



1819 NEWS

Allen Mendenhall: The earth bringeth forth spring

[Allen Mendenhall](#) | 03.09.26



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In Alabama, there's a Friday in late February or early March – you know it when it arrives – that cannot quite decide what it is. The cold has loosened its grip, but spring has not yet committed; everything feels suspended between two worlds.

It was on such a Friday that I loaded the car and headed toward Pine Mountain, Ga., that quiet green country just east of Auburn and Opelika, a road I have driven more times than I could count for more reasons than I could list. For the 29th straight year, our church has gathered there, and I've made the retreat perhaps 10 of those times. I've never bothered to count more precisely than that; some things are diminished by arithmetic.

My friends Sarah and Brian Watts set the tone before the weekend began. A video arrived on my iPhone that morning: our children, tiny, solemn, and faintly ridiculous, singing "Old MacDonald Had a Farm" while a mutual

friend worked the neck of his guitar. The footage was nine years old, which meant my guitar-playing friend was sitting somewhere near my current age when it was shot.

Time does that: folds back on itself until the math becomes personal. The children did not know they were being preserved. They never do. I watched it twice and felt that specific bittersweet ache of recognizing how much has already passed.

We arrived at Pine Mountain just past dark on Friday. Noah and Gabriela were already gone before I turned off the engine and pulled toward a basketball court full of children. I unloaded the suitcases, coolers, food, and whatever miscellany accumulates on such journeys – alone, which is how fathers learn to feel useful and invisible at the same time.

Saturday morning, I did the thing I do every Saturday morning of every retreat, the thing I have done so many times it has ceased to be a mistake and become, instead, a personality trait: I forgot the coffee. “Coffee, do not forget the coffee,” I tell myself each year, and every year, I forget the coffee, as though some autonomous unit of my brain files it under “obviously handled” and moves on.

I have made solemn vows about coffee. I have written the coffee on lists. The lists came with us to Pine Mountain. The coffee did not.

So, while the children slept off whatever mayhem they’d gotten into the night before, I drove through lifting fog in search of a gas station that might take pity on me. There was something exhilarating in that early errand: the roads empty, the pines still, the bucolic surrounds teetering on the edge of something.

That something, it turned out, was spring.

She chose our retreat weekend, again, to make her debut. The timing felt less accidental than sacramental. The earth had begun to soften; the sky brightened. You could smell the change before you could see it, that green muscular scent of things pushing back against the cold and dark. It felt less like weather than an argument: a rebuke, patient and irrefutable, against every variety of despair.

Death, the world was insisting again, does not get the final word.

It never has.

Dr. Frank Thielman decamped from Beeson Divinity School at Samford to speak to us about Paul, in three sessions: Saturday morning, Saturday evening, and Sunday morning.

Paul, who knew something about being remade.

The children ran free, as they always do here. That's the gift of this place: fishing, paddle boats, putt-putt, soccer fields, bike paths, obstacle courses, and playgrounds enough for any small civilization. The supervision is light, which is to say it is the right amount, which is to say the children are trusted, which is to say they rise to the occasion.

My children are older now. I watched them looking after the little ones: steadying a wobbly bike, explaining the rules of a game – with a patience I did not know they possessed – to someone half their size.

I thought of that video – those same two, small and singing, unknowing – and understood that the bittersweet feeling I had carried all morning was not grief for what was lost. It was recognition. The children who sang “Old MacDonald” with such hilarious gravity were still there, entirely intact, just larger now, having grown not away from that sweetness but around it, as a tree grows around a nail and makes it part of itself.

That is what regeneration actually looks like: not replacement, but incorporation. The old life held inside the new, spring holding winter in its memory even as it refuses to become it.

The softening earth. The brightening sky. Children tending to children.

E-I-E-I-O.

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