

Local Pilgrim

WHAT WILL I DO WITH THIS TIME?

"You are dust, and to dust you shall return." Genesis 3:19

"Where are you?" my husband asks through my cellphone.
"Sitting in a cemetery," I say. I stopped here on my way to the grocery store to sit among the dead.

Near my city's center, this cemetery has a parking problem. It's surrounded by small, tightly packed, single-family homes, people who can't afford a mountain view in the Shenandoah Valley, people who can't be too picky about their neighbors. My car is parked in a tow-away zone, so I sit in the grass among headstones where I can keep an eye on it.

An ambulance siren wails a few blocks away, but here there is no sign of distress. It's so quiet. So still. Only me and a squirrel, who's giving me the side-eye as he nibbles an acorn. I contemplate the quiet of death. The rest. The feeling of peace that slowly fills me as I allow myself to forget about my parked car, my grocery run, the work left on my to-do list.

I take in the names on the headstones nearby and wonder what advice Abby, Erwin and Paul would share from the other side. I wonder: what would my grandparents want me to know? Or my friend Chrissy, who died by suicide? Here, in the cemetery, I am reminded of my reality: I have one precious, limited life. What will I do with this time? What will you?

PRAYER | Divine Creator, from dust you formed us, gifting us with life. To dust we will return. Hear our prayers for all who come forward to receive the mark of their mortality today, ashes smeared on the foreheads of young and old. Hear our prayers for pastors who touch ashy thumb to warm skin, making the sign of the cross on the foreheads of those they love. Awaken us all, Giver of Life, to the reality of our limits, the fact of our mortality, and the precious chance we have now to live and love and marvel. Amen.



THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 15

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HONORING OUR STORIES

"So he told them this parable." (Luke 15:3)

The St. James Theatre in New York City has an absurd number of stairs. To reach the balcony, one must endure a treacherous hike through the building, crossing canyons of theatergoers, bathroom lines and merchandise stands. The occasional usher, smiling with a playbill in hand, offers a word of support for those ascending to the balcony.

But by the time the show begins, the hike is long forgotten. None of that matters anymore. It is time to tell a story. That is why we are here, after all, and it is why I return to this theater again and again. It holds marvelous stories.

Storytelling is a wonderful thing, and one I find most effective in the theater. New audiences arrive to see each performance, shaping and reshaping how the same story is told and received. Theater is immensely personal; for only a few hours, we inhabit another world. Together. With actors, technicians, musicians, critics and those who just love a show, we partake in telling a story as though it is the first time it has ever been told. It is a beautiful thing to be a part of.

Jesus understands the value of a good story. His ministry is one of narrative and nurture, and he reminds us that the stories we tell – and why we tell them – matter deeply. His ministry is one of the many reasons I am a Christian, for Jesus shows us through parables and speeches that stories have the power to change the world.

My hope this Lenten season is that we can honor the stories of our faith. What might the story of Jesus offer us from day to day? How does his story influence the way we move in the world? What stories around us do we forget to listen to?

PRAYER | *Holy and wonderful God, we give you thanks for your Son, Jesus, the storyteller, who reminds us how important our stories are. May we learn from Jesus to tell bold stories, ones that just might change the world. Guide us in tuning ourselves to the narratives swirling all around us, that we may hear the stories of all your people. Amen.*

Local Pilgrim

STAYING GOLD

"Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others." P(hilippians 2:4)

The Golden Pony is a popular bar among locals. It is named after a line from S. E. Hinton's novel *The Outsiders*. "Stay gold, Ponyboy," Johnny whispers to his friend who lies dying in a hospital bed, encouraging him not to lose his optimism and innocence in the face of life's harsh realities.

A waiter approaches our table of four: me, my husband and another couple I'd invited. "You all here for the show?"

The Golden Pony's lower level is reserved for live music, bands that seem to require a lot of black leather, nose rings and electric guitars. We aren't here for the show, however. We came for the eclectic menu of drinks: the Corn Hub, Maple Margaritas, the Buck and something called a Fernet, which happened to be tonight's special.

"You shouldn't have that," the waiter says. "It's a bottom-of-the-barrel kind of drink."

In light of this rave review, my friend orders one Fernet for us all to try.

A Fernet tastes like Coke mixed with Vicks VapoRub. After just one small sip, I can't get the taste out of my mouth for the rest of the night.

Our table conversation turns to our lives. All of us are working parents. As we gingerly sip our drinks and dip fried cauliflower into sriracha sauce, we lean into one another's hopes and fears — for our kids, for our world at war, for our work, which we pray might be meaningful to someone, somewhere. I'm grateful for a conversation that moves beyond small talk, one in which I don't feel the need to paint my struggles pretty.

We linger, pushing the ticking clock on our babysitters, because we need this — good company, laughter and the encouragement of good friends to "stay gold" in a world of unrelenting, harsh realities.

PRAYER | *God be with the weary, with those who must walk or stand on their feet or do hard labor. God, grace us with the comfort and shelter we all need to rest and renew ourselves for the work to which you call us. Amen.*



Local Pilgrim

REPENTING FOR A MOUNTAIN OF TRASH

"In days to come the mountain of the Lord's temple shall be established as the highest of the mountains and shall be raised up above the hills." (Micah 4:1)

I live in the Shenandoah Valley, nestled between the Blue Ridge and Allegheny mountains. So at first, I didn't notice anything different about one nearby mountain. Then I saw a green Waste Management truck pull up, stop to be weighed and head off toward the closest mountain — a mountain of trash.

Grown over with grass, the unnatural mountain blends into its surroundings. But the bulldozer working its sides — and the black birds circling — reveal its truth.

According to the Environmental Protection Agency, Americans produce 268 million tons of trash annually. Individually we toss 4.5 pounds of trash every day. The global average is 1.6 pounds — we Americans are trashier than most. But we've come a long way from the days of throwing waste out our windows to fester in the street.

According to dumpster.com (a fascinating website), the first U.S. landfill was created in 1935 in California. It was your basic hole in the ground, periodically covered with dirt. In 1959, "sanitary landfill" guidelines were introduced, and the Solid Waste Disposal Act was passed in 1965. Today, landfills have evolved into a system meticulously engineered to protect human health, control groundwater contamination and reduce the methane caused by decomposition, a major contributor to climate change.

But even with these advancements, we have a trash problem. Landfills have multiplied, space is quickly filling, and recycling is more important than ever. Green advocates have dubbed us a "throwaway society" because of all our single-use products.

Today's pilgrimage to the mountain of trash gives me reason to repent of my trashy ways and to work for a more sustainable future.

PRAYER | *God, we've made our own mountains: trash piled to the heavens like the tower of Babel. Help us consider your creation as we buy and consume. Help us be more mindful of the limited space we inhabit and the earth's resources we must learn to share. Amen.*