

**LIVING MEMORY
LENTEN DEVOTIONAL
Sunday March 30, 2025**

Birth or Death? There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.

—T.S. Eliot, *The Journey of the Magi*

I believe in God,
the Father almighty,
Creator of heaven and earth,
and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died and was buried;
he descended into hell;
on the third day he rose again from the dead;
he ascended into heaven,
and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty;
from there he will come to judge the living and the dead.

Jesus was conceived, he was born, he suffered, and then he died.

The Apostles' creed put a lot into one sentence. Its power is its brevity, but brevity is also its weakness. We could reduce the sentence even more. Jesus was born . . . and he died. This abbreviated abbreviation is like a headstone marker in a cemetery. 1942-2020. Birth—Death.

To be "engraved" in stone has natural limitations. Marble is softer and affords more embellishment; granite is very hard and thus limits the potential for carving and cutting the stone.

engrave (in'grɛɪv), v. Pa. pple. engraved, engraven. Fr. *engraver* (13-17th c.)

1. To sculpture; to portray or represent by sculpture.
2. a. To cut into (a hard material)
 - b. To mark by incisions; to inscribe with incised characters; to ornament with incised marks.
3. a. To carve.
 - b. To make (wounds, cavities) by incisions.

- c. To impress deeply; to fix indelibly.
- 4. To represent (a figure, a landscape, etc.) by lines incised upon a metal plate . . . with the view of reproducing it.

The grave marker, our most common memorial and statuary art, would be incomplete without the dates; the work would be unfinished. I find this most commonly in shared graves with a common headstone. The stone was purchased and "engraved" for one spouse with completed dates; the stone has the name of who will be buried with their date of birth but the date of death is blank.

Through the years after a funeral I will be approached by a friend or relative of the deceased and they will say to me, "I want you to do my funeral." I know it is wrong, but I can't help but say, "do you want to set a date, put it on my calendar? When would you like to pencil that in? What are you thinking; somewhat soon?" One of Emily Dickinson's greatest poems on death was:

I haven't told my garden yet—
Lest that should conquer me.
I haven't quite the strength now
To break it to the Bee—

I will not name it in the street
For shops would stare at me—
That one so shy—so ignorant
Should have the face to die.

The hillsides must not know it—
Where I have rambled so—
Nor tell the loving forests
The day that I shall go—

Nor lisp it at the table—
Nor heedless by the way
Hint that within the Riddle
One will walk today—

A great weight of grief is the wound of finality. It is as if we are cut, impressed, carved by an ending. This is a weight because we do not carry such with us in life. Death is a "cutting" according to the Greeks. Our time is "cut short." Life has no sense of ending.

To find an ending is the great challenge of writing prose, especially fiction. To tell a story to its end one must choose the ending, where to end the tale; "when would you like to pencil that in?" It's an absurd question in life; it is the key to writing powerful prose.

Our living memory, what comes to mind, the markers (engraved images) we conjure, our living memory is shaped by the days that people came and the days they left us. Other events and times can make an impression, be represented in our mind's eye, but death and birth somehow cut the deepest. They mark us.

I can remember so many details, images, sounds from the days our children were born. They come to mind as if they were just laid aside a moment ago. What transpired the next day and the next and the next . . . no idea. Those next days are lost in an endless sea of impressions, hours and days and weeks and months blending like the ocean is filled with water.

The same is true for the moments of death. I remember them easily. These memories, the losses, intrude; they bring themselves to my thoughts and emotions, often when I have no desire for their presence. The price I owe to these memories never seems fair; it is as if the bill is too high; I am being overcharged.

An ancient part of burial in the Near East, something that sounds foreign to us, is the reburial of bones. When someone dies, they are entombed with spices. After a year, once the flesh has wasted away and only the bones are left, a person is buried in a bone box or on a shelf with other bones. This is what the women were doing in the garden on Easter morning. They were bringing spices for the process of ossification.

One way to consider memory, personal or living memory, is to pay attention to how little we have and how much we have lost. Were one to consider how much occurs in a single day (the rather insane attempt of James Joyce's *Ulysses*), if we were to consider this even as we were living it, on the very day we are experiencing, the chances are good we will remember only a slight fraction of what we saw and heard, felt and thought. Our memory of such events will not remain, but lingers for just a moment.

Another way to consider this is to imagine the memory of the soul as hard, hard like a stone. Most events, people, times they are like the wind and the rain; they can only erode us. There are a few events, of which we are never sure why, there are some events that make incisions, they cut us, carve and impress the soul like a chisel to the stone. Some memories are good; some are bad. Some make impressions; most are like the wind and the rain.

