera that would send the sermon to the congregation and beyond, out into a

lonely world afraid of infection. On the first Palm Sunday of Covid, I wanted them to know that this isolation would not last forever, that we were not alone, and that God is always with us in the ditch. But I knew I had to begin by telling them about another Palm Sunday five years before.

Palm Sunday 2015

Palm Sunday is my favorite Sunday of the year.

It was the forty-ninth Palm Sunday of my life, if you assume that my mother took me to Grace Episcopal Church in Anderson, South Carolina, as a babe in swaddling clothes.

It was my twenty-second Palm Sunday as an ordained pastor.

It was my eleventh Palm Sunday as the senior minister of First Church in the suburbs of Chicago.

But for the first Palm Sunday of my life, I was not in church.

Instead I stayed home that morning, four blocks away on the same street from the 1,400-member church I had served as senior pastor for the last ten years. That morning on Palm Sunday, instead of seeing me in the pulpit in my clergy robe and stole beginning worship, my parishioners listened to the president of the church board reading out loud a statement that the board had written and emailed to me the night before. I knew how it began:

Greetings to all of you on Palm Sunday, as we begin our observation of Holy Week—of Jesus’s entry into Jerusalem, of His betrayal by Judas, of His crucifixion, and ultimately of His resurrection. But before Jesus returned to Jerusalem, He spent forty days and nights in the wilderness, a time not only of Satan’s temptation, but also of Jesus’s own contemplation and self-examination.

I read my copy on my computer as I imagined the president of the board trying to read hers from the pulpit in front of hundreds of people she had known and loved for years, there in the generations, children and grandchildren of the church. It must have suddenly become very quiet when she continued:

I mention this because our church is about to undergo its own period of trials and contemplation. Earlier this week, we learned that our

denomination has determined to conduct a Ministerial Fitness Review of our Senior Pastor, Lillian Daniel. This is a serious matter, and we intend to cooperate fully. This is a process designed and developed to protect the interests of all parties involved, including the Congregation. Although we will not be wandering in the desert, forty days is probably a reasonable estimate of how long it will take the committee to complete its investigation and make recommendations as to next steps. We are permitting Pastor Lillian to take a leave of absence during that time.

I knew that the statement continued at length about what little they knew about the process so far but indicated their total commitment to it. That trust in the process was a sentiment I may have suggested they add in the back and forth of email edits the night before. When it came to exactly what I had been accused of doing, the board president would explain that she could not outline any charges against me because we had been given no specifics. Finally, she would conclude in words that I could not imagine her getting through without crying:

And I ask that you also remember this church and all its members in your prayers, as we undergo our own test and struggles, as we reflect back on Jesus's struggles on this Palm Sunday.

I did not hear any of that in person, of course. But the night before, the president had emailed me the final draft statement she would read so that I would know what they were saying and doing that morning in my absence, and she told me that they had also just sent it that night to all the church staff. Minutes later one of them was banging at my door, sobbing until I let her in. "I don't care what you have done, Lillian, it can't be that bad," she said, embracing me against her Saturday night sweatshirt she had probably put on for an early night before one of the biggest Sundays of the year. "We love you. Whatever you've done, it doesn't matter. We'll be here for you, your church family."

But now I was crying, sputtering, trying to explain from my doorway that I was only allowed to talk to one of the lay leaders and one of the other lead ministers from this point on, but that I had told

them my story, and I had told them to share it with others, and so I trusted they would pass it on and that she would hear one way or another, probably in an emergency staff meeting for the fourteen people employed by the church. But for now, I was under ecclesiastical house arrest, barred from my pulpit and from any communication with my church members or staff.

As I untangled myself from her public embrace on the front porch, I said “I love you too, but people are going to see you here. You’ve got to go. We’ll get to talk later, soon, I’m sure, when the process says we are through this first phase.” But had I known then that those words would turn out to be the last we would ever exchange, I would have pulled her inside and told her everything right then and there, rules be damned. I had no idea that this moment of restraint, my voluntary silence, would be the first of many forced silences, each one shaming me into surrendering my narrative to an ecclesial process that would hold it captive.

