

Westley Conn: Good morning.

Congregation: Good morning.

Westley Conn: Welcome to morning prayers. We'll begin today's service with the response of reading from the Black Appleton Chapel psalter book, Psalm selection number 124, found on page 62. Please stand as you are able. If it had not been the Lord who was on our side, let Israel now say...

Congregation: If it had not been the Lord who was on our side when our enemies attacked us...

Westley Conn: Then they would have swallowed us up alive when their anger was kindled against us.

Congregation: Then the flood would have swept us away and the torrent would have gone over us.

Westley Conn: Then over us would have gone the raging waters.

Congregation: Blessed be the Lord who has not given us as prey to their teeth.

Westley Conn: We have escaped like a bird from the snare of the fowlers. The snare is broken and we have escaped.

Congregation: Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth.

Westley Conn: You may take your seats.

Choir: (singing)

Jenny Hoffman: A reading from second Corinthians, chapter 12, beginning of the seventh first. "And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. For this thing, I besought the Lord thrice that it might depart from me, and He said unto me, 'My grace is sufficient for thee, for my strength is made perfect in weakness.' Most gladly, therefore, will I rather glory in my infirmities that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore, I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong."

Jenny Hoffman: I agreed to deliver this morning prayer message last summer. I thought that the timing would be perfect. I had my first sabbatical in the fall, and I had planned an adventure that was guaranteed to change my life and fill me with all of the wisdom necessary to stand here and impart something meaningful in five minutes, or so I thought.

Jenny Hoffman: At Harvard, we are among the luckiest people in the world; with safety and freedom to pursue our own curiosity, and relatively secure employment both during our time here and aided by Harvard's name beyond. But the tenure track at Harvard sure beat me up. I started too young with grossly insufficient maturity and management experience to run a physics laboratory. Soon, I had three young children of my own, who nursed through the night for two years each, and I was so chronically exhausted that I once fell asleep in a senior professor's office in the middle of a one-on-one conversation.

Jenny Hoffman: No matter how hard I worked, I was always hundreds of emails behind, submitting typo-ridden funding proposals with just moments to spare, writing my talks at the last minute while hiding in the ladies rooms of universities around the world, and clinging for dear life to the appearance that I was holding it all together amongst my male colleagues.

Jenny Hoffman: One particularly painful week, I received simultaneous rejection letters for two papers and one proposal that constituted the sum total of my work for the previous six months. I was scheduled to give an invited talk at a major conference later that day, having been up most of the night with my jet lagged 10-month-old. I managed to put the slides together to deliver the talk, but at the first audience question, my mind blanked completely, my eyes filled with tears, and I sat down without answering.

Jenny Hoffman: Although I did eventually squeak through Harvard's tenure process, it was not before I had uprooted my family to take a more secure international job, switched my kids through three schools in a single year, and landed the whole family in various forms of therapy as we struggled to regain our equilibrium. Through these years, I turned to sugar for solace, and developed a pathological relationship with food that remains a constant thorn in my side.

Jenny Hoffman: So when I finally earned my first sabbatical in fall 2019, I longed for a complete reset. If I did something dramatic enough, I thought I could cleanse myself of all those hard years, and bad habits, and soured relationships. I have always used long runs as a form of meditation, so I embarked on my longest run yet. I bought a one-way plane ticket to San Francisco, and set out to run home. Through thousands of miles of solo thought, I planned to work through all of my problems and flaws and return a wiser and better person.

Jenny Hoffman: I would no longer eat six pints of Ben and Jerry's in the 24 hours before a proposal deadline. I would learn to express my opinions and faculty mates with discretion. I would develop a time management system to respond promptly to all of my students' emails, but still get eight hours of sleep so I could remember from one day to the next what we had talked about in our last conversation. I would set a better example, a structure for my children, by organizing family chores so we could at long last find our floor under the scattered toys and boxes yet to be unpacked since I returned to Harvard three years ago. Surely, with 15 hours a day, seven days a week to think for almost two months, I would emerge a changed person.

Jenny Hoffman: I didn't. Although I left my beloved family for almost seven weeks, and spent more than I could afford on my midlife pilgrimage, and required surgery to fix 2,500 miles of damage to my knee, I returned the very same person with the very same flaws. I ate several bags of M&M's while stressing over the deadline of this talk. Although I'm happy to report that I did not write it in the church ladies room. I still have dozens of unanswered emails from students in my inbox. I'm still a workaholic who chronically over commits and runs late for family dinner many evenings.

Jenny Hoffman: So why do I tell you all this? First, to connect. We are all human and we each have our thorns no matter how fancy our title or our CV. Second, to suggest a way forward despite our flaws. If reflecting 15 hours a day for 42 straight days while running across an entire continent, a literal 40 days in the desert, is not dramatic enough to make a dent in my most crippling flaws, then what purpose can I set before me? What goals can I reasonably strive for? I have continued to wrestle mightily with this over the three months since my return. An insight came to me last week, ironically as I was entering CVS to succumb yet again to my sugar addiction.

Jenny Hoffman: I walked by the petite woman with a got empathy sign whom I've often seen huddling in the cold on a milk crate or else standing hunched amidst a crowd of birds with whom she shares her crumbs. I passed her, as usual, and then stopped, turned, and asked her what she would like from within CVS. She described in detail her favorite brand of granola, so I bought it for her, and felt a lightness that I hadn't felt in too long. Apparently empathy is a more effective drug than sugar, although it is harder to come by.

Jenny Hoffman: More generally, I am learning to find some peace by focusing on the little things and trusting in God's grace to guide the bigger things. Small habits have come to me over the years around mundane moments that happen every day. Every time I trip while running, but manage to spin my arms just fast enough to avoid a face plant, I say a quick but heartfelt prayer of thanks. Every time I hear a siren, I say a prayer for the wellbeing of the person towards whom the sirens race, and for peace for their family. Every single night before I sleep, I say out loud at least three things I'm grateful for that day. These habits are so ingrained that they don't require a conscious thought, but they offer me a brief instant of grace in my flawed daily existence.

Jenny Hoffman: In the often punishing environment of Harvard, where so many of us are so painfully aware of our own thorns in contrast to the awesome achievements of those around us, let us remember Paul's letter to the Corinthians about God's grace. "Therefore, I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong." Will you pray with me? God, help us to turn our weakness into the strength of our empathy. Amen.

Congregation: Amen.

Westley Conn: Please join me in offering The Lord's Prayer, found on the reverse of your order of worship. Our father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Congregation: Our father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Westley Conn: Please stand as you are able to sing together the hymn Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee, number 23 of your crimson Harvard hymn book.

Congregation/Choir: (singing)

Westley Conn: Receive now this benediction. May the Lord keep you from evil, may the Lord keep you in your going out and in you're coming in, from this time on and forevermore. Amen.

Congregation: Amen.