


A season of uncertainty

Lorraine Reimer

I *knew* that I was facing breast cancer as soon as the radiologist requested that I stay for not only a second mammogram but also an immediate biopsy. I had walked into the hospital that morning confident that I had nothing to worry about. After all, no one else in my family had ever had cancer. I walked out of the hospital, a few hours later, numb with almost certain knowledge of a diagnosis that came shortly thereafter. I felt betrayed by my own body.

Surgery quickly followed within six weeks. Despite the small size of my tumor, the resulting pathology report necessitated that my future treatment plans would need to include both chemotherapy and radiation due to the aggressive nature of my cancer. I was in for the battle of my life, yet I felt unexpectedly at peace. All would be well, no matter what. After I received my diagnosis, God's Word became more precious to me than ever before; I clung to God's promises of presence and peace. The psalm-



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ist's words leapt off the page during my morning devotions in the days after my doctor's awful confirmation: "The Lord is my strength and my shield; in him my heart trusts; so I am helped" (Ps. 28:7).¹ They became my comfort and my guiding light.

That comfort and guidance became sorely tested in the weeks after I began chemotherapy. A host of side effects, both common and uncommon, rained down on my body, bringing me to the brink of refusing any more treatment.

Sicker than I had ever imagined being, I felt uncertain that I could go on, especially when my doctor sadly informed me that what was happening would most likely worsen before treatments stopped. He left the decision in my hands, and I was to inform him in a few days of my choice of whether to continue. *How* could I continue?

¹ Unless otherwise specified, all biblical quotations are from the NRSV.

A sabbath of uncertainty

Just as I faced deep uncertainty about my ability to endure more treatments and the horrific side effects, my home congregation now is facing a season of profound uncertainty—a season that comes on the heels of the pandemic’s monumental shifts. Our long-term pastor’s COVID-shaped

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burnout led him to request a five-month sabbatical. During his absence, an interim pastor has accepted our congregation’s call to serve in a part-time capacity, traveling each week from his home several hours away. So much uncertainty is contained in those last two sentences; there is much we are not sure of.

These next few months will invite all those affected on a journey toward our congregation’s and our pastors’ unknown future—a future on which God’s handprint already is stamped. Several

questions have arisen in my own mind as I have pondered this time of sojourn for our church. *How will the members, both individually and collectively, move forward, in faith, despite shifting pastoral realities and the ongoing recovery from the pandemic disruptions? What results will our pastor’s sabbatical time yield for him and his family? How will our interim pastor fulfill his shepherding role over the next five months?* As one who holds a position of leadership in the church, I feel it is important to understand what the complex uncertainties are for our congregation as well as for our long-term and interim pastors.

For now we see in the mirror dimly

As the world moves forward past the initial crisis of the pandemic toward the possibility of a COVID endemic, the members of my home congregation search for ways to recover and heal from the incredible strains, anxieties, and disconnections wrought over the pandemic years. Each has struggled in their own way, and our pastor has been no less affected. Indeed, perhaps he has been even more so affected, given his God-given desire to shepherd his congregation through a time in history when distancing and masking were required for the safety and well being of all, yet these requirements have generated much controversy over the government’s health mandates. Along with many others, our church family is living

with the consequences of those burdens, especially now as we have gifted our pastor with his requested sabbatical time. During his absence, my question is how the members of our church will strive to be a community of faith, caring for each other and living out the words of the prophet Micah, “to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with [our] God.” Will our church family honor our commitment to learn and grow in our service to God during this sabbath interval—a tenacious promise spoken during our pastor’s time of blessing and sending? Will the congregation, accompanied by our chosen interim pastor, trust God to lead and direct our collective path? These are some of the uncertainties that confront our gathered community.

Before our pastor left, he shared his reasoning for his sabbatical request as well as some of the questions that crowded his own mind. The weariness and losses of pandemic ministry, as well as the stresses and strains of solo pastoral work, had affected his ability to process, in real time, the collective trauma that has accumulated and had shaken his confidence in his ability to shepherd a congregation as a lead pastor. He needed time—time to let God speak and time to listen for God’s voice. Yet, I wonder whether, at the end of this time of sabbath, he will be

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gifted with the clarity, wisdom, spiritual growth, and vision for his ministry that he longs for.

As our interim pastor prepares to answer God’s call to ministry with our congregation, he has shared the questions and uncertainties that are percolating in his mind as well.² Under normal circumstances, an interim pastor’s role is defined by the interval between a former pastor and a new pastor—a time of processing a farewell and a time of preparing to welcome a new person in that role

of pastor. However, in this circumstance, there is no sense of transition since the pastor plans to return post-sabbatical. Given these realities, it is uncertain what shape the interim pastoral role will take and how he might embody that role so that our congregation may be assisted to grow

² I have received permission from both the long-term pastor and the interim pastor to share their thoughts and experiences.

in faithfulness to God. Given the brief timeframe of the sabbatical, it is uncertain how our congregation will receive our interim pastor's pastoral care and in what ways will he best enter the life of our congregation. Knowing the uncertainties being contemplated, there is the further uncertainty of whether our interim pastor's quest for God's guidance in his new role will be provided in a way that he feels able to move forward with his ministry to our church while, at the same time, maintaining a healthy relationship with his family, despite the physical separation during a portion of each week.

