

Pilgrimages

Senior Spotlight: Spring 2026

Lee James



Note from the Author

As I was reading through the poems I've written over the past several years, I noticed a theme: many of them reference, or are directly about, stories of waiting from scripture. I've found myself relating to the Israelites wandering the wilderness, or the Psalmist praying out pain, or those waiting for the Messiah. These stories become so alive to me as I imagine myself within them. The poems here are my way of attempting to capture the life these stories take on as I let them dialogue with my story. I hope they can come alive to you here as well.

Along with each title is a quote, a date, or a Bible passage. These sources are what inspired my poetry, and it feels amiss to exclude them. They point to the ways and moments in which I found my life and scripture in dialogue with one another.

We are all a part of this great story. Christ came and left, and we're living in the middle – God is with us, but has not yet returned. We are all walking a long journey, each on our own and all together. Perhaps these poems can remind you of the ways your own life is intertwined with the story each of us is a part of.

*Come, walk with me,
the journey is long.*

Yours for lighting up the world,
Lee

Cover: Footprints

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O Come, O Come

“O Come, O Come, Immanuel, and ransom captive Israel.”

Before Christ is born,
Israel is in captivity.
Now I know that times have changed,
but it still seems like we’re waiting.
It’s not just Israel this time.
The people are wasting days across this waiting world,
each holding our breath as the earth spins.

We used to want a divine warrior -
O come, o come, Emmanuel,
and save us from our enemies.
Herod sits upon his throne,
we bear our rulers’ burdens,
and we chafe at Rome’s oppression.
O Lord, destroy our enemies.

And you came as a child,
born to a carpenter’s house.

“Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s,”
you said,
“Bear their burden an extra mile,”
and, “pray for your enemies.”
You cursed the bitterness we held beneath holy faces,
drove away our sacrifices,
and healed on our holy days,
digging your fingers into dirt
and smearing it across our pristine faces
to heal what’s hidden underneath.

And now you're gone again,
and we're still waiting,
generation after generation
of blindness.

There's war in a hundred hidden places all over our broken
world.

There's hunger in the many countries across this planet,
and there's hunger across our own towns
that we're too busy or pious to notice.

There's loneliness, poverty, divorce, violence, homelessness,
anger, fear.

We're all chafing under the rule of our own Herods
and we're all just waiting,
hoping that someday soon, something will change.
O come, o come, Emmanuel,
and save us from ourselves.

This little planet is so full of little people,
tearing each other apart
and pretending to be bigger than we are.

What can we do but wait?
We're still here, tending our flocks,
going about our tiresome daily lives,
and hoping that one of these tiresome days,
we'll be surprised by a host of heavenly messengers,
announcing Messiah's arrival.

Silent night

“Silent night, holy night; all is calm, all is bright.”

The night is all but silent. A pregnant teen clings to the coat of her husband, scared eyes watching every passerby. She's afraid. She's faced the anger of her parents and her townspeople and she knows what fear feels like. Echoes of her parents' voices whispering “adultery” drift around in her head like the wisps of foul smoke that drift from the campfires lit amongst the city as the crowd fights for warmth. So the girl finds herself here, her only safety in the arms of a man who had every right to have her killed.

The girl's legs are tired. She's never been pregnant before, and her hump is the biggest it'll ever be. They've traveled all day, and now they can't even find a place to sit down.

Her husband is just as tired. The town is filled with people and he can't find a place to stay. If only Mary could've stayed with her family. “Why, Adonai,” He whispers, “why this year?” Joseph wishes the Messiah could've come just one year late.

Immanuel's overdue now. Mary can tell, or she thinks she can, but she's never been pregnant before. She's scared. She knows the feeling well by now, but this time it's setting into panic.

A man in the crowd rushes past and jostles Mary. She stumbles. Winces in pain. Starts to sob; hiccups of half-formed words and messy tears and a runny nose. Mary wipes her nose on her sleeve and Joseph starts to panic, too. He's a carpenter: he knows woodgrain and a chisel and long days of sweating work. He doesn't know how to comfort a sobbing, pregnant teenage girl.

