

Local Pilgrim

FINDING GRACE IN THE WILDERNESS

"The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness." (Mark 1:12)

Jesus spent 40 days in the wilderness. Indeed, a great many biblical figures spent time in vast wastelands. Maybe that is why I am driven and drawn to the desert west of Las Vegas.

With a backpack filled with cashews and a few liters of water, I make my way to Red Rock National Conservation Area. Peaks rise six and seven thousand feet from the ground like a phoenix stretching into the blue sky above, flexing broad brushed swatches of red, white and gray rocks.

The wilderness of Red Rock, the starkness of the desert landscape, the barren, dusty, dry rock crumbling and crackling under each step, the sharp pointed cacti, the eerie quiet — all remind me of the wilderness where Jesus experienced his temptation before he began his public ministry.

I have hiked the trails of Red Rock, traversed the blank rock faces, climbed boulders the size of casinos, lowered myself into crevices large enough to swallow tour buses and ultimately scaled the peaks. This wilderness is where I find peace, comfort and solace.

It is in the wilderness that I am drawn to the One who is the fountain of the living water of which we drink. Indeed, the wilderness is where God fashions streams of grace.

During our Lenten journey, to what wilderness will you be driven, in order to experience exceptional closeness and fellowship with the God of peace?

PRAYER | Gracious God, who drives us and leads us to lands that may not appear very fertile, open the eyes of our hearts to discover unexpected, beautiful blooms of grace, love and joy in the wilderness, whereby we may experience a closer relationship with you. Amen.



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GIVING THANKS FOR TRASH COLLECTORS

“Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.” (Matthew 20:8)

As a Waste Management truck rolled by me at the landfill, I thought of the workers I usually see hanging off the back, pausing at every driveway to pick up our cans and throw our trash into the truck's compactor. God, I give thanks for these garbage collectors, working a nasty but necessary job. Civil servants, they should be called. These workers make about \$28,000 a year in Virginia.

In 1968, after two Memphis garbage collectors were tragically killed by a malfunctioning truck, Martin Luther King Jr. spoke in support of sanitation workers on strike, calling for better safety standards and a decent wage. In 1981, a garbage strike in New York City led residents to pile mountains of trash around Manhattan. Pedestrians had nowhere to walk, and a growing stink filled the air. The strike was resolved on December 17 that year as an early Christmas gift to the city, providing sanitation workers with increased pay and more sick days.

Can we imagine life without these essential workers? When I consider all I throw in the black bins that I conveniently wheel to the end of my driveway – all the nasty, disgusting funk, the bags that sometimes rip and leak – I give thanks to God for sanitation workers, for their diligence despite their dirty, physically demanding jobs. These workers who keep our cities clean and efficiently running often get overlooked. Thank you, God, for the garbage collector.

PRAYER | *Thank you, God, for the garbage collector, the essential worker, the overlooked laborer without whom our society would fall into disarray. Thank you for those who work the dirtiest jobs so our homes can be clean and free of trash. Let us not look down upon these servants, but rather embrace them with gratitude and treat them with the dignity and respect they deserve. Amen.*



Local Pilgrim

FINDING REFUGE IN THE FACE OF CHANGE

"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change." (Psalm 46:1-2)

Over my landfill's cement wall, where people pull up to toss their trash into the dumpster below, I survey what has been discarded: outdated computer towers and screens, broken fans, dusty vacuum cleaners, boxes full of who knows what. I see a red plastic scooter — the kind my son rode as a toddler. Lots of kids had the same scooter. They straddled the seat to push themselves with both feet. A black circular handle attached to the back allows the protective trailing parent to push or steer.

Now 16, my son recently graduated from learner's permit to driver's license. This milestone happened while I was away on a work trip. I got home after he was already in bed, and then I slept in the next morning. I awoke to discover my son was already on the road, driving himself to school. I wondered how much I'll see him now that he is free to drive himself wherever he needs or wants to go.

Here in the landfill, I am reminded how much of life is letting go. Toddlers grow up to be teenagers. Toys are outgrown and tossed. In the face of all this change, I need someone steady with whom I can share my grief and can lament all this unavoidable loss, while still embracing the hope and joy that change brings. Maybe you need this refuge, too? Lent reminds us of our refuge in the wilderness – or the landfill – our steadfast rock of support. God is our refuge in the face of change.

PRAYER | *Eternal God, life moves fast, kids grow quickly and in the blink of an eye we are left only with memories. Help us cherish the joys of the present. Help us observe and attend to all we have in the here and now, so that when this day fades, we can embrace all that comes, instead of grieving all that we've let go. Amen.*



Local Pilgrim

BELONGING AT THE POOL

"Listen and hear my voice; pay attention and hear my speech." (Isaiah 28:23)

"I'm not at risk of drowning, but I can't swim in a straight line." So I told my swimming instructor at the Jewish community center last spring. Since that first lesson, my skills have grown. I can even (kind of) do a kick turn. But the real gift has been the people I encounter at the JCC in Pittsburgh's Squirrel Hill neighborhood.

