

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Morning.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Welcome to the Appleton Chapel of Harvard Memorial Church for our daily service of morning prayers. Our speaker this morning is Claudine Gay, the Wilbert A. Collett Professor of Government and of African-American Studies and Former President of Harvard University. I invite you please to rise and join in saying our responsorial Psalm, which is number 46 in your black Psalter, please make the responses in bold.

God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

Congregation:

Therefore, will not we fear, though the earth be removed, and though mountains be carried into the midst of the sea.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Though the waters thereof roar and be troubled, though the mountains shake with the swelling thereof

Congregation:

There is a river, the streams whereof shall make glad the city of God, the holy place of the tabernacles of the most high.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved. God shall help her. And that right early

Congregation:

The heathen raged, the kingdoms were moved. He uttered his voice, the earth melted.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

The Lord of hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our refuge.

Congregation:

Come, behold the works of the Lord, what desolations he hath made in the earth.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

He maketh wars to cease unto the end of the earth. He breaketh the bow, and cutteth the spear in sunder. He burneth the chariot in the fire.

Congregation:

Be still, and know that I am God. I will be exalted among the heathen, I will be exalted in earth.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

The Lord of hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our refuge.

(Singing)

Claudine Gay:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Claudine Gay:

When my mother emigrated from Haiti to the United States, she came as a live-in nanny for a family here in the Boston area. The agreement with her and with the agency that had placed her was that the family would help her enroll in English language courses as the first step in her journey to college and eventually to a nursing career. My mother arrived young and alone, but buoyed by a clear and urgent vision for her future. It was not long before she realized that the family did not share her vision. Her household responsibilities expanded. Her freedom of movement diminished. Her questions about ESL courses went unanswered. All of the assurances that had emboldened my mother to leave Haiti were swept aside in an effort to impose what felt at best, like indentured servitude. My mother was distressed but unbowed. Over the course of several months, as she labored for this family, she quietly began making weekly trips to the post office, each time sending off a small package small enough to fit in her purse to an address in Brooklyn where an older sister lived.

Eventually, a day arrived when she set out for her weekly errands, carrying nothing more than her purse, and this time walked past the post office and continued on to the bus station where heart racing and determined, she boarded a Greyhound for New York to begin again. My mother first told me this story many, many years ago and my relationship to it has changed over time. When I was young, younger, I was captivated mostly by the subterfuge and her cleverness, how she concealed from the family her plans for escape, how the family failed to notice that objects were slowly disappearing from her bedroom. What I heard was an epic adventure story and it elicited in me a mix of pride in my mother's ingenuity and envy that my own life was devoid of drama.

As I grew older, the adventure receded as the focal narrative. I wondered instead about how she decided what to send ahead and what to leave behind. What was important to her, what mattered most for her future. I marveled at her unsentimental attachment to things and felt embarrassed by my shoe boxes full of trinkets and tchotchke. I've been thinking about this story a lot in the last few months, in part as I approached the first anniversary of my mother's death and contemplate her improbable American journey that began and ended only a few miles from here. My questions are different now. I wonder about her resilience through setbacks, about the courage to pursue a bold vision for her future despite forces intent on her diminishment, about the hope that allowed her to begin again. Where did that come from? This time, I'm left to guess at the answers.

I feel myself straining to hear my mother's voice, light, but insistent, and always formidable. My mother's wisdom took the form of directives. A no-nonsense, no-excuse style that bothered me as a child, but now I would welcome. How do you summon resilience, courage, and hope? How do you begin again? Just tell me. In his poem For a New Beginning, John O'Donohue opens with this promise, "In out-of-the-way places of the heart where your thoughts never think to wander, this beginning has been quietly forming, waiting until you are ready to emerge." My mother was not a storyteller. That's more

my dad. It's because her stories were so rare that I remember this one about her first months in America so vividly, and keep coming back to it, turning it over and over in my head, mining it for lessons to comfort in guide through every chapter of my life.

Today, I understand that my mother offered the story less as entertainment than as evidence. A reminder of what lies within us in out-of-the-way places of the heart, and what may lie ahead if we dare to let go of the past and trust in the process of renewal. Though mind and body may feel unsettled by change, the soul delights in the act of starting over, even when the destination is not clear. "Unfurl yourself into the grace of beginning," urges O'Donohue, "Awaken your spirit to adventure. Hold nothing back. Learn to find ease and risk. Soon you'll be home in a new rhythm, for your soul senses the world that awaits you." As I stand on the threshold of a new chapter, I miss my mother's voice, but I find comfort in the knowledge that I am my mother's daughter with her resilience, courage, and hope, with a soul that delights in beginnings, and that is enough to step into the unknown with confidence.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

I invite you please to rise for the prayers. The Lord be with you.

Congregation:

And also with you.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Let us pray. Gracious God, in you we live and move and have our being. We humbly pray you so to guide and govern us by your Holy Spirit, that in all the cares and occupations of our life, we may not forget you, but may remember that we are ever walking and ever beginning again in your sight, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

And now we pray the prayer Jesus taught us, saying, our Father, who are 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 of the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen. Please join in our concluding hymn, number 29, This is My Song, Oh God, of All the Nations.

(Singing)

Thank you all for joining us here this morning. And a special thanks to Professor Gay for her words this morning and her service to this university. Just a couple of announcements, please join us downstairs for Mem Cafe refreshments immediately after this service in the Undercroft, the student oasis. And if you're interested tonight, at 5:15, we'll offer a service of Holy Communion here in the chapel. And now, glory to God, His power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine, glory to God from generation to generation in the church, and the Christ Jesus, forever and ever. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

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The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Let us bless the Lord.

Congregation:

Thanks be to God.