

2024 Lenten Devotional
Written by Teri McDowell Ott
and many others

Local Pilgrim

A Wandering, Wondering Daily Devotional



THE PRESBYTERIAN OUTLOOK

Local Pilgrim

A Wandering, Wondering Daily Devotional

When I was a kid, I loved Louis Fitzhugh's *Harriet the Spy*, which is about an 11-year-old girl who records observations about her community in her treasured notebook. Harriet's spy work leads her to learn and reflect on local happenings, from the family who owns the local grocery store and is worried about maintaining their business, to Little Joe, their delivery boy, who is sneaking the store's produce to hungry children. Harriet eventually gets in trouble for her spying, when her friends find her notebook and have their feelings hurt by judgments Harriet has recorded. But by the end of the book, Harriet learns important lessons in empathy, and is given a new role to take advantage of her gifts — editor of her school newspaper.

The idea for these Local Pilgrim Lent devotions arose from my fond memories of *Harriet the Spy* and all she discovered through careful observation. I also wanted to know my community better. Our family moved to Harrisonburg, Virginia, in June of 2022, but I hadn't taken time to explore beyond the places my errands take me. These "local pilgrimages" led me, notebook in hand, to some wonderful places — an inclusive playground built for children of all abilities, an arboretum I had always wanted to visit but never made time for, and my public library that welcomes and respects everyone who enters. I also ventured to places I'd never have gone without an assignment: a city bus, a seedy bar, a cemetery, the waiting room of our local hospital. Other writers of this "local pilgrim" series ventured to places equally beautiful and mundane, as a sacred exercise in attending to whatever God lays before us in our lives and our communities.

I've been blessed by this Lenten series, purposefully exploring, discovering and reflecting on my community. Lent is the perfect season for a pilgrimage such as this, leading to meaningful contemplation and sacred discoveries. As you make your way through this devotional, you might find yourself inspired to go somewhere new; or somewhere familiar with a notebook in hand; to pause, ponder and pray. What will God reveal to you? I trust your pilgrimage will bless you just as "Local Pilgrim" has blessed me.

Teri

Teri McDowell Ott, Editor of the *Presbyterian Outlook*

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?

P R A Y E R | 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.



Local Pilgrim

HERE IS SOMETHING SIGNIFICANT

*“He has inscribed your name and mine on His palms; and our walls are constantly before Him.”
Isaiah 49:16*

In the cemetery I'm visiting, the tombstones are as varied as the lives they remember. Traditional granite bricks and round-topped stones, engravings in print and script. Some ornate. Some simple. As I walk between and around them, a few tall obelisks stand out from the crowd. I wondered about these towering headstones, marble and granite pointing to the heavens like the outstretched finger of a winning athlete.

The Washington Monument is, perhaps, the most iconic obelisk known to Americans, its shape dating back to the architectural genius of ancient Egypt. In his book *Washington's Monument: And the Fascinating History of the Obelisk*, John Steele Gordon writes, “The obelisk, silent as only stone can be, nonetheless seems to say as nothing else can, ‘Here is something significant.’”

When I contemplate a significant life, my mind doesn't picture the tallest tombstone. Rather, did I love generously? Did I act honestly, and authentically? Did I walk humbly? Did I contribute meaningfully? This cemetery pilgrimage leaves me full of questions.

“Something significant.”

I imagine we'd all like our lives to be so remembered. What does a significant life look like to you? What are its marks? Its characteristics?

This Lent offers us a multitude of opportunities to reflect upon our lives, renew our faith and return to God.

P R A Y E R | *God, you are the potter and we are the clay. You mold us from the dust of the earth, shaping our lives for various purposes. As we contemplate our finite lives, our reason for being and our significance, may this pilgrimage through Lent renew us for the road ahead, and for*



Local Pilgrim

OUR NEEDS ARE RARELY CLEAR ON THE SURFACE

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you.
Ephesians 4:32

Late afternoon on a rainy Friday, and the parking lot outside the emergency room is full. I have no idea what or who is inside the automatic doors that, as a sign says, are open to the public. I try to time my entry for a lull and venture inside the hospital, insecure that I am not walking in with a health emergency, but a notebook and pen. I am relieved to find the desk clerk alone.

"I'm a writer," I stumble, "working on a project that includes a hospital. May I sit in your waiting room and observe? I won't disturb anyone." The desk clerk, a young woman, doesn't think it will be a problem but wants to check with security, and she points to a uniformed man. The security guard listens to my request – he's a Virginian, clearly by his accent – and agrees that I am not a problem. Gratefully, I settle into a chair in the corner of the waiting room.

The walls here are painted a color I would describe as "institutional yellow" and the chairs are ugly padded-plastic, but not uncomfortable.

Some of the "emergencies" are clear. A young man comes in with a bloody gash near his left eyebrow. Another man hops in on one foot, his big toe swollen and bandaged. Others, not so much. A young mom with her toddler and preschooler are tucked into the corner across from me. The mom's voice is patient but tired as she tries to keep the kids entertained ... with pieces of paper ripped into puzzles on the floor (that I pray has recently been mopped) ... at the vending machine where the little girl begs for a bag of chips ... with the automatic hand sanitizer that is fun for only a minute.

