

“Is There No Balm in Gilead?”

Jeremiah 8:22

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

September 18, 2022

“Is there no balm in Gilead?” So asked the prophet Jeremiah long ago. A medicinal perfume, from a plant that grows in the region of Gilead, near the Sea of Galilee. A healing salve. A *cure*.

There’s a question that’s been on the hearts of a number of people in this church. Some of you have asked me directly: “*Are you okay?*” Most of you know that I was on a medical leave this summer. What happened? How am I now? *Am I ready to come back?* I think you all deserve some answers.

About a year ago I started experiencing very intense and very frequent nightmares. We all have periodic bad dreams – I’ve certainly had plenty in the course of my life – but these were different: much more vivid, much more frightening than anything I had ever experienced before. On July 4 of last year we resumed worshiping in this sanctuary after more than a year at home. But within just a matter of weeks, the pandemic was back, in full force. Here at the church, we had gone through a lengthy process to determine when and how we would re-open, including a survey of church members and friends, which revealed clearly that no matter which course of action we took, at least a third of the congregation was not going to be happy with our decision. Passions and feelings were very intense. It was an utterly no-win situation. My nightmares started sometime in the midst of all that.

One of my earliest nightmares was about a Session meeting, the governing board of this church. In my dream our church inherited a church camp that we didn’t even know existed until we owned it. The camp was in a bad state of disrepair, it had no staff, but there were summer camps scheduled. We suddenly found ourselves in a very odd situation, and decisions had to be made. The Spiritual Growth Committee wanted us to keep the camp and get it up and running. The Finance Committee said that would be far too impractical and costly, and we would be better off selling the camp and using the proceeds for future needs. Then the Mission Committee got involved, agreeing that we should sell the camp – but instead of keeping the proceeds for our own use, we should give them away, to support Afghan refugees. All three groups had valid and reasonable arguments. But they were mutually exclusive. There was no possible way we could do them all. I had to moderate that meeting; that is part of my job. It devolved into a fierce argument that left elders in tears and stretched relationships to the breaking point. That dream is kind of funny, and obviously it grew out of the years-long process we went through to save Camp Greenwood, but the passionate intensity in that dream paralleled the passionate intensity we were experiencing in real life over the pandemic.

That passionate intensity sometimes led to uncivil behavior. I’ve been doing this job, here and at my previous church in Maryland, for nineteen years now. I’ve been yelled at by parishioners from time to time. I think I got yelled at more in 2021 than in the previous 18 years combined. In another one of my early nightmares, I was being stared down by the three witches from *Macbeth*, who were all screaming at me simultaneously, for hours on end, relentlessly, mercilessly. It just wouldn’t stop.

So, in real life, there was passionate disagreement. And some yelling. Then there were some who were willfully defiant. The Session had to make some very difficult decisions, and a few people chose to disregard those decisions. Not many, but enough to cause a great deal of stress. Some of our staff members and key volunteers really got scared because of some other people's actions. Our Session is comprised of a dozen faithful members who volunteer their time to help this church run smoothly. We spent many hours over many months seeking the best course for the diverse needs in this church. Those who defied the will of the Session displayed a lack of respect for our elders and their hard work. There was also a case in which someone made a promise to me and an elder about a safety matter, and then broke that promise, to our great surprise and deep dismay. Now I need to emphasize that the vast, *vast* majority of this congregation has been *extremely* cooperative throughout the pandemic, including most of the people who disagreed with some of our decisions. I am *extremely* grateful for the patience so many of you displayed. And I was very disappointed in some others. This congregation has so many things going for it; we are so blessed in so many ways; we do a *lot* of things right; there are many other congregations that wish they had what we have – the quality of our music, the quantity of our children and youth, our financial strength, so much more. But some aspects of our life together really need to improve. Yelling and rebelliousness are *not* the work of the Holy Spirit.

In the midst of all the stress and distress, I also received a series of emails filled with blatant bigotry and racist comments. These came from somebody I knew and cared about, who had been spending far too much time listening to alt-right sources like Breitbart. This was also immensely upsetting. Let me be very clear: the official position of the Presbyterian Church (USA) is this: “In sovereign love God created the world good and makes everyone equally in God’s image, male and female, of every race and people, to live as one community.” (*The Book of Confessions*, §11.3) That’s from our most recent church confession; it’s part of our church’s Constitution. An earlier confession said this: “The church labors for the abolition of all racial discrimination and ministers to those injured by it. Congregations, individuals, or groups of Christians who exclude, dominate, or patronize their fellowmen, however subtly, resist the Spirit of God and bring contempt on the faith which they profess.” (§9.44) There are some viewpoints that have become more widespread in the last six years that are completely antithetical to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We need to be willing to *name* that.

