

Rohan Press:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Rohan Press:

Thank you. Welcome to the Appleton Chapel here in our Memorial Church for our daily service of Morning Prayers. Our speaker this morning is Elizabeth Propst, who is not only a long-time seminarian here at the Memorial Church, but also I'm blessed to say a very good friend. So I'm very grateful that she's here this morning. I invite you please to rise and join in the singing of our responsorial song, which is Psalm number 62 in your black Psalter. For God alone, my soul waits in silence. From Him comes my salvation.

Congregation:

He only is my rock and my salvation, my fortress. I shall not greatly moved.

Rohan Press:

For God alone, my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from Him.

Congregation:

He only is my rock and my salvation, my fortress. I shall not be shaken.

Rohan Press:

On God rests my deliverance and my honor. My mighty rock, my refuge is God.

Congregation:

Trust in Him at all times, you people. Pour out your heart before Him. God is a refuge for us.

Rohan Press:

Men of low estate are but a breath. Men of high estate are a delusion. In the balances, they go up. They are together, lighter than a breath.

Congregation:

Put no confidence in extortion, set no vain hopes on robbery. If riches increase, set not your heart on them.

Rohan Press:

Once God has spoken. Twice have I heard this, that power belongs to God.

Congregation:

And that to you, O Lord, belongs steadfast love. For thou wilt requite a man according to his work.

Rohan Press:

You may be seated.

Elizabeth Propst:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Elizabeth Propst:

It is a privilege and a joy to be back with all of you at the start of the new semester. Our reading for this morning comes from the letter of James in the fourth chapter, beginning at the 11th verse.

"Do not speak evil against one another, brothers and sisters. Whoever speaks evil against another or judges another, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law, but a judge. There is one lawgiver and judge who is able to save and destroy. So who then are you to judge your neighbor? Come now you who say, 'Today or tomorrow, we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there doing business and making money,' Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, 'If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that.' As it is, you boast in your arrogance, and all such boasting is evil. Anyone then who knows the right thing to do and fails to do it commits sin." Here ends the lesson.

As some of you may remember from the previous times I have spoken here at Morning Prayers, I usually meditate on whatever reading the church Lectionary, our calendar of scripture, has assigned us for today. This is not because I have a deeply rooted faith that scripture speaks to us in all times, in all places, but because I am lazy.

This morning, the Lectionary gives us this passage from the letter of James. This fall, I'm in a lot of interesting classes that speak to this text in a lot of interesting ways. I'm taking a class on the Hebrew Bible, so we could think about how James views this letter as part of the wisdom literature tradition and how he draws on Ecclesiastes and Proverbs. I'm taking a class on Martin Luther and another class on modern Jewish thought, so we could think about how the concept of law has evolved and these different traditions in interesting and motivating ways. I'm taking a class in the English department on beauty, so we could think about how James draws on Hellenistic philosophy to argue that the just life is also an appropriate life, a well-ordered life, a beautiful life.

But we're not going to think about any of those things this morning, not because I'm lazy, but because part of me wants to keep the letter of James at a safe distance with some snippet of etymology or history. Part of me wants to keep it safely at arm's length and poke it with an intellectual stick. Part of me wants to do a little learned dance to distract us from the elephant in the chapel.

James's message isn't hard to understand. The law he speaks of is the law that Christ tells us. "Love your neighbor as yourself." And James also believes deeply, wholeheartedly that in order to live by this law, we also have to live by what Christ tells us in the Gospel of Matthew; that if we want to follow Him completely and perfectly, we must sell all that we own and give the money to the poor.

The lectionary cuts James off right before he gets going. In the next line of the letter he writes, "Come now, you rich people. Weep and wail for the miseries that are coming. Your riches have rotted. The wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out. And the cries of

the harvest have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will eat your flesh like fire. TGIF. Am I right?

The great existentialist theologian, Soren Kierkegaard wrote once that, "Christian scholarship is the church's prodigious invention to defend itself against the Bible," this confounded book that would mow us all down if it got loose. And Kierkegaard believed as I believe that scholarship is essential, vital to our lives as people of faith. It's what keeps us from believing that the scripture that God has given us can mean whatever we want it to mean. But sometimes when we look at the history of scripture, the language of scripture, the otherness and the foreignness and the distance of scripture, we are looking at those things because we want to avoid looking scripture in the eyes, because then we will have to acknowledge that it is looking back at us.

My prayer for us this morning, in this beautiful and wealthy church, at a beautiful and wealthy university, in a beautiful and wealthy country, is that we will have the courage this semester to stand before the word of God and listen when it calls our lives into question. I pray that we will have the strength to be uprooted, to fall at the feet of the Word, and surrender ourselves to it. Like James, we are called to convert. I pray that we have ears to listen. May it be so. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

Rohan Press:

And now, I invite you to rise for the Lord's Prayer, which will be just a pale imitation of what the choir recited. But let us please pray the prayer that Jesus taught us saying, "Our Father, who art 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.

Now please join in the singing of our concluding hymn, which is hymn number 203 in your red Harvard University Hymnal.

Unto God's gracious mercy and protection, we commit ourselves. The Lord bless us and keep us. The Lord make His face to shine upon us and be gracious unto us. The Lord lift up His countenance upon us and give us peace, both now and forevermore. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.