Next to show up was the pastoral colleague I was allowed contact with, whose manner was understandably businesslike. He was in need of facts and information. He was not there to discuss my ministerial mistakes or to go anywhere near the narrative. He was there to retrieve the logistical details for the Palm Sunday service he was now going to have to lead himself. All my sermon notes for it would languish unused, as he was now scrambling to create a message of his own for a bizarre challenge he never expected. “I hope you’re back before Easter,” he said. “But just in case, give me what you have.”

So I gave him what I had for Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter Sunday, all four services in Holy Week. We packed a great deal of detail into a short visit, and after getting the notes he needed, with so much work to do, he seemed understandably uncomfortable, like an awkward family member visiting a seriously sick person in the hospital when, after the doctor has left the room, the visitor is suddenly aware of the time, the smell of urine. They pay their quick respects, then hold their breath down the hall until finally outside the hospital door they gasp, so grateful to breathe the fresh air of the uninfected.

That next morning, when the Palm Sunday worship hour approached, I prayed for the pastors, the musicians, the lay leaders, and the whole congregation, as I imagined them from my exile at home, every moment of the scene unfolding four blocks down the street. I pictured hundreds of parishioners, not yet aware of the letter they were about to be read inside, cheerfully lining up for the triumphant outdoor procession around the Gothic church buildings, grandparents and grandchildren, all waving palms in the air to reenact the crowds who greeted Jesus in Jerusalem just days before his death. I imagined the moment when someone ceremonially knocked on the old red wooden doors and the crowds entering the church under a canopy of palms created by the red-robed choristers who lined up on either side of the aisle, their palms raised high to create an arch that the church members of all ages walked under as together they all sang, “All glory, laud, and honor to you, Redeemer, King, to whom the lips of children made sweet hosannas ring.”

Even from four blocks away, I could tell the minute the board president stopped reading her statement to the congregation that day because my phone started exploding with texts from the people in worship. “We’re coming right over,” they wrote, despite having just been told that they could do nothing of the kind, but Protestants tend to be independent people, resistant to any form of church hierarchy, even their elected own.

But I knew something they did not yet know. It was one thing for them to break the rules but entirely another thing for me. My future as a pastor now hung in the hands of a small and secret committee who had yet to share the charges with me but had made clear the certain rule about having no contact with my church members and the great costs of breaking that rule.

Many of the people texting me might be parked outside my house already. They would have to come by after church to get their cars. As I looked out the window, my phone exploding, I saw parishioners walking up the block to my house, perhaps having left church early, before the final hymn.

If I ever wanted to see my church again, I had been told, I had to keep my distance totally, and if I was ever reported to have broken this rule, I might never serve a church again. So I ran upstairs, tossed

a handful of clothes into a half-zipped suitcase, kicked it down the back stairs, and snuck out the kitchen door and into the car in the garage. I peeled out of my driveway just fast enough to avoid driving by my church members but slowly enough that I could see them waving and reaching toward my car's rearview mirror, where I could see their lips silently mouthing the words "What the hell is going on, Lillian?" and "What on earth did you do?"

As the board president had told the church that morning, the letter from the church tribunal was vague and listed many sections of the ordained ministers' code. What she did not tell the church was that the name of the person bringing the charges was included. Seeing his name was enough for me to know what the charges were.

This is what I had done:

Eighteen months earlier, during the week finalizing my divorce to a good man I had been married to for twenty-three years, I crossed the line you are never supposed to cross as a pastor. I had an inappropriate sexual relationship with a church employee. I regretted it and I believed he regretted it too, and I thought we had parted on decent terms. From a distance he seemed happy, and when we ran into one another, he seemed collegial.

