

Elizabeth Propst:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Elizabeth Propst:

Welcome to Morning Prayers here in the Appleton Chapel. We are excited to have today, Claire Neid as our speaker. A quick correction from our program, Claire is a second year master of theological studies candidate, not a second-year MDiv. Please rise, embody your spirit and join in our responsive psalm, which is number 105 in your black psalter.

We give you thanks, oh, God, and call upon your name. We make known your deeds among the peoples.

Congregation:

We sing to you. We sing your praise and speak of all your marvelous works.

Elizabeth Propst:

We glory in your holy name. Let the hearts of those who seek you rejoice.

Congregation:

We search for you and your strength. We continue to seek your face.

Elizabeth Propst:

You spread out a cloud for a covering and a fire to give light in the night season.

Congregation:

You opened the rock and water flowed, so the river ran in the dry places.

Elizabeth Propst:

For you remembered your holy Word and Abraham your servant.

Congregation:

So you let forth your people with gladness, your chosen with shouts of joy.

Elizabeth Propst:

You gave your people the lands of the nations, and they took the fruit of others' toil.

Congregation:

That they might keep the statutes and observe the laws. Hallelujah.

Singing

Claire Neid:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Claire Neid:

This is a poem called Worm by Gail McConnell.

"Burrowing in your allotted patch, you move through the dark, muscles contracting one by one in every part, lengthening and shortening the slick segmented tube of your furrows in your wake. Devising passages for water, air, you plot the gaps that keep the structure from collapse. Dead things know you. Plants and creatures both. Your grooves shift matter, sifting as you go. Eyeless, your appetite aerates. Eating the world, you open it. You ingest to differentiate. Under the foot-stamped earth, you eat into a clot of leaf mold, clay and mildew, and express what you can part with, as self-possessed as when you started. Your secretions bind the soil, your shit enriches it. How things lie now will be undone, will reoccur. You, a surface-level archivist sensing all there is can be gone through. The body borne within its plot."

You might be thinking to yourself, did she just read a poem about a worm for Morning Prayers? The slimy, squirmy, sometimes skinny, sometimes meaty invertebrates that slink across sidewalks after rainstorms and wiggle their way through gardens. Worms are, let's be honest, a little weird. I'm certainly not the world's biggest fan of them. This poem is from Gail McConnell's poetry pamphlet entitled Fourteen, published in 2018, but I came across Worm last fall and an anthology of poems compiled by Pádraig Ó Tuama.

Despite my indifference to worms, I felt the connection to Worm, the poem, when I read it. I was a few weeks into my first semester at HDS and was convinced that I didn't belong in Harvard among my brilliant peers and professors. Perhaps you're familiar with the feeling. In this context, one line jumped from the page and spoke directly to the imposter syndrome that had infested my psyche. "Your secretions bind the soil, your shit enriches it."

The poem I felt was saying that faking it till you make it might actually produce something worthwhile, valuable, even. And when a nefarious self-doubt had crept its way into my brain, convincing me of a reality in which I was a fraud, someone with no idea what I was doing, the stanza was a buoy keeping me afloat when I felt unmoored. I felt seen by the sightless creature that dwells in dirt and mud. It's true when worms move, they discharge a slimy nitrogen-rich mucus that not only helps them move easily through dirt, but glues soil particles together to prevent it from caving in and it provides nutrients for plants. That's some pretty good shit if I do say so myself.

Rereading the poem, I found myself unconsciously mimicking the movement of a worm, contracting my muscles, undulating my body. I saw myself in the worm. Like the worm devising passages for water and air, I was trying to find my way in a new environment. Questions of who am I, where am I, what am I doing here in the now, and what am I doing here in an ultimate sense, dominated my thoughts loud and demanding, often plummeting me into a darkness where it took all my effort just to keep moving, contracting and undulating.

But picturing the worm beneath the soil, hidden from the sunlight, eating, aerating, burrowing, secreting, provided a refuge from the suffocating thoughts and spirals that return day after day. The Worm, the poem about the worm, awakened a creatureliness inside of me, grounding me in my body and to the earth beneath me. The poem has an aura of darkness, but in it I found light. Worm is a poem about survival, but not just survival for the sake of survival. It speaks to a survival that is both gritty and

graceful, creative and cunning. It reassures us that even in uncertainty, deep knowing can emerge. That simple movement can inspire transformation. That hand in hand with the detritus and the decomposed is renewal and rebirth.

The poem reminds us of impermanence and the subversiveness of life. How things lie now will be undone, will reoccur, and it reflects us back to ourselves, illuminating our resilience and our courage. Worm witnesses and propels us, or at least a did for me for my first year of HDS and continues to as I enter my second. But perhaps most of all, Worm reveals that the big questions themselves generate our creatureliness. They lead us to wonder, awe, inviting us to grapple and struggle, to worm our way through the depths of wherever we find ourselves.

The worm in the poem embodies what it means to seek ourselves in the world and find the world in ourselves. And I think that worms in general deserve a bigger fan base, a recognition of their quiet, often unseen, but essential work in the natural world. Like worms, our bodies, senses, intuitions, and yes, our excrements, are creating as we are moving, building and becoming even, and perhaps especially in the darkness, the mud, the moments of uncertainty and doubt. And I don't think this poem is about finding clarity or answers, but about believing that you are innately and strong and deserving creature, about the importance of accompaniment in the tough stuff, and perhaps most fundamentally about admiring sheer existence in life and homage to aliveness.

And so this is an invitation at the beginning of the fall season, the school year, wherever you are, to lean into your wriggling wonderful wormness, to trust the slow, steady, careful, creaturely movements, knowing that like the worm, you are a surface-level archivist, sensing all there is can be gone through, the body born within its plot.

Elizabeth Propst:

Please join me in prayer.

We give thanks this morning at the end of our week for the small and exposed and fragile pieces of creation upon which all of the grand edifices of creation rest. We give thanks in particular for each person who comes to this space on weekday mornings, who invites us into their vulnerability and who in turn invites us to enter into our own vulnerability. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

Elizabeth Propst:

Please rise, embody your spirit for The Lord's Prayer.

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 forever. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

Elizabeth Propst:

Please join in our closing hymn, New Every Morning is the Love, number 47 in your crimson hymnal.

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Singing

Christ has no hands in this world but yours, no voice but yours. May our hands and our voices do the work of justice and of love today and always. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.