So Joseph does what he knows how to do. He tangles his anxiety into a fist and finds the closest door to knock on.

A tired man opens it. “I'm sorry,” he starts, but Joseph doesn't let him finish.

“Please.” The carpenter begs. “My wife-” Joseph can’t finish, his throat knotted up with fear.

The man inside glances over to Mary, face tear-streaked, shivering, very very pregnant. That man decides that Mary looks too much like his daughter: they’ve got the same round face and scared brown eyes.

He sighs. “I really don’t have space.” Joseph opens his mouth to protest, but the man holds up a hand. “I don’t. But if you want it, you can stay with the animals. I’m so sorry - that’s all I can give you.”

Mary starts sobbing harder. Joseph wraps an arm around her and forces himself not to cry. “Thank you.” He tells the man at the door. “It’s a place to stay.”

They find the barn and Mary’s crying. It smells like animals: sweat and slop and manure. “It hurts.” Mary whimpers as they find a place among straw for her to lie down. Long minutes pass, and Joseph’s starting to panic too now. Mary won’t stop crying and he doesn’t know how to help a girl give birth.

Then, a pair of women from the house rush in, with a lamp and blankets and a bucket of warm water. “It’s not much,” one says, “but we’re here to help.” Mary’s face fills with relief at the sight of the women.

One woman immediately sets to helping calm Mary. The other bustles about, muttering to herself and getting things in order. Eventually, she orders Joseph out of the way. He finds himself sitting against a wall, watching two strangers help his wife prepare for birth.

It’s all but silent. It’s a donkey braying loudly and a woman barking orders and another whispering prayers and Mary crying loudly. It’s waiting. Joseph would laugh if he wasn’t so anxious. This is Immanuel’s coming? There is no peace, no calm, no heavenly light. The night is loud and fearful. It’s dark but for a small flickering lamp. No one in the barn sleeps two seconds that night. No, it is not a silent night. And yet, Joseph thinks as he waits, perhaps this night is truly holy.



Morning, earth, spinning

A response to "Liturgy of the Ordinary" by Tish Harrison Warren

I wake
in medias res
the world already spinning without me.
Everything happening at once,
and I open my eyes
unto a cacophony of noise
and sound and color
spilling into each other.
The world is awake already,
and I awake into it,
into the living
and breathing
and being.

I rise from sleep
in the midst of it all,
the world already spinning about me.
And I can feel it,
the world,
the spinning,
pulsing through my heartbeat,
surging like the air in my lungs,
the earth below my feet,
the water in cupped hands
rising up to sate thirst.
I listen,
and I hear the world's pulse.

I begin my day
among all the other pieces of this world,
of this spinning world within and without
and I smile,
amongst laughter and tears,

for I know that I am of many,
and I am many.
My heart pulses to the rhythm of the world.
The sun rises,
clouds drift, rain falls,
the moon pulls tides,
my lips drink water,
my hands create,
my eyes read,
my feet walk and run –
all these holy acts
of another creature
another heartbeat
in the balance and rhythm
of this ever-spinning world.

I wake,
and the world is spinning,
and here I am
within it.

Memento Mori

Ash Wednesday 2024

“Remember that you are dust, and to dust you will return.”

The pastor says to me

as she draws a cross in ash across my forehead.

It's a symbol, I think,

as I walk back to my seat.

A mark on our faces to say,

I know that I am nothing.

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust,

and each man returns to the ground where they're from.

It's humbling,

to look around at the faces of friends and mentors and strangers

and see that we're all just clay.

There's something grounding about it.

To not need to be anything,

to look at yourself and see a human,

a human beloved,

without needing to work for it.

It makes me feel small.

Memento mori - remember that you must die.