But now, eighteen months later, he had chosen to bring these charges at this moment, days before Holy Week. I knew, as he knew, that the rules in such cases are strict. No matter when the charges come, the accused pastor must be pulled out immediately, in case that pastor is a serial predator and has multiple victims or systemic patterns of abuse. These are the rules, made stricter over the years to compensate for the sins of previous generations of church bureaucrats who had moved child abusers and predators from one church to another unpunished and unexposed.

I accepted the hard rules because I also trusted the process, which would of course in a relatively short time determine that I was not a predator or danger to anyone in my church. After that was determined, one day soon, I assumed, we would be together in person, and I would take the consequences. Whether or not my church would want me as their pastor, at least we would soon be able to hash this out in truth and light. As soon as I got the letter, I called one of the lay leaders and the other lead pastor and told them

what I had done wrong, giving them my permission to tell anyone who asked.

“Trust the process,” I said, because I did. And in the days leading up to Palm Sunday, when I was told I was not allowed to talk to anyone associated in any way with the church other than these two, because they would handle all communications on my behalf, I still trusted the process.

The Church of the Weary Traveler

With no idea where to spend this strange quarantine, I drove to Madison, Wisconsin, a few hours away, where Jim, the man I had been dating long-distance for less than a year, had an apartment I could hide in. Neither of us had expected me to show up on his doorstep in these particular circumstances, so he had left me to myself, and by midafternoon on Palm Sunday, I was on my second bourbon alone at a bar on Willy Street called the Weary Traveler.

Preferring sign language to actual conversation with the waitress, I pointed on the menu to their special—a hamburger patty stuffed with cream cheese, chopped onions, and mounds of crushed garlic.

“Ah, now that,” she whispered, “is a perfect choice for you on a day like this.”

Suddenly I was paranoid. What did this waitress know about me and the day I was having?

Was this a perfect choice for everyone? Or merely for the unlovable? Had someone called ahead to tell her my shameful tale? Or was she an intuitive or a psychic?

“I assume you want another bourbon,” she said, revealing that indeed she was a psychic. She also intuited that I was a theological trinitarian and that in my religion good things come in threes. Returning with my third drink, she announced, for the whole bar to hear: “She’ll have the Bad Breath Burger!”

And why the hell not?

I was now a minister under a professional review for sexual misconduct. What more could I do to disgust the people around me?

Between Palm Sunday and Easter, on Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday, Christians recall the saddest moments in the Jesus story through worship. When they're done correctly, somberly, these services are darkness-soaked affairs that make the Easter light so much more blindingly beautiful when it comes.

They are also very lightly attended, because most Christians skip the somber midweek services of Holy Week. They skim the surface of the story by attending on Palm Sunday and then jump straight to Easter.

But they're missing out. Palm Sunday is the cosmic gateway into the long religious arc that none of the tourists know about. We go into the dark to better appreciate the light. The sadness, the betrayal of the crucifixion, that is what Holy Week is. It fills up your melancholic tank so that you can really appreciate the sweetness of Easter, when new life returns in stunning relief. If you do that deep practice year after year in Holy Week, you will find that it may even become a day-to-day thing, a beautiful rhythm that reminds you that your heart beats up and down for a reason. That betrayal, wrongdoing, and suffering do not have the last word.

Had I not been barred from the pulpit under charges of pastoral misconduct, then that is what I would have preached to my congregation outside Chicago on that Palm Sunday. Instead, with an irony I didn't fully appreciate at the time, I preached it to myself at the Weary Traveler, a fitful exhortation about being plunged into the darkness, alone in my silence and shame. The half-eaten Bad Breath Burger oozed an odor I now regretted ingesting; it was stinking me up, from my insides out. And my Palm Sunday sermon, so carefully composed for that full and happy church, now seemed too bland for the congregation whose pain and confusion I could barely contemplate, so heavy was my guilt that I had caused it.

