01/04/18- 01/05/18 **Elephant**

My mother died twenty five days ago. She bore her illness for as long as her will could allow, long past the timelines of doctors and reason. Her illness progressed as her body and mind diminished, over the course of fifteen years. Arriving at the International terminal of the Hartsfield-Jackson airport, I was reminded of many trips to the international terminal at the airport in Charlotte, dropping my mother off and then picking her up from trips she took abroad. Most of those trips took her to Guatemala, as a nurse on a medical team. I remember the joy our family had when mom's face finally became visible in the opening of the gate, relief that our family was complete once again. Grief in some ways in a profound experience of absence, a sense that wholeness may only be something you felt before.

I begin here because grief does not follow expectation or desire. How I wished I could put my grief on hold, just so that I might experience this trip without its corruption. I had thought, with the length of my mother's illness, and the knowledge that it would one day take her bodily life, the pre-emptive grief I had experienced would have prepared me for the reality of her death. It did not. So here I am, traveling to India, in the midst of my grief, as the Lord has called me.

It is curious to me that, just as I pre-emptively grieved my mother's death, I have also built up a store of anticipation for this trip. Since studying India briefly in undergrad, it has always been a place I felt drawn to visit. The vibrancy of life and location that jumped out of the books I read and the videos I watched catalyzed all over again, when the opportunity to actually go presented itself. It is humorous in some way, how much my pre-emptive grief over my mother's impending death and my anticipation for this trip felt so similar. It’s almost enough to make me laugh. Yet, as I sat on the plane, contemplating our arrival, I knew that much like my grief, my anticipation would and could hold no light to the reality of being there.

Arriving in Kochi, a statue of an elephant greeted our arrival. It was large, and ornamented, staring down the hallway which we had to traverse to get to customs. My mother loved elephants. Elephant ornaments, statues, and jewelry adorned many walls, shelves, necks, and ears in our home growing up. Before leaving on the plane, I received an email from my sister Jessica, discussing the possibilities of an urn to hold my mother's ashes. We all agreed that an elephant decoration would be appropriate. So after many, many hours in airplanes and airports, a life-size elephant statue was there to greet us. It was as though my mother's face was again becoming visible from beyond the gate, and I was again becoming complete. The Lord had led me to India, and my mother was waiting for me when I arrived.  
 In thinking of the scripture we were offered for the day, of Paul's words in Romans 14:7-8, I am reminded that my mother died to the Lord. In thinking about death over the last few weeks, I have begun to understand it in simpler terms. It is merely the passing away of that which cannot continue. My mother's body, ravaged by illness, could not continue. To live and die to the Lord means understanding what you can carry with you. Yet, what cannot continue is never fully all that was. Something moves forward, in and through Christ. An elephant guarded our arrival. I felt my mother's presence the moment I saw it.

In the Hindu tradition, the God Shiva destroys the universe in order that a new universe may rise from it. In much the same way, I know that I too must die to the Lord. I hope this trip does not include my body dying to the Lord, but I know there will be parts of me that can go no further. It is unlikely that I will be the same man I was when I left Atlanta and when I return, in place of what has died to the Lord will be what now must live to the Lord, in new ways. The second scripture text offered by our trips lectionary for today is the story of Sarah laughing at the prospect of having a child at such a young age. I think about Sarah, laughing at the absurdity of God's will, and I think of my own position of absurdity, in the overwhelming grief of my mother's death, and in the unbridled anticipation of soon stepping foot in a land I have dreamed of for many months and years. It is enough to make me laugh as well. And yet, I know the answer to the question posed to Abraham that day when Sarah laughed. Nothing is too wonderful for the Lord. My mother died twenty five days ago. And today, she greeted me when I arrived in India.