I remember mothering two young kids. This two-year-old's stubborn, "No, Mama!" when offered the flavor of chips she doesn't want, reminds me of how hard, and exhausting parenting is — even under the best of circumstances. All three appear more in need of a bath than medical care, but who knows. Our needs are rarely clear on the surface. Maybe this mother just needed to get herself and her kids out of the rain. No matter, I want to pray for them all.

P R A Y E R | *Nurturing God, we pray for parents doing their best, for parents who are weary but still patient, for mothers and fathers using every ounce of creativity to entertain the curious minds of their children. We pray for people who need help, but whose needs are unclear. We pray for those who wander into emergency rooms on rainy days because the sign says "open to the public" and they have nowhere else to go. Amen.*

Local Pilgrim

SICK AND ALONE

“Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted.” Psalm 25:16

An EMT rolled a wheelchair with a large man through the emergency room doors. Clearly, the man wasn't well, his sweatshirt pulled up high around his neck, his hood over his head. The EMT was attentive and caring, asking the man, “What can I get you?” He had a fever, I overheard. His blood pressure was high. After giving these vitals to a nurse, the EMT left for another call. He said goodbye to the man and wished him well.

Besides this man sheltering in his sweatshirt, no one else was in this waiting room alone. A young man with a gash in his forehead jokes with a whole squad of buddies. A young mom does her best to entertain her kids. An older couple sit quietly in front of me, occasionally leaning to whisper something in the other's ear. A man who dropped a bench on his toe hobbles in with his girlfriend.

I was sick and alone once. I'd just moved to a new call, fresh out of seminary, and had caught some sort of virus. I was bad sick — the kind of sick when you start to wonder if you're going to make it. I won't get into the gory details. But the worst part was being alone. I didn't know anyone well enough yet in my new community to call. I didn't have anyone to sit watch, to make sure I was still breathing, drinking fluids, getting the rest my body needed, checking my temperature. I thought about calling for an ambulance that night, but didn't.

Tonight, sitting in this waiting room, I pause to pray for those who are sick and alone. People who have to be wheeled into hospital emergency rooms because they have no one to care for them. Lord, in your mercy, hear my prayers.

P R A Y E R | *Merciful God, hear our prayers for those in need of emergency services, EMT's and ambulances. Surround those who are sick and alone with your care and compassion. Thank you for professionals who step in to care for those who are alone, with the respect and dignity all deserve. Amen.*



Local Pilgrim

NO ONE IS TURNED AWAY

All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability. Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. Acts 2:4-6

A man carrying a clipboard chats with a young couple in Spanish, as he escorts them to the door. The woman holds a baby wrapped in a blanket. I can't make out or understand the conversation, but the couple is clearly relieved, and appreciates the man who appears to be the hospital's staff translator.

Later, a brown-skinned family of four, the mother in hijab, arrive through the emergency room doors with their own translator; a slender, dark-haired man who gives the desk nurse all the information she needs, moving back and forth between the two.

I wonder if there is any space in my community more equitable than this hospital waiting room. The diversity of socioeconomic class, race, gender, religion and language spoken does not dictate who gets treated when. Here, the system is based on need. Whoever has need gets help. Whoever's need is more urgent gets help first.

A man who appears to be unhoused walks in (the staff greet him, he's been here before) and wanders over to the vending machines to buy a bag of chips and help himself to a cup of hot coffee. Here, no one is turned away.

P R A Y E R | *Gracious God who welcomes all and expects us to do the same, we pray for your Spirit's guidance in this diverse and beautiful world. May we see each other as siblings rather than strangers. May we marvel at the ability you give us to communicate, translate and understand many and various languages. Help us be among the helpers, those who respond to need with care, concern, and compassion. Amen.*



Local Pilgrim

GREEN-LABEL DAY

And God is able to give you more than you need, so that you will always have all you need for yourselves and more than enough for every good cause. 2 Corinthians 8

In the checkout line at Goodwill, a little boy spilled his bag of gummy bears on the floor in front of me. His parents caught him right before he scooped the candy up to put in his mouth.

This was our first visit to our local Goodwill, my teenage daughter having caught the bug to go “thrifting.” The place was busy on Sunday afternoon; and the clerk at the checkout heaved a big sigh before we approached with our treasures.

Sunday is green-label day — every item with a green label is on sale for \$1.00. My daughter found three pairs of jeans, two with green labels. I found two more pairs for full price, \$7.99.

The clerk rang up our total for five pairs of jeans: \$24. “Do you want to round up to make a contribution?”

“What will my contribution support?”

“Job training through Goodwill,” the clerk responded, shoving our jeans in plastic grocery bags.

“Sure, let’s round up.”

Goodwill is a 120-year-old international organization, founded by a Methodist minister who collected used household goods and clothing in wealthier areas of the city, then trained and hired people who were poor to mend, repair, and sell the used goods. Goodwill remains a leading nonprofit provider of educational and workforce-related services.

The store impressed me. It was clean, well-organized and well-run. All sorts of people were shopping there this Sunday afternoon: whole families; young, trendy women looking for vintage finds; a mom my age buying an outfit for a party with a “hippie” theme.

As my daughter and I were leaving, a Latinx family was also checking out, each kid with a new, proudly held toy — the girl cradling a stuffed animal, the boy a board game, the parents smiling at their children’s delight.

P R A Y E R | *Bestower of blessings, you call us to serve and share. May those of us blessed with more than enough, give in ways that honor the dignity of those who have less. Though our needs differ, your love for us is steady, inclusive and unconditional. We gratefully sing your praise. Amen.*