Humans are so wonderfully intricate -

so many pieces, so many functions

that all work together to form a beloved child.

A beloved child so easily broken and battered.

We are clay,

and to dust we shall return.

But these jars of clay are much beloved,

and the potter holds us,

safe in his hands.

Storm clouds and a solo traveler

Highlander 2025

The traveler is crying. He's huddled in his sleeping bag, jacket zipped to the chin. Wind whips at the tarp that provides his only shelter. The clear plastic snaps in the wind, scattering drops of water onto the ground around the traveler.

Around the traveler's makeshift shelter, rain pounds into the ground, a relentless torrent as loud as – no, louder than – the thunder booming terror overhead. It is dark. Night, yes, but darker than night, storm clouds blanketing the sky and blotting out even the sparse comfort of stars.

The traveler cannot see. In this moment, all the traveler knows are the sounds of thunder, pounding rain, and a plastic tarp that is only barely keeping the traveler from getting soaked.

All the traveler knows is wet clothes, tears, numb hands, numb nose.

All the traveler knows is cold and fear.

Finally, the traveler nods off to sleep. Fitful, yes, but he hopes it will amount to something. At the very least, the traveler thinks, I'll be unconscious through the storm. He slips into weary, haunted dreams.

"Wake up!" A voice cuts through the traveler's nightmares.

The traveler opens tear-crusted eyes to a flashlight shining in his face. Rain still pounds against the tarp and the ground, and on the stranger, too.

"What's going on?" The traveler asks, rubbing his confused eyes.

"Get your things. It's not safe out here. I'm bringing you to shelter."

The stranger lowers their flashlight, and the traveler sees soaked clothes and tired eyes. Why would this stranger retrieve him from the woods? How did the stranger find him?

But the stranger did come out in the storm in the middle of the night, and that's enough for the traveler to trust the help they're providing.

The traveler gets out of his sleeping bag, and notices that his pants are barely even damp. If he leaves his makeshift shelter, he'll be not only wet but soaked.

But if he stays here, he may never get dry.

The traveler, after only a moment of indecision, balls up his sleeping bag, and crawls out of his shelter.

Within seconds, he is soaked. The traveler stands and looks the stranger in the eye. Deep, kind, tired eyes. The traveler shivers. Whether from cold or something else, he doesn't know.

The traveler hugs his now-soaked sleeping bag to his chest.

"Alright," he says, "let's go."

The stranger nods. "Follow me."

The stranger turns and starts walking through the dark, storm-swept forest. The light of their flashlight pools around them, and the traveler follows. Wind whips rain into the traveler's eyes, a branch snaps against his arm, thunder booms overhead.

They keep walking through the storm. The traveler is cold, shivering. He starts crying again, tears mixing with the cold, sharp rain on his face.

The traveler trips on a log, sprawls against the ground. The stranger's light keeps moving, and the traveler lets out a wail of despair. He can't stand a moment more in this pounding rain! If this stranger leaves him here alone-

The light stops. The stranger turns, hurries back through the forest.

"Are you alright? Here, let me help."

The stranger reaches out a hand and helps the traveler up. The stranger is strong, their hands calloused.

"I think I'm okay," the traveler says, shaken, "are we almost there?"

"We're close. Let's keep moving."

The stranger was right – they are close. After only a minute longer of hiking through the storm, they arrive at a lean-to.

With a gasp of relief, the traveler rushes past the stranger and into the shelter of the lean-to. Their things are wet, they're cold, but the rain is pounding on the lean-to now, not the traveler's head.

The traveler and the stranger lay out sleeping bags side by side. The storm goes on outside, but with the shelter and their shared body heat, the traveler is able to sleep soundly for the first time in a long time.

In the morning, the rain had stopped and the sun is shining. The traveler opens his eyes. His hands are warm and his clothes are mostly dry. Outside the lean-to, the stranger is building a fire.



