

M. CRAIG BARNES

Diary
of a
Pastor's
Soul

THE HOLY
MOMENTS IN A
LIFE OF
MINISTRY



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Contents

Preface	11
Prologue by the Diarist	15

July

Week One	Writing the Faith in Stone	19
Week Two	A Faithfully Anonymous Pastor	23
Week Three	The Pastor's Wife and the Mustang	26
Week Four	Pastoral Care as Déjà Vu	29

August

Week One	Saying "I Love You"	35
Week Two	A Sunday with the <i>New York Times</i>	37
Week Three	In-Laws and the Priest Thing	40
Week Four	The Blessing of Old Faith	44

September

Week One	Pastor, Not Friend	49
Week Two	Beth, Our New Financial Planner	54
Week Three	Letting Go of Mac the Custodian	59
Week Four	Pastoral Lessons from My Sheepdog	63

October

- Week One Falling from Illusions 69
Week Two The Pastor's Home 72
Week Three The Grace of Being Ordinary 77
Week Four The Study 80
Week Five "It Hurt My Feelings" 84

November

- Week One The Sin I Can't Forgive 89
Week Two Finding Gravitas When You're Young 92
Week Three The Pastor on the Doctor's Table 96
Week Four The Pastor's Pastor 101
Week Five Humility to the End 105

December

- Week One Our Faith and My Faith 111
Week Two Frantically Preparing for the Prince of Peace 115
Week Three A Young Pastor in Deep Waters 119
Week Four A Wedding for the Nonbeliever 124
Christmas Eve Being Joseph in the Pageant 128

January

- Week One The Long, Gray Days of Ministry 133
Week Two The Obituary Writer 135
Week Three The Pastoral Search Committee 137
Week Four Announcing the Retirement 141
Week Five Listening to a Friend 143

February

- Week One Making Sense of a Pastor's Cancer 149
Week Two A Wintry Funeral for Young Teddy 152
Week Three The Blessed Church Lady 156
Week Four Taking the Heat for God 160

March

- Week One The Weary Partisan 167
Week Two I Was Done with Words 169
Week Three The Redemption of Early Mistakes 172
Week Four The Loss of Saturday Nights 178
Week Five Call Finds a Way 181

April

- Week One Struggling to Say “Behold” 187
Week Two The Real Problem with Being Visible 191
Week Three Hard Lessons on Flannelgraph 193
Week Four Finally Loving Easter 195

May

- Week One The Beloved Horse’s Ass 201
Week Two Getting It Wrong with Race and Gender 205
Week Three The Adored Director of Music 209
Week Four You’re Dead Right 212
Week Five Dad, Not Pastor 215

June

- Week One Seeking the Holy 219
Week Two When I Can No Longer Blame Work 222
Week Three Still Holding Back Part of Me 225
Week Four The Last Surprise 228

Epilogue 231

Prologue

BY THE DIARIST

I've never been the kind of person who keeps a diary. Never even tried before tonight. But I now find myself irresistibly drawn to the idea.

My wife Ellie and I have decided that one year from now, I will retire as the senior pastor of St. Andrews Presbyterian Church. Since last Christmas we've talked about it off and on, but never with a sense of commitment to the idea. Somehow this spring we crossed over into a realization that the time had come.

I'll turn sixty-eight in a month, and Ellie is a few years behind me, which means if we want to have a retirement, we'd better get on with it. This will be the twenty-eighth anniversary of my installation service as the pastor of St. Andrews, and the forty-third anniversary of my ordination. I like the idea of leaving before we hit any more round numbers that need celebrating. No one at the church has indicated—at least not to me—that it's high time for me to move on. Some of that came up after I first arrived, but long ago the congregation and I settled into each other.

Neither Ellie nor I are sure how I will handle retiring. She took early retirement years ago from her career as a social worker. She's never regretted it. But we both have doubts about me apart from St. Andrews. We have no plan other than feeling like we need to leave town to make plenty of room for the new pastor. After making the last tuition payment for our daughter Mackenzie, we bought a cabin on a lake that has long been our vacation home. I suppose we'll settle in there until it's time for the Old Presbyterian Pastors Retirement Home. I'm a little worried about what lies ahead, but I would really like to use this year to think carefully about what I'm leaving behind.