After considering these questions for a while, I wonder whether my own experience with the uncertainties of spiritual wilderness may help to illuminate a pathway, for my home congregation, toward trusting in the Lord's providence while, at the same time, helping to remind myself of the Lord's faithfulness over the years.

I will make a way in the wilderness

Over the course of my weekend of agonized decision-making, God answered my pleas for wisdom and guidance in three completely diverse ways. On Friday, a small envelope arrived in my mailbox, containing a short missive from an acquaintance in our community who had successfully fought breast cancer several years earlier. Her unexpected words of encouragement spoke directly to my heart: "We do whatever we must do to fight this disease. When the going gets tough, the tough get going!" This woman had no idea what I was facing at that moment, yet God used her to speak words that I desperately needed to hear.

My second answer came in the form of a dream in which God reminded me of a conversation among me, my husband, and our two boys. After sharing my distressing news with our young adult sons, I reassured them that, with my family's prayer support, I would do everything in my power to fight this horrid disease so I could be present for their futures—their graduations, careers, weddings, and children. I awoke in the night, clearly recalling my dream and the words of promise that I had spoken. How could I renege on my promise?

My third answer came over a period of several days. As part-time managers of a life-lease building, my husband and I oversaw the hosting of a family who were in town to attend the funeral of their son and brother. The deceased man and I had much in common. We were of similar age; we had the same number and ages of children; and both of us had been diagnosed with cancer. The main difference that I was aware of was

that he had chosen not to take any further treatment beyond his surgery. Within two years, he had died from a recurrence of cancer, and his family was deeply grieved. I had a choice to make.

Despite my uncertainty in my own ability to endure the suffering involved, I chose to trust in God's leading, cling to the psalmist's words that I had chosen as my guiding light, and move forward with my treatments,

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come what may. And come it did! The chemotherapy side effects did worsen, yet I was given the strength to endure, and my doctors were given the wisdom to prescribe medications that alleviated the worst of my symptoms. Praise the Lord!

However, weeks later, as I neared the conclusion of my radiation treatments, odd feelings of sadness, anxiety, and confusion began to cloud my mind. My doctors' enthusiasm over my successful

completion of the treatments fell on hollow ground. Why did I not feel like celebrating? Weeks went by with worsening symptoms, the heaviness weighing me down. A dear friend suspected depression and encouraged me to seek medical help.

Diagnosed with anxiety and depression, I faced yet another uphill battle: finding the right medication that would address my symptoms. Weeks stretched into months with little resolution, as I remained paralyzed by the intense sadness and anxiety, unable even to formulate a prayer or focus on Scripture. During that time, I was inspired by my faith community to draw on Christ's strength and to trust in the promise of the Holy Spirit's prayerful intercession on my behalf. Faithful accompaniment was demonstrated by individuals who were moved to speak or write words of encouragement, through the prompting of the Holy Spirit. Worshiping and praying together as the body of Christ reminded me of the power of God and the lengths to which God's Son endured suffering for my sake. Often, I simply wept as my church family sang songs testifying to God's love and grace. The realities of my life never were denied or ignored; rather, they were accepted as trials that testified to the love of God. That demonstrated love carried me through that time of deep uncertainty.

Finally, with the help of an experienced psychiatrist and the prayers of many, a combination of medications was found that slowly but sure-

ly brought healing and restoration of my mental health. Hearing God's voice through God's Word and God's people, I was thankful for my community of hope and the God who authored that community. Through the healing I received, a way was made in the wilderness I was in, and I could, as the apostle Peter instructed a group of first century Christians to do, "proclaim the excellence of him who called [me] out of darkness into his marvelous light" (1 Pet. 2:9). That excellence is what my home congregation may now draw on to endure and to grow despite the uncertainties of our pastor's sabbatical.

Come to him

In 1 Peter 2, the apostle exhorts a community of early Christian believers to take strength from their identity as God's holy nation, at a time of great uncertainty in their life of faith. During the final years of Emperor Nero's reign, Christian believers in Asia Minor faced persecution best described as an environment of antagonism and discrimination. Peter encourages believers to continue to grow in their spiritual maturity and to manifest behaviour worthy of the God they serve, despite their uncertain circumstances.

Come to him. . . . Let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. . . . You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the excellence of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. (1 Peter 2:4–5, 9)

The nature and character of God are excellence, perfection, and glory. Knowing the love expressed through God's nature and character creates the ground from which grows the trust needed for living out our faith—for practice and proclamation. Believers know this excellence because of God's Word and the gift of God's Son, the living Word. Trusting God's excellence and providence both in our own individual faith journeys and in our collective journey as a church will enable the members of my home congregation to endure the uncertainties we face and to grow despite those uncertainties.

Ten years have passed since my last cancer treatments ended and my depression lifted, yet the passage of time has not dulled my sense of wonder each time I remember the ways in which God chose to answer my prayers for healing and restoration. I am thankful that my cancer remains

in remission, and the medication continues to successfully treat my depression. My prayer is that, at the conclusion of this time of sabbatical, we church members may be able to reflect on God's loving hand guiding and directing our church and its pastors, both present and returning, and witness to the excellence of our Almighty God.

About the author

Lorraine Reimer recently enrolled in the Master of Arts in Theological Studies at Canadian Mennonite University after retiring from a career in education. She combines her online studies with her life as a wife, mother, grandmother, and daughter of a parent with Alzheimer's disease. Lorraine lives in Boissevain, Manitoba, where she attends and coordinates worship at Whitewater Mennonite Church.