Protect Us, Lord

Psalm 23

Protect us, Lord. Take our burdens.
My words are dried up within me,
my soul is weeping all day long;
my heart is broken for the tears of my brothers.
Protect us, Lord. Take our burdens.

My shoulders are weary
from days of plodding on.
I've walked through green pastures
and the valley of death,
but I still fear evil.

Protect us, Lord. Take our burdens.

Guide our feet and
ward off the shadows
that try to devour us.

Grant us peace, Lord.

Lead us home to still waters
and set a banquet feast
in celebration of our return.

May we come home rejoicing
at the wonders you've shown us.

May we find the courage to sit and supper
with ourselves,
another among our enemies.

There is so much broken
in ourselves and in our world.

Our hearts overflow with sorrow -
may you fill our cups with joy.

May we seek you
and wait in your presence,
forever.

Protect us, Lord. Take our burdens.
Bring us closer to a greater trust in you.

Flight From Egypt

Exodus 13:22

In the desert, long days are for walking.
Wrists still chain-chafed,
follow the Cloud through the desert,
trust things will be better someday.
May God guide us through the wilderness.

In the desert, long days are for doubting.
The sun is hot, sand whips through the air and gets between
fingers, in eyes,
under makeshift bandages.
The wilderness sand rubs raw against new and old wounds alike.

Maybe things were better before.
Maybe chains and whip and certainty
were better than long walking days
and a sandy unknown.
Maybe it would be better to go back.
To give up.

But I'm not alone in the wilderness, am I?
As we walk, a friend comes alongside,
holds out her hand:
"I will weep when you are weeping.
Let me walk with you."
So we walk.

In the desert, long days are for hoping.
My friend asks me:
"What do you hope to do now that we've left Egypt?"
"I want to live.
I want to create something beautiful."
And eventually, as we walk, the sand begins to turn to grass.

One evening, the sky is clear.

My friend and I lay on the grass together.

I point out constellations.

"Y'know," I say, "God looked at all that,
this beautiful world, and thought it needed each of us."

"We're so small."

"We're so enormous."

The Cloud, flickering yellow like a flame in the dark, murmurs:

"You are so loved."

In the desert, long days are for walking.

We're so weary, my friend and I,

but there is no sand surrounding us now.

There is grass, and shrubs,

and in the distance, I think I see trees.

"Things are getting better." I whisper,

too scared to hope out loud.

My friend smiles, holds my hand.

"We are bound for the promised land."



Dying to self

ES Fall Retreat 2024

I spent this weekend dying to self. I listened all morning, met my brokenness, and spent the afternoon in my room. Waiting. You didn't speak to me, not in so many words. You were there, silent, watching and holding me as I wrestled. In this new knowledge of who I am, my heart, like rich new earth, is torn apart by memories. I am so hurt, you see. I am so hurt and I am filled with such hurting. And I'm told I must meet it with hands outstretched. Waiting. Dying to self and lying down, my body fresh earth for you to plow rows into. You're planting seeds, I know. But I'm dying to self and I'm wrestling with the corpses of who I was. It's bitter. I've heard death makes good fertilizer. This knowledge doesn't keep out the mourning. I'm dying to self and my selves are haunting me. O for the day when there will be no more dying! Still, I'm wrestling with this baptism of self. Fresh in my selfness, and I'm dying. Made new, and being remade to life as I die, and I'm wrestling. My heart is mourning my past selves. And I'm dying, and wrestling with my death. Why are you silent? You! How can you be silent while I'm wrestling? Why will you not hold me, comfort me? Tell changing to turn away another day, let me rest. Let me stay the way I am. But you're silently placing your hands on my corpses, gently burying my old selves, and turning, still silent, smiling. And my broken pieces smile back, a plowed field planted with new seed. And then it rains.

