

Congregation:

[inaudible 00:00:01].

Kelley Woehl:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Kelley Woehl:

And welcome to Appleton Chapel, here in our Memorial Church, for our daily service of Morning Prayers. Our speaker this morning is Abby McElroy, class of 2024 and the Multifaith Engagement Fellow here at the Memorial Church. Now, I invite you to rise and join in singing today's psalter, number 41 in the black books found in your pews. "Blessed is he that considereth the poor: the Lord will deliver him in time of trouble."

Congregation:

"The Lord will preserve him, and keep alive; and he shall be blessed upon the earth. And thou wilt not deliver him unto the will of his enemies."

Kelley Woehl:

"All that hate me whisper together against me: against me do they devise my hurt."

Congregation:

"An evil disease, say they, cleaveth fast unto him: and now that he lieth he shall rise up no more."

Kelley Woehl:

"Yea, mine own familiar friend, in whom I trusted, which did eat of my bread, hath lifted up his heel against me."

Congregation:

"But thou, O Lord, be merciful unto me, and raise me up, that I may requite them."

Kelley Woehl:

"By this I know that thou favorest me, because mine enemy doth not triumph over me."

Congregation:

"And as for me, thou upholdest me in mine integrity, and settest me before thy face for ever."

Kelley Woehl:

"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel from everlasting, and to everlasting. Amen, and amen." You may be seated.

MUSIC:

Peace I leave with you.

I leave with you, my peace.

My peace, I give unto you.

Not as the world giveth, give I unto you.

Let not your heart be troubled.

Let not your heart, your heart be troubled.

Abby McElroy:

A reading from the memoir, *Hijab Butch Blues*, by Lamya H. "Yunus wakes up in the stomach of this whale in the sea at night, alone and afraid. He doesn't know how long it's been or where he is. I've always been taught that the whale is a punishment from God for Yunus leaving his people, for giving up. But what if that's wrong? What if Yunus's leaving is not a giving up, but a disengaging to protect himself? What if the whale is not punishment, but protection? From God, from the storm roiling above and around him. From his people who won't listen to him, won't listen to God. From fighting to exhaustion, from fighting to his demise. A brief respite, this whale. A shelter. A resting place. A protection, for the time being."

In this passage from the incredible memoir, *Hijab Butch Blues*, Lamya H. considers their friend's argument that Yunus, known in the Christian and Jewish traditions as Jonah, is their favorite prophet. Prophet Yunus, peace be upon him, as Lamya argues, is in fact best known for being swallowed by a whale, after running away from the community God has asked him to prophesy to. Lamya H. is, at first, unimpressed.

The story of Jonah, as told in the Qur'an, differs a bit from the story as it was written in the Hebrew Bible. In both stories, God asks our main character to prophesy to the people of Nineveh, who are living badly and making all kinds of mistakes. In the Hebrew Bible, Jonah refuses God's call from the very beginning, boarding a ship in the opposite direction from the city of Nineveh, the community God has instructed him to save. Why? Because he does not want to save Nineveh, a city that ruthlessly killed and enslaved his people. This is personal for Jonah. In the Qur'an, Yunus goes to Nineveh, preaches, and is met with resistance, argument, and a lack of repentance. He ultimately decides to leave, feeling it is useless, and that God's wrath is inevitable. But, on the journey home, a storm approaches, and Yunus finds himself in the belly of a whale.

In some ways, God is asking Jonah to do something we're hearing a lot about right now. God wants Jonah to talk to the people who have harmed him and his community, to listen, ask questions, get to know them and their stories, and, in Jonah's case, get them to repent for their harm. God wants Jonah to dialogue with the Ninevites. A similar call reverberates through our campus and our country. We're politically divided, and students too often feel hurt, unsafe, and angered by the things their classmates say. Who, in turn, often feel hurt, unsafe, and angered. In one version of this story, Jonah says, "No, I can't." And so he boards a ship, walks away, and ends up in the belly of a whale. In another, Yunus goes, and for too long, it does not work. And so he leaves, and still he finds himself in the darkness of the whale.