During tonight's women-only swim hour, I see a mother and her adult daughter with special needs. They are water-walking in a lane, holding hands. Another woman, wearing long sleeves, leggings and a hair wrap, swims a freestyle so exuberant it splashes water at least two lanes away. Next to me, a woman with porcelain, wrinkled skin becomes a swan as she swims the backstroke, her fingers curved with the loose grace of a dancer. At the edge of my lane, by the stairs, two Asian girls huddle giggling, while their caregiver tends to a younger sibling in the shallow pool. Next to the caregiver, a young woman learns to float, her skin so dark it glows.

At the end of my laps, I take off my slightly too-tight goggles and stick my head under the surface. As the cool water soothes the suctioned-cupped skin around my eyes, I smile. This. This pool. This air in my lungs and blood in my veins. This group of odds-and-ends people. Somehow, we belong to one another, baptized into community by the JCC pool.

For a second, I see it so clearly — and then the vision fades, as the things that divide us come into focus: the ways I fail daily to love my neighbor, especially those who think, look and act differently than me. In Lent, we mourn our missteps just as we cling to the holy glimpses God gives us of what is to come.

PRAYER | *Creator God, thank you for the air in our lungs and the blood in our veins. Thank you for all the little ways our bodies serve us every day. Help us to see the bodies of our neighbors, strangers and enemies. Help us to see their humanity: their bodies like ours, their God-given breath. Grant us courage to act in love, and forgive us when we fail. Amen.*



Local Pilgrim

REMEMBERING TO REST

*"Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in all ways. The Lord be with all of you."
(2 Thessalonians 3:16)*

Every day I take time out from the world. I come home from traveling through bus rides and class notes, group projects and math assessments, practice sessions and dance and cirque rehearsals, and I dive into my space — my room, my bed and some snuggles with my cat. No matter where I have traveled that day or week, I am safe there and I can just chill out.

In church, they talk about being still and quiet, and this is my place and my time to do that. I slow down. I let out my worries and my hopes. And I can just be.

That's my pilgrimage: to get back to my soft landing place and just rest.

PRAYER | *Dear Lord, no matter how busy things get, help us remember to rest. Remind us all that time alone is necessary and that peace and quiet is its own prayer. Amen.*



Local Pilgrim

ENJOYING TRUE WELCOME IN THE BURGER SPOT

“Ask, and it will be given to you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened.” (Matthew 7:7-8)

In the heart of our Main Street stands a beloved burger spot, an icon since 1938. It clung to its unique traits for a long time: such as no cheese, cash only and getting your food before finding a table. It now takes credit cards and offers cheese as a burger topping, but the distinct menu remains, drawing both locals and visitors. Despite a bustling lunch rush and limited tables, there's always room.

This spot isn't just for locals, either. It's a pilgrimage for burger seekers. Approaching the counter with my usual order, delivered in the restaurant's unique lingo, triggers a smile from the familiar cashier, an unspoken recognition of me as one of the regulars. But it remains a warm, welcoming spot even when a newcomer is told they don't sell french fries or don't have lettuce and tomatoes. It's a place where strangers become friends, where the unspoken rules create a sense of community. You always run into friends and family from near and far, giving everyone a sense of home.

PRAYER | Gracious God, we're grateful for places in our communities that mirror your inclusivity. May the comfort and simplicity of these places and times remind us of those seeking to belong in your church. Help us share this welcome message with others, and through our interactions with others, teach us to understand that true belonging lies in Christ. Grant us patience as we wait, knowing that seeking leads to finding, that waiting opens promised doors. Guide us to embrace fellowship, spreading the love of Christ. And when we encounter such places, remind us that our ultimate home is in your presence. Amen.



Local Pilgrim

SLOWING DOWN IN GOD'S CREATION

"Be still, and know that I am God!" (Psalm 46:10)

On a beautiful Saturday afternoon, lots of people come to the arboretum to walk the paths and enjoy trees native to the Shenandoah Valley. I was lucky to get a parking spot. This arboretum has been at the top of my list of local attractions to explore since we moved here in June 2022, but it took a writing assignment to finally get me here.

I head down a well-maintained gravel path, slowly leaving the city behind. I love the smell of forest — that fragrant mix of air, soil and plant life. The sky is brilliant today, with patches of blue peeking through the tree canopy and enough cottony clouds to protect me from direct rays of sun without darkening the beauty around me. The wind tousling the tree's leaves calms me better than any meditation app ever could. I feel myself letting go of the tension I always hold in my neck and shoulders. It's 65 degrees and sunny, the perfect day for a hike.

The arboretum's path leads me to a solitary wooden bench — lonely along the path. It beckons me to stop and write a bit in the notebook I brought to record what surfaces during this excursion. Fellow hikers pass by, but no one seems to think me odd for sitting and writing. This bench, in this arboretum, seems made for people to stop and contemplate their place, their existence, their God.

PRAYER | *Slow us down, God. Help us take in the sights, sounds and smells of this beautiful planet we are privileged to call home. Guide us into the outdoors, down a meandering path without purpose, so we can be reminded of your presence everywhere and of our call to marvel at the beauty you set before us. Amen.*