Melvin Village Church

9 July 2023

I'm having an emotion right now,
but I don't know what to name it.
I'm not sure how to say what "it" is.
It's sitting in a plastic chair outside.
It's the group of people I'm seated with.
It's the tent above us giving shade from the blistering sun,
and the breeze brushing against my face,
a respite from the still, humid air of summer.
It's the woman in the front
playing an old hymn on a keyboard,
and the birds in the nearby trees singing along.
It's us singing with the birds.
It's us. It's singing.
It's birds. It's nearby trees.
It's the breeze whispering through the trees,
careful not to speak too loud
and thus disturb the sermon.
It's the shadows of rustling tree-leaves
dancing across the ground.
It's the sun glistening off the waves of the lake,
and the sound of the waves tiptoeing toward shore.
It's a warm feeling in my chest
as I sit next to good friends.
It's stillness, and enjoying the stillness.
It's peace.

In Between Seasons

Ecclesiastes

the sun rises and the sun sets
don't we?
the day dawns and the day ends
don't we?

meaningless, meaningless,
the preacher says,
but i've got to believe there's more to it than this.

all these
wakings and sleepings,
long days,
laughter, tears,
work and play,
rest.
planting seeds, weeding weeds,
harvest come autumn.
traveling, and returning home,
marriages and birthdays.
getting sick,
breaking bones,
mourning lost ones,
and healing.
times of war, and times of peace,
hellos and goodbyes,
beginnings, endings.

there's a season for everything,
but where's the meaning in my seasons?

i'm watching the sun's rhythm of rising and setting,
and i'm waiting for the world to stop turning
so i can breathe for a moment.

there's a time to be born, and a time to die.
what about the time in between?
i'm waiting
in between moments,
in between events.
in between.
where does the in-between fit in?

the sun rises, and the sun sets,
but the sun hangs in the sky for time upon time,
and some nights it seems as though it will never be light.
some nights, some days, it's just waiting.

that's where i am right now:
in between, waiting.
maybe i'll stop and watch the sun hang in the sky for a moment.
maybe I can wait in this in-between place.
someday i'll make sense of my seasons.
it doesn't need to be today.
the sun will set, and the sun will rise,
i'll figure it out slowly.
in the meantime, i'll keep on waiting.



An Ode: to the tree in front of my childhood home

Summer 2025

I used to be taller than you.
We both grew with each season,
climbing higher towards the summer sun
and standing shivering in winter snowfalls,
reaching arms and branches to the sky,
trying to catch the falling flakes.
Year by year passed and I didn't even notice
how tall you'd gotten.
This summer,
a bird made a nest in your branches.
When we were young,
birds perched on you
and you drooped.
Now we both can handle bigger burdens.
But you're taller than me now,
and there's a birds' nest in your branches,
and I'm not sure if I even recognize you.
You've changed, childhood tree.
You've grown older,
taller,
found your place.
I can hear the birds singing in your branches.

For Night

Genesis 1

At the end of the day,
night has come.

Weary from her efforts,
the sun sinks below
the bedspread of the horizon.
The moon blinks open silent eyes
and sings the world to sleep.

All is calm.

Our worries of the day rest with the sun,
folding feathered wings and curling to nest
alongside our passions and our pride.
Remind us, Lord, that
although the world is full of hurt,
one day all will be renewed
to perfectly glorify you.

Tonight, Lord, give us peace.

The moon gives us comfort,
guiding us through the night,
and reminding us that you, Lord, are present
even when the darkness
seems so strong around us.

You will watch over us,
in our sleeping and in our waking.

So let us now be calm.

The night has come,
and our bones are weary.
Let us release our burdens,
and allow ourselves to rest,
following the rhythm that our holy Creator set
from the beginning of time:
There was evening, and there was morning.

So let us find our rest to be a form of worship,
imitating our Maker's rest
after the work of creation.

Lord, give us peace
as our minds and bodies rest tonight,
And rejuvenate us through this rest,
So that when we rise with the morning,
we may also glorify you through the works that we face
in each new day,
and say, when our work is done,
that "*It is good.*"





The Lantern; May 2026