But this is not the end of either story. The complexity of these stories mirror many of the complexities that are present in the call to dialogue. When we talk about dialogue, especially in a university setting, usually what we mean is civil discourse, a specific type of dialogue where people engage to learn more about the arguments, ideas, and perspectives of someone who thinks differently from them. Persuasion

is not the outcome or objective; instead, it's understanding. This is an incredibly valuable undertaking. A sacred undertaking, if we listen to Jonah and Yunus's story. And yet, when the issues being argued are personal, and connected to the participant's humanity and safety, sitting and listening calmly may feel impossible. Some might hear this call and react like Jonah in the Hebrew Bible, getting on the first boat out of town. Or they might engage and share their story and the story of their people, and be heartbroken when the Ninevites do not repent, and instead offer arguments that they find dehumanizing or offensive to a core aspect of their identity. And in that place of hurt, they leave, and board the first ship in the morning.

One can only imagine where those ships lead. Towards radicalization, isolation, shutting down of ever being in community again. Neither of these options are what God wants in these two stories, total stepping away from and writing off entire communities. So, God sends something else: a whale. In mainstream readings of both stories, the whale appears to be a punishment from God, a divine intervention to hold our main character in place when he disobeys, doesn't see his mission through to the end, or even to the beginning.

But Lamya H. invites us to see the whale differently: as a sacred place of safety and of rest, where Prophet Yunus can stop fighting every battle, but instead reflect and build community. What if, instead of punishing Jonah, God was caring for him by sending the whale to swallow him? At Interfaith America's Leadership Summit this year, a peer in one of my sessions talked about the importance of intragroup care. Intergroup dialogue is not easy, despite being important. We must care for the people undertaking it, care for the people who, like Yunus, are exhausted from their attempts, and care for the people like Jonah, who are running away from it all together. That care can look like time away, mourning and grieving and recharging with your community in the whale. We must create an ecosystem of support that makes this hard, but essential, work possible.

In the Qur'an's telling, when Yunus emerges from the whale, the Ninevites have changed their ways. They have repented, converted to Islam, and been saved. They were not ready when Yunus was there with them, but his words stuck with the community. It takes time. In the Hebrew Bible, Jonah is finally able to go to the Ninevites and share God's Word with them after his time in the whale. And they're saved, too. It took time for him to be ready. It took patience and care and the warmth of a whale's belly while being tossed around in the stormy sea. And guess what? When they're saved, Jonah can't celebrate. They heard what he had to say, and still the experience was hard. This isn't simple.

As we go into this year, let us create space for the hardness of this thing we are tasked with. This is not a sprint. Let us have the strength to recognize when we're ready to lean into this challenge, and let us hold each other and be each other's whales when we are not. Will you pray with me? Light of all lights, who gave Jonah and Yunus a sacred place to rest by sending a whale in the storm, help us to recognize our own capacities and needs this year. Give us the wisdom to know when we can engage in the important and hard work of dialogue, and allow us to show ourselves grace when we need to retreat. Hold all of us, as we hold ourselves and each other, building and rebuilding your beloved community. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

Kelley Woehl:

If you would now stand and join me in praying, as Jesus taught His disciples. "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. For ever 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. For ever and ever, amen."

Kelley Woehl:

And if you would remain standing for our hymn, number 14, and that is God is Love, Let Heaven Adore Him. I believe we'll sing the first and third verses of that.

MUSIC:

God is love, let heav'n adore Him.

God is love, let earth rejoice.

Let creation sing before Him.

And exalt Him with one voice.

God who laid the earth's foundation.

God who spread the heav'ns above.

God who breathes through all creation.

God is love, eternal love.

God is love; and though with blindness.

Sin afflicts all human life.

God's eternal loving kindness.

Guides us through our earthly strife.

Sin and death and hell shall never.

O'er us final triumph gain.

God is love, so love for ever.

O'er the universe must reign.

Kelley Woehl:

Friends, may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace and believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

[inaudible 00:20:30].