The rhythm of Holy Week prepares us for such moments. The reason we call it practice and keep doing it year after year is so that when we have a year like this one, when we drop into a darkness so cave-like and complete we feel utterly alone, we have that reserve when we need it—because God never leaves us alone. So even there

in the Weary Traveler, I went back to that theological well and tried to rewrite the sermon I had composed for better times, scribbling notes as I went.

Now I was composing a new sermon, telling myself that this one was going to be for the people in the bar that day, the ones who I capriciously decided had probably not been in church that Sunday in Madison. I imagined they might be the educated and cultured despisers of religion, the ones who find ancient traditions dull but find themselves endlessly interesting, disdainful of clergy, dismissive of organized religion, who encounter God in the sunset and think they are the first to ever do so, the “spiritual but not religious” who think they are edgy but are now statistically in the mainstream of American culture.

I wanted to tell them that as a professional pastor I understood the appeal of finding God in the sunset. I wanted to point out that around the world and across denominational divides, whatever kind of Christian you are, it is not lost on clergy that our standing-room-only services are the ones that celebrate birth and babies, bunnies and new life and resurrection and flowers. It is the pretty things that people show up for. We have noticed that our least-attended services are the depressing ones that dig deep into death and despair. We didn’t come up with this miserable material. It’s in the Bible, and now we are stuck with the responsibility for a yearly schedule that rubs the faithful’s collective noses in the crappiness of the crucifixion for the entire week before Easter when everyone really would prefer to think spring. Avoidance of the tough stuff for a Hallmark-card experience extends equally to the churchd and unchurchd. This may explain why so many clergy are depressed.

Yet as I composed this new sermon, I found my spirits lifting a bit. I liked the way this sermon was shaping up, and I took a big sloppy bite of the cold burger, having worked up an appetite.

Now I was ready to turn my imaginary preaching pen to focus on that other group of sinners: my fellow Christians of the relentlessly cheerful variety. I should know. I had been one of those happy-clappy types until a few hours ago. My words would be tough and true, if I could only compose them in peace, but the bar patrons were inconsiderate of the importance of my sacred scribblings and my need for

silence. Worst of all, one nosy woman at the next booth kept trying to engage me directly, with eye contact and then big gestures she could only have learned in a mime troupe, pointing to her chin and then dramatically pointing at mine, waving her paper napkin like a flag in an object lesson for a class of nursery-school students. “I think you have some cream cheese or something there,” she chirped, as if I had time for this kind of nonsense. If she didn’t want to see someone eat a messy Bad Breath Burger and wear it on their chin, shirt, and sleeves, she shouldn’t have come to the Weary Traveler.

This intrusive napkin waver reminded me of all the positive-thinking, do-gooder people who think you do God’s work by touching one soul at a time, the ones who get introduced to Jesus through some prosperity-peddling best-selling airport author who promises you your best life now, who thinks Jesus spoke English and therefore it’s a clever idea to translate “the Beatitudes” as the “be happy attitudes.” Brace yourselves, friends, this new sermon is for you. For even you consumers of commercial Christianity-lite can read the Bible or attend a church during Holy Week and discover the truth the prosperity preachers don’t want you to know:

Jesus, our all-powerful loser of a founder, died a humiliating and gruesome death at the age of thirty-three, having accomplished no earthly goals any of us would recognize.

Despite what the televangelists tell you, and at the risk of stating the obvious, this is not a self-help religion. None of us escapes the hard stuff, whether it pounces on us out of nowhere or we bring it on ourselves. Take me, for example.

This was the kind of bold insight I shared in my newly revised sermon, silently of course, from my booth at the Weary Traveler. But now heads lifted up from beers and burgers and turned in my direction, as if perhaps I had vocalized that last part, announcing to the bar: “Take me, for example!” I took a sip to ensure I would not speak the next part out loud, because it was feeling pretty inspired:

And as for the so-called good news, the resurrection to eternal life, is that it? Does the promise of heaven merely help us cope with the

miserable? Is the Christian journey just one long excruciating exercise of such delayed gratification of joy that we forget how to live in the here and now? What good is the good news of eternal life if we have to die waiting for it?