Then there were the incessant issues with the quality of our livestream. The many additional responsibilities that the pandemic thrust upon me. The significant increase in the amount of time and energy it took to pull off a Sunday morning. I endured, for a long while ... until I just couldn’t any longer. Our human brains are only designed to withstand so much. Mine eventually cracked.

My life descended. The nightmares got worse. Every one was different, like a different horror movie playing in my head night after night. My fervent prayers to God for relief went unanswered. It is so debilitating to feel *terrified* to go to bed at night. One night, I dreamed I was trapped in a basement, screaming for help, with no one to rescue me. “Is there no balm in Gilead?”

According to a study conducted by the Barna Group, which studies religion in this country, *more than half* of mainline Protestant pastors in the U.S. gave serious thought to leaving the ministry entirely at some point in 2021. *More than half*. Many of my colleagues retired during the pandemic, or retired early; some of my colleagues did quit; many have reported mental health issues. We’re now facing an acute pastor shortage. Towards the end of last year, there was only one thing that kept me going: the children and youth of the church. It was my concern for their wellbeing that kept me here.

As winter progressed, the pandemic eased, but my nightmares were not going away. I realized I needed professional help. I was blessed to find a licensed counselor who was also a pastor. He put

me through a thorough battery of assessments. We ruled out a bunch of things – I wasn't depressed, or suicidal, or suffering from panic attacks. But I met the criteria for adult-onset Nightmare Disorder, and a borderline case of PTSD. We began a course of treatment. But it wasn't a quick fix, and after a particularly miserable week (that included some more yelling), I concluded that I simply *could not* go on. I approached the Personnel Committee for a three-month leave. I am immensely grateful for their support, and the support of the Session. It was a desperately needed, and deeply appreciated, Sabbath.

In June I spent two weeks at an intensive program in Colorado that helps pastors deal with crisis and trauma. My counselor there had decades of experience administering EMDR, eye movement desensitization and reprocessing, which is one of the most effective treatments for PTSD. That process was very helpful, and my nightmares went away ... for a time. They returned later on. That was discouraging. I continued meeting weekly with my counselor here, and I also began seeing a spiritual director every other week. At the end of July my family celebrated my parents' 60th wedding anniversary in Hawaii. A Sabbath within a Sabbath. That was a wonderful trip, until my dad and my sister contracted Covid. We ended up sending most of the family home a day early, while I stayed in Hawaii to help care for the two of them while they were confined to their rooms. I ended up with a *lot* of free time – time to swim with the giant tortoises and the multi-colored fish, time to explore one of Maui's rugged coastlines, time to ascend a 10,000 foot volcano, watch the sun set into the clouds, and be dazzled by more stars than I could count. A Sabbath within a Sabbath within a Sabbath. I gotta tell you, if you have to be stuck someplace for several extra days, Maui's not a bad place to be!

In the middle of our time in Hawaii I had three back-to-back nights of nightmares, leaving me very apprehensive about whether I would be ready or able to resume my duties this month. But then ... *something happened*. Something *significant*. One day recently, the nightmares were just ... *gone*. I had a bad dream a couple weeks ago, and it was just that: *a bad dream!* Not a nightmare; there weren't the same feelings of *terror* and *dread* and *horror* that I had experienced so many nights before. I woke up rejoicing. *Hallelujah! I just had a bad dream!* There was another last week, a little more intense, disturbing enough to wake me up, but still nothing like the earlier ones. Yesterday, my counselor gave me another assessment. My Nightmare Disorder appears to be gone. Hopefully, for good. We're going to keep monitoring, but we are now at a point where we can consider reducing the frequency of our meetings. And honestly, I feel better than I've felt in a *long* time. I finally feel *joy* again.

What happened? What caused this change? Well, my therapist reminded me yesterday that there were a lot of things that I did intentionally to work towards healing. Some extended time away in a beautiful setting also undoubtedly helped. But I think the bulk of the credit needs to go to *God*. My healing feels like nothing less than a *miracle*. If I needed a reminder of the power of God – I got it.

Prayer *did* make a difference. But it took a long time. So often we expect God to act *now*, as if it's God's job to answer our every beck and call, as if we get to tell God what to do. It doesn't work that way. In the book of Genesis, when Rebekah was having trouble conceiving a child, Isaac prayed to God. God answered his prayer; God gave them a child. But it was a *long* time coming. It was *twenty years* before Rebekah got pregnant. Sometimes God says "Yes" to our prayers: "Yes ... but *not yet*."

There is a balm in Gilead. It makes the wounded whole. It heals the sin-sick soul.

So I'm back. I'm *ready* to be back. I'm the same guy I was before. And ... I'm *not* the same. I've been through hell. I've beheld the heavens. I've experienced the healing power of almighty God.

© 2022 Rev. Bill Pinches