

The Rev. Calvin Jones:

(Music)

Morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

The Rev. Calvin Jones:

Welcome to Morning Prayers, here in Appleton Chapel. We're so grateful that you are here with us this morning. Our speaker this morning is Horace Ballard, the Theodore Stevens Associate Curator of American Art, here at the Harvard Art Museum.

We're grateful that you're here, this morning.

All who are able, please rise for our responsive reading found in your black psalter. We'll be reading Psalm 42, found in your psalter.

As a hart longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for Thee, O God.

Congregation:

My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God?

The Rev. Calvin Jones:

My tears have been my food day and night while men say to me continually, "Where is your God?"

Congregation:

These things I remember as I pour out my soul, how I went with the throng.

The Rev. Calvin Jones:

And led them in procession to the house of God with glad shouts and songs of Thanksgiving, a multitude, keeping festival.

Congregation:

Why are you cast down, O, my soul, and why are you disquieted within me?

The Rev. Calvin Jones:

Hope in God. For I shall again praise him, my help and my God.

Congregation:

Deep calls to deep at the thunder of thy cataracts. All thy ways, like billows, are gone over.

The Rev. Calvin Jones:

As with a deadly wound in my body, my adversaries taunt me while they say to me continually, "Where is your God?"

Congregation:

Why are you cast down, oh, my soul, and why are you disquieted within me? Hope in God. For I shall again praise him, my help and my God.

The Rev. Calvin Jones:

You may be seated.

(Singing)

Horace D. Ballard:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Horace D. Ballard:

The reading this morning is Emily Dickinson's first poem after the Battle of Shiloh during the US Civil War. Her poem 657, I Dwell in Possibility.

"I dwell in possibility of fairer house than prose, more numerous for windows, superior for doors, of chambers as the cedars impregnable of eye, and for an everlasting roof, the gambles of the sky, of visitors the fairest, and my occupation this, the spreading wide, my narrow hands to gather paradise."

On April 9th, 1860, something extraordinary happened. 164 years ago today, the French science writer and editor by the name of Edouard-Leon Scott de Martinville made the first intelligible recording of the human voice. It was a voice from his native village in Brittany, humming the melody and then singing the words to the Breton nursery rhyme that Claude Debussy would make famous, *Au Clair de la Lune*, by the light of the moon, or moonlight. Scott de Martinville had no way of playing back this recording, which he termed an autophonograph. Playback would come later, 17 years later, in the experiments of Thomas Edison. But for us today, I wish to tarry a bit on moonlight.

Yesterday, for those of us across the Americas in the path of totality, or a few hours distance and adjacent to it, we witnessed the power of the moon as it eclipsed the sun. Moonlight is a poetic device, a generous colloquialism by which we speak of celestial reflection. In an eclipse, to my layperson eyes, the moon passes between the earth and the light of the sun for a brief heavenly moment that takes human hours. And instead of reflecting, the moon gradually takes light away.

It is no wonder ancient and contemporary cultures, that still form and shape our understanding of the universe and each other, created stories and myths to account for this event whereby the moon asserts its visible presence during the daytime. It is no wonder that the transience of the moon, and the human capacity to glean more information about the moon's many facets and faces, have long been the events that have brought us as a world family together.

I'm thinking of the moon landings at the turbulent mid-century. I'm thinking of rocket launches. I'm thinking of Pink Floyd. I'm even thinking about the global umbrage when Barry Jenkins "Moonlight" was, for a brief few minutes, eclipsed out of this best picture Oscar by *La La Land*. It was an honest, unintentional eclipse, but one that for many of us at the intersectional crossroads of queer identity and the Black diaspora felt all too powerfully, for it was all too expected, a vocal slip that was an augury and a celestial sigh of how far we still have to push to assert our presence as full humans.

And why did so many of us feel that way? I cannot speak for the many, but I can speak for me. I felt that way because the human voice itself is like moonlight. The human voice is also a radiant reflector of presence. Time present and time past meld in our vocative legibilities. The voice contains and connotes not just who we are but the places, spaces, idioms, and events that have shaped us.

My voice, for instance, may convey to you that for much of my life I was a singer and was trained to be a conduit for the transcendent visions of composers and conductors. And it is still to this day the honor of my life to have been such a conduit. But once in a while, when I say the words car or aunt or mama, the Appalachian regions of Virginia and the Tidewater area of Powhatan, the indigenous word for the James River, eclipses those decades of training, and positions me proudly within the space of my ancestors.

And that is why the reading for today that I chose, and you were so generous to listen to, Emily Dickinson's Number 657, speaks to me and I hope to you so clearly. This is the poem in Dickinson's Oeuvre where she declares that her home, her voice, is poetry. It is her guiding light. "I dwell in possibility," she writes in April of 1862, as war rages and as a dear friend has just been lost." Poetry for Dickinson at this moment is a fairer house than prose.

Here in Harvard Yard, across the way at the Houghton Library, we are blessed to have her desk, a bedside table really, barely 12 inches by 12 inches square. And yet from that plot of intellectual ground a ferocious and cosmic voice arose from which she built a home and a reputation for the ages. And what a home is poetry. It is more numerous for windows and superior for doors, spacious enough to gather paradise as its everlasting roof proves the gambles of the sky.

On this day, in which we marvel and share with each other our shared newfound reverence for heavenly events beyond human capacity, when we share with our voices where we were and what we are now wondering, I urge us to think about other objects of life that reflect back to us the commonalities of human presence. I know that when I walk back across the yard and return to the art museums and think about paintings and sculptures as reflective of our shared history, I will be doing the same.

Thank you.

May the grace evident in the light of the day and in the tessellated geometries of the green and budding world that heralds a new season give you joy. May the wisdom of compassion that sutures so many of our teachings and traditions together through fellowship be a beacon to you in a storm-tossed and war-torn world.

(Singing)

Thank you.

The Rev. Calvin Jones:

All who are able, please rise. Let us recite together the prayer that Jesus taught His disciples, saying...

Congregation:

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on the 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.

The Rev. Calvin Jones:

Now, let us sing together Hymn Number 349, found in your Harvard hymnal, entitled At the Dawning of Creation.

(Singing)

As we leave this place but never away from God's presence, as we leave this gathering but never away from God's grace and love, may you remember the infinite possibilities to go into this world to show forth love. Go in peace. Let us bless the Lord.

Congregation:

[inaudible 00:21:49].

(Music)