

Stephanie Grossano:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Stephanie Grossano:

And welcome to Morning Prayers. Our speaker this morning will be Maia Peele, she is a first-year Master of Divinity student at Harvard Divinity School. Our service will begin with a reading of Psalm 27. Please rise, in body or spirit, as we read the Psalm responsively by whole verse. "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?"

Congregation:

"When evildoers assail me, uttering slanders against me, my adversaries and foes, they shall stumble and fall."

Stephanie Grossano:

"Though a host encamp against me, my heart shall not fear; though war arise against me, yet I will be confident."

Congregation:

"One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and to inquire in His temple."

Stephanie Grossano:

"For He will hide me in His shelter in the day of trouble; He will conceal me under the cover of His tent, He will set me high upon a rock."

Congregation:

"Give me not up to the will of my adversaries; for false witnesses have risen against me, and they breathe out violence."

Stephanie Grossano:

"I believe that I shall see the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living."

Congregation:

"Wait for the Lord; be strong, and let your heart take courage. Yea, wait for the Lord!"

Choir:

(singing).

Maia Peele:

Good morning, everyone.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Maia Peele:

Today I'm inspired by the scripture Matthew 5:11-12, and it reads, "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you." In this verse, Jesus is delivering a Sermon on the Mount, offering comfort and encouragement to those who face opposition or mistreatment for their faith in Him. This verse speaks directly to followers of Jesus, suggesting that suffering endured for their beliefs is not something to be feared, but rather a mark of their faithfulness, and a path to future reward.

This scripture and verse falls within a section known as the Beatitudes of Persecution. The Beatitudes are the core ethical teachings of Christianity. Jesus acknowledges that His followers are destined for persecution and suffering, but encourages them with assurance of future blessings for their unwavering devotion to Him. Jesus tells the people, "for the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you", providing the people with ancestral connection, linking the living and the dead, and creating a community amongst shared beliefs.

This verse encapsulates Black history and the Black experience in the United States. A day before Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King's assassination, he spoke about seeing the promised land, and said, and I quote, "Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it does not matter to me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place, but I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountaintop. And I have looked over, and I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. My eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord." End quote.

And as I came to my understanding of my history, Black history, suffering and death were apparent things for me. Through scholarship, it is evident that Black death is a founding pillar of America. Black death is necessary for American democracy. Black death is necessary for the American dream. Black death is necessary for the economic foundations and advancements of America. We cannot ignore the Black suffering, oppression, and dying that is so woven into the American dream. We cannot ignore the racial violence and subjugation that is in the bricks, soils, and grass of Harvard University. We cannot ignore the bodies in the Atlantic Ocean. We cannot ignore the bodies of those beaten so brutally at the hands of white supremacy that death became peace. We cannot ignore bodies unethically housed at the Peabody Museum and other museums across this nation. We cannot ignore Machiado, Macormo, Macuolo, Quaggu, and Sturmann, whose bodies were used to support scientific racism and build this institution's prestige.

Although white supremacy attempts to persecute Blackness, as Dr. Christina Sharpe says, "Blackness exceeds time." The circulatory nature of Blackness allows for our embodied history to flow through the DNA of generations and generations of Black people. Our embodied history allows us to feel both the joy and trauma of our ancestors. In the book Blackpentecostal Breath, author Crawley argues that "Black breath is an extension of the flesh, and exists outside the system of white supremacy." Eric Garner's last words, on his deepest breath, uttered, "I can't breathe." Harriet Tubman's breath saying, "Go down, Moses, to guide enslaved people to freedom." And just as Jesus said in His last breath, "Father, forgive them, for they not know what they do."

In the Bible, the breath is symbolic of the Holy Spirit. And in Black history, Black breath is the spirit of the movement. In the scripture, Jesus speaks of the reward the persecuted will receive in heaven. On this day, with my Black breath, I pray that that reward will be greater than earthly suffering and persecution. I pray for the Black community, whose breath is the spirit of Black history. I pray for the ancestors who came before me, who endured immense suffering to witness me at this podium today. I pray for Black scholars, students, and activists who, like Dr. King, have no martyr complex, but know silence is not a luxury of the oppressed. I pray for Black students who walked this campus before me, especially those who were the first to do it, and bravely said, "The honor, I assure you, is Harvard's."

I pray for Black women who, too often, are a forgotten part of this history. Women like the great author and anthropologist, Zora Neale Hurston, whose research was devoted to documenting and protecting the sacredness of Black religion and spirituality. But despite her contributions, she was still left to be forgotten, buried in an unmarked grave for years. And Fannie Lou Hamer, who devoted her life and spirit to activism, no matter how many times she was unjustly arrested and beaten, coining the infamous phrase, "I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired." And Mahalia Jackson, whose breath inspired, especially when she yelled to Dr. King, "Tell them about the dream, Martin." And women like our former president, Claudine Gay, whose resume speaks to her excellence, but the institution still fails to protect her. And to all the praying grandmothers, my praying grandmother, I pray that we are all able to unweave the suffering that is so deeply embedded in the American experience. But through the process, we must not forget those prophets and ancestors who suffered before us. I pray for healing.

Please rise, in the body or the spirit, and join me in 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, 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."

Stephanie Grossano:

And let us now sing together the hymn 278 in your crimson Harvard Hymnal.

Congregation:

(singing).

Stephanie Grossano:

On this day, may you act justly, may you love mercy, may you walk humbly with God. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.