St. Andrews and I have had highs and lows over the years, and a lot of long stretches that were not particularly high or low. It was in the ordinariness of parish life that I found myself deeply committed to the congregation. There was always another funeral and another baptism, another associate pastor coming and going, another Advent and Easter, and so very many weekly sermons along the way that were neither brilliant nor dull but hopefully faithful to the gospel. There were also moments of crisis, like when the steeple caught fire after a lightning strike, and moments of joy like we'll hopefully have when the construction on the new Christian education wing is completed next year. But pastors easily rise to crises and joys. The challenge is to pay attention to the ordinary rhythms, the daily manna, and find the traces of divine grace.

I was never keeping count of it all. But now that I know this is going to be my last year, I feel the need to pay more attention to what I hope will be another ordinary year of pastoral ministry. And if there are surprises, I'll search for the grace in that as well. Thus, this diary. I'll try to write a page or two every week, always searching for the sacred subtext of what's been unfolding beneath the surface of my ministry all these years. As I now understand, that's where I keep finding the Savior at work.



July



Week One

Writing the Faith in Stone

It looks like we've finally found a way to get Alice Matthews off the property committee. She's ruled it for twenty-three years. All the decisions about how we would use the church's facilities, including the sanctuary, have had to pass through the committee she's run with an iron will to maintain the church's heritage—or at least her vision of it. When I speak about ministry, her eyes always glaze over.

Alice has always focused on our gray stone church building: its beautiful oak doors, the parlor that the women's association keeps redecorating, the spire in constant need of repair. It's not a particularly large church. The sanctuary can comfortably seat six hundred people, which we see only on Christmas Eve and Easter. Alice refers to the architecture as neo-Gothic. My wife Ellie refers to it as Gothic-wannabe.

If it weren't for Alice's inability to continue driving at night, I doubt we would have been able to pull off retiring her from her service/domain on the property committee. This evening we concluded the meeting with a little cake and coffee to thank her for her long service as its chair. I said some appreciative words to this woman with whom I have constantly sparred for over two decades.

Alice doesn't hate me, love me, or even think much about me as her pastor. In her mind I am always just the next necessary person in a robe for her church. After all, churches have to have a pastor, she understands. She typically sits through worship, but I never get a sense that she is engaged either by the liturgy or by the sermon I spent so many hours constructing. For Alice, I'm pretty much beside the point.

She never actually had to say, "I was here before you and will still be here after you." We both knew it was true. But the problem of aging caught up with her, finally moving her out of power. This is the pastor's last great hope for conflicts with old parishioners.

Much of the current literature on ministry indicates that people like Alice Matthews are exactly the problem with the church today. Some even claim that she's the person who is whittling away at the souls of pastors who are knocking themselves out to inflame their congregations with passion for the mission of Christ.

But now that she is out of the way, I'm already wondering if there is not something more to her soul than I saw.

She's part of a generation that believed in institutions and their buildings. Sturdy things you can count on. They're not going to be easily discarded because a pastor comes back from a conference with a new laminated notebook filled with the latest ideas for church renewal. It doesn't matter how awful the new soprano is in the choir, or how bad the sermon, you can still get a blessing by just walking up the old wooden stairs to the balcony whose creaks and moans echo the aches and pains of all the saints before us who trudged up those stairs after a hard week's work.

Alice is an anti-Gnostic. She likes to find her holiness in the dust and gritty realities of the church building and all the memories they hold. While the services seem to do little for her, just being in the building allows her soul to exhale. It was within these walls that she was married, her children were baptized, her daughter married, and her husband's funeral was conducted. Everything she

knows about Jesus and his grace for us is lingering in the mortar that holds the stones of her church together.

It's not that she's against ministry and mission as much as she is for the physical church itself. If my new program for opening the church gym to neighborhood kids means they might spill something on the floor or, God forbid, smoke pot in the bathroom, she will throw her shriveled body across the doors. But if I take up an offering for a program to help children in Haiti, she will dig deep in her purse.

She says she understands the need for "all these mission projects." And I think she really does care about the poor. But our primary mission in *The Gospel According to Alice* is caretaking our temple. She and I have very different understandings of the church, and over the years we just kept bumping up against that fundamental disagreement, especially when it came to the church budget.

I keep preaching, literally, that we cannot participate in the mission of Christ that sends us to Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth and keep our hearts inside the temple. This is one of the first lessons the early church had to learn. I know that I'm right and that Alice is as wrong as she can be about our congregation's priority.