Now my sermon was taking a dark turn that required me to drive my fountain pen's nib deep into the weave of the wet cocktail napkin, which then blurred all my notes into each other, illegible and a mess. It was as if God was saying to me, "There, there, Lillian. Pour it all out. Get your barstool sermon done. Scratch it all out onto the cocktail napkin soggy with the tear-moistened and unrecognizable stain of your heartbroken words. But trust me. One day, someone bigger and better than you will wipe that stain away. And you will preach again. But you have preached enough for tonight, my weary traveler."

I swear to this day that I heard that, and it gave me comfort. For these are the true Holy Week stories. The reason we go to the depths is to discover that when we go there, God goes too.

As it turns out, my quarantine would last much longer than that Palm Sunday, or that week, going on well past the next forty days, for nearly a year of wandering in a wilderness of my own making. I would be investigated, tried, defrocked, and then, when I finally stopped giving a frock, I would be refrocked.

But I couldn't imagine any of that then. There was much to let go of along the way.

For now, it was my forty-ninth Palm Sunday, and I was just another bad pastor without a pulpit, worshipping my third bourbon at a bar called the Weary Traveler. Hosanna in the highest.

Pandemic Palm Sunday 2020

Five years after writing my Palm Sunday sermon for the customers at a bar because I had been kicked out of my church, I found myself writing a Palm Sunday sermon for another congregation that had been kicked out of their church by a virus.

Through a tiny camera on my phone and in the fog of isolation on that first Palm Sunday of the pandemic in 2020, I wanted to reassure

my church in Iowa that I knew what it was to be cut off and that they were not alone, not really. And so I told, in a sermon, in my own words for the first time, the story you have just read, of being removed from my church, sticking to the earliest days of the story and the Palm Sunday I began down the street from my church in the suburbs of Chicago and ended at the Weary Traveler in Madison, Wisconsin. Yet even that short confession was terrifying—few people had heard many details of my story—and I wasn't sure how the congregation would respond.

There was more to tell back then, and there is even more to tell today. Just as the pandemic had only begun, so had my time in the darkest depths on that Palm Sunday five years before.

But I didn't share all of that in the 2020 pandemic sermon, which ended this way:

There is more to be told about how I came to shatter my own lifetime record of perfect Palm Sunday attendance. Which makes it all the more painful for me to be separate from you in worship in this strange coronavirus time. Is it any wonder that in this moment of being quarantined we might find ourselves recalling the loneliest times we have survived in years past? Suddenly we are shut off socially from each other, and of course we worry. . . . Of course I worry . . . will we be cut off again?

Thank God, we are not cut off. We are going to stay connected in brave new ways, and when our courage fails, the Holy Spirit will connect us even then. I say it out loud to remind myself and to remind anyone else who has ever been sick and alone before. No matter what you experienced back then, we are not ultimately cut off from one another. This is the promise of Holy Week. We are not cut off.

I know the pain of exile in place, of feeling cut off from the work you thought you were born to do, cut off from those you love, cut off from your church, and even cut off from God. I've felt all that before, and trust me, this is not the same. For one simple reason—we get to do this. We get to worship together, wherever you are in time or space. Because surely the One who created both those dimensions is also capable of connecting us across them.

So as a pastor who has felt isolated before, let me tell you about the life-saving power of the Holy Spirit who will never let us go, no matter how lost we are. Let me tell you about the God who uses the wilderness to change us and, when we are finally free from our own distractions, uses exile to find us. And let me tell you about a savior Jesus who, long before loving me, recruited and then welcomed a bunch of sinners and misfits to his table and said no matter what, no matter who, no matter where you are on life's journey, you are welcome here. You are not alone.

Amen.