But I also know that for over two thousand years the church has never fully left its affection for a temple of holiness. This is why we used to spend all our money building cathedrals that took centuries to construct. We were looking for a glimpse of dwelling in the Holy. Some of us still are. When I'm a guest preacher at a booming new church meeting in a facility whose architect is probably also responsible for the Best Buy stores, the walls don't suggest that our faith is sturdy. Or that someone was here before us. Or that we are here to behold the beauty of the Lord.

So how do we follow the mission of Christ to go into all the world if we are lugging these heavy Gothic buildings on our back?

And how do we follow Christ's call to leave all and follow him without sacrificing the stained-glass windows with the weathered brass plaque tacked on the bottom that says "In Memory of . . ."? It's as if the little plaque is whispering, "Don't forget me as you forge ahead into your new ever-so-relevant ministry, or you will also forget who you have always been."

I think we may be losing something core to our faith in moving Alice Matthews out of the way of the church's progress. Of course, she had to go. The mission is the mission, and our faith has never survived by being a comfortable place of memories. I get that. But I wonder what it does to our souls to so easily forget things like place and the holy memories that are attached to them.

Week Two

A Faithfully Anonymous Pastor

Once a year I teach a class on pastoral ministry at our local seminary. Although it adds a lot of work, I keep saying yes to the invitation because I really love working with the students. Most of them impress me with their dedication to Jesus Christ and the pastoral ministry. Occasionally I encounter a student like Brad Landis who renews my hope in the future of the church.

He's almost thirty years old, rustically handsome, and one of the smartest students I can remember. But he hides his brilliance beneath a bushel of deferring shyness. In the few times he spoke up in my class, he always began by clearing his throat and pushing his horn-rimmed glasses back up on his nose, as if he were imitating Clark Kent. Then he would suggest a profound insight from our theological tradition.

Brad finished seminary in May at the head of his class and could have gone on to graduate school to earn a PhD. Several of the other professors, including the dean, confronted him with his amazing gifts for scholarship. I did the same once after class. "To whom much is given, much is required," I tried. He nodded deferentially. But he was always clear on his calling and wanted only to serve a local congregation—preferably a small one.

He said yes to the first church that offered him a job. Last Sunday I preached at the worship service where he was ordained and installed as the pastor of a rural congregation in Michigan. From the airport it took me two hours of country driving, and getting lost more than once, to find the church address that MapQuest had overlooked.

Once the ordination worship service began, I looked out at the congregation of worried farmers, worn-out homemakers, and bored teenagers. A yellowed fluorescent light hummed its way through the whole service. The microphone on the pulpit squealed if you got too close. The floor fans moaned as they vainly tried to cool the summer heat. Even the laments of the building were part of this sacred conversation between congregation, God, and the new pastor. It occurred to me that I had never written an exam as challenging as the one he would face every Sunday.

Karl Barth claimed that his early years as the pastor of a blue-collar congregation in Safenwil were formative for the insights that led to his major theological breakthroughs as a professor. But as I sat in that chancel and watched my former student kneel to accept the laying on of hands, I wondered how many brilliant Karl Barths there have been who never left their Safenwil.

My former student has no strategic plan for “turning this church around.” Brad’s only ambition is to be the next in a long line of faithfully anonymous pastors who never move on to prestigious positions. But he isn’t anonymous to these people who know his name.

He’ll spend his years baptizing their babies, helping to deliver a calf in the middle of the night, serving on the school board, burying husbands who died too soon, attending Fourth of July picnics, negotiating debates about how to pay for the new church roof—and then every Sunday he will stand in their pulpit and make holy sense of it all.

When the ordination service was over, we all made our way to the basement fellowship hall for a potluck dinner. Tables perched

over beige linoleum were adorned with red-and-white-checked vinyl cloths and small, handmade arrangements of daisies. Families and friends plopped into the gray metal folding chairs as they ate, laughed, gossiped, and teased. Several women fussed over the serving tables filled with casseroles, salads, overly fried chicken, and jello with slices of pears trapped inside. Children squealed as they chased each other around the room. I overheard a story about summer being a great time to get a good deal on snow tires.

They could have been discussing their anxieties about the future of family farms, the economy, or “just where is this country heading?” But there was none of that today. Even the small talk had a lilt to it.

I understood why when their new pastor entered the room and I saw how many of his parishioners just wanted to touch him. Brad never even made it to a chair. One after another they got up from the tables wiping their hands in order to shake his, or give him a hug, or pat him on the back. One man had tears in his eyes.

This was a Eucharistic feast. A new pastor had come, and the congregation took it as a sign that God knew how to find them. The holiness of the room became so apparent I almost took off my shoes. No one wanted to leave, certainly not me. Least of all, the new pastor.

This was my glimpse into a mystery about the mainline church that is hidden from all the statistics and anxiety about its decline. I have no idea what hardships lie ahead for this congregation, or even how long it will last. But I do know that today they are filled with expectancy. In their midst is another highly capable pastor who is prepared to bring thousands of years of theological hope to bear on a community—one that finds holiness by sitting in a church basement swapping stories about the new snow tire that is sure to get you through the winter that always comes for us.

Week Three

The Pastor's Wife and the Mustang

Tomorrow is our wedding anniversary and I still don't have a present. I've never been good at this. When I was younger I thought something as simple as buying an anniversary gift shouldn't be so hard. Now I've settled into not knowing what Ellie wants. I actually love that about her.

There is a mystery about this woman that sometimes drives me crazy, but mostly makes me want to keep asking her out on a first date.

Before we were married, she was candid about the costly mistakes she had made in her early twenties, and said she had decided it was time to start taking her life, and her faith, more seriously. I remember being impressed by her resolve and envious of her mistakes. By the time I met her, she had made so many healthy choices and was now well respected, but that persevering, irrepresible streak of something inappropriate in her fascinated me. Once while visiting her apartment I walked in while she was trying to assemble an IKEA desk. When I came through the door a screwdriver sailed across the room as she screamed, "*Motherf——!*" That may have been the moment I decided to ask her to marry me.

Now that our years together have piled up, I've become accustomed to living with two very different women in this marriage. In addition to the cleaned-up, respectable pastor's wife she wants to be, the wild woman who frightens her was also at the altar when we exchanged vows.

That wild woman will not be ignored, is not ever going to leave, nor will she allow me to consume her with understanding. I can't avoid flirting with her, but she's way out of my league, and we both know it. And the last thing she ever wants to hear when she's disappointed, which is often, is something that sounds pastoral.

The woman Ellie prefers to be takes pride in her pies, buys Christmas presents for the church staff while we're on summer vacation, says kind things about my sermon even when we both know it didn't quite work that morning, and always sits at the end of the third pew, left side. The untamed woman hides through most of that.

Both women raised our daughter Mackenzie. There's a photo on the dresser of our bedroom with her leaning over an infant, cooing. It's a glimpse of total delight. Unlike me, Ellie never missed a soccer game, piano recital, or ballet performance. She went to Barnes & Noble to get books on algebra so that she could help with homework, and later with SAT exams. I often came home from an evening committee meeting at church to find the two of them lying on our bed, sometimes talking about a boy, sometimes in a tickling contest. But when Mackenzie went through the classic stage of adolescent rebellion, she knew her mother was a lioness who didn't mind eating her young. It helped with the boundaries issue.

Ellie spent most of her career as a social worker employed by an adoption agency before burning out and taking early retirement. Her job was to be the advocate for birth mothers who decided to give up their babies for adoption. She would help them review the applications, in which couples described why they would be great

adoptive parents, and then make a choice. Sometimes the birth mother changed her mind after the baby was already placed in a home. Then it was Ellie's job to drive to the adoptive parents' house and take the baby out of their arms. She left a bit of her heart with each of those weeping couples, and eventually too much of her heart for doing social good was gone. She became a part-time interior designer. She said it was easier to fix living rooms than lives. But she has lots of other projects.

Tonight she's out in the garage working on her rusted-out 1967 Mustang. Again. She inherited the car a few years ago from her crazy uncle who adored her. She was startled that this was his bequest to her when he died. And then delighted. "This car is a classic!" she kept telling me. So we towed it back to our house, because it didn't run, and now it has settled into our garage, forcing us to park our working cars along the curb.

She knew nothing about cars before diving into this renovation project—shortly after she burned out on fixing up people. Since then she's spent countless hours on YouTube and talking to her now-good-friend Ray at the counter of the local auto parts dealer, trying to figure out what it will take to finally restore the old classic. I keep finding new tools on the kitchen table. And I love it when she strolls into the study at home with grease on another one of my old T-shirts.

She keeps telling me this car was meant to be flaunted on the street. But I wonder which old Mustang we're really talking about.