

Wes Conn:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Wes Conn:

Welcome to morning prayers. We'll begin today's service with a responsive reading from the Black Appleton Chapel Psalter Book, Psalm selection number 100, found on page 50. Please stand as you are able.

Wes Conn:

"May all lands be joyful before you, O God. Serve you with gladness and come before your presence with a song."

Congregation:

"We know that you are God. You yourself have made us and the universe. We are your people, and the sheep of your pasture."

Wes Conn:

"We shall enter your gates with thanksgiving, go into your courts with praise, give thanks to you and call upon your name."

Congregation:

"For you are good. Your mercy is everlasting, and your faithfulness endures from age to age."

Wes Conn:

You may take your seats.

Choir:

(singing)

Healan Gaston:

It's a pleasure to be here with you today. "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I must, and the wisdom to know the difference." Many of you recognize this as the famous Serenity Prayer used by Alcoholics Anonymous and other 12 step programs, and originally written by the mid-20th century Protestant thinker, Reinhold Niebuhr.

Healan Gaston:

Niebuhr figures prominently in a book I recently published called, "Imagining Judeo-Christian America: Religion, Secularism, and the Redefinition of Democracy." It looks at how the term "Judeo-Christian" emerged as a descriptor for American democracy and national identity, and then, how its meaning shifted over time as it was caught up in one round after another of our culture wars.

Healan Gaston:

Of course, many people associate that term with Dwight D. Eisenhower, who was the first president to use it. Eisenhower presided over a nation grappling with its newly tri-faith character, as encapsulated by Will Herberg's 1955 book, "Protestant, Catholic, Jew." Yet, Eisenhower became increasingly wary of Judeo-Christian language as the global struggle for democracy intensified in the late 1950s. As decolonization picked up steam, he worried about the term's exclusion of non-Western religions and abandon it.

Healan Gaston:

Meanwhile, the rise of the Civil Rights Movement began to shift the term's center of gravity. Martin Luther King Jr. invoked Judeo-Christian principles as he sought to bend the arc of the moral universe toward justice. Yet, by the mid-1970s, a wide swath of the population, especially young people, associated the language with the moral hypocrisy that fueled the Vietnam War and chafed at its exclusivity as an age of multiculturalism dawned.

Healan Gaston:

The ascendant Christian right and then took up the Judeo-Christian framework as its own, and the current phase of the culture wars opened. In fact, Ronald Reagan was by-far the most prolific user of Judeo-Christian language in the white house, even as he turned it against the very vision prophetic leaders like King had in mind. This tug of war over the meaning and relevance of the term Judeo-Christian is as consequential today as it has ever been. A time when our current president's allies call for a global defense of what they term, "the Judeo-Christian West."

Healan Gaston:

As I've discussed this book in different forums, I've been struck by the number of people who recognize that America's longstanding culture wars have become potentially fatal as they prevent us from even beginning to address the reality of climate change and the threat it poses to our planet. At a recent talk in Arizona, an older man rose from the audience and skeptically observed that I hadn't said much in my remarks about Judeo-Christian values.

Healan Gaston:

I explained that while readers would find many of the figures in my book making robust statements about Judeo-Christian values, my point in writing it was to take a step back from either defining or defending Judeo-Christian values, and to look instead at how they have been defined and defended in American public discourse since the 1930s. A history of a political discourse required a particular methodology, I explained. It wouldn't do for me to cherry pick the evidence that I liked. I had to offer a comprehensive account of how the discourse had changed over time. And I added that my hope in undertaking this study was that it might help us move beyond our cultural conflicts in a moment where they've become simply too dangerous to continue.

Healan Gaston:

The room erupted in applause. I've never experienced that in a question and answer session. It was a stunning moment of realization about the extent of our collective frustration with the linguistic parameters of democratic politics today. I do believe we can find new words, and with them, new ways of imagining our nation and its democracy. As in the past, however, it will take a new generation to help us find our way.

Healan Gaston:

I will close with a prayer for these trouble times inspired by Niebuhr's Serenity Prayer, and also incorporating a few of his most famous words from the Children of Light and the Children of Darkness. Please join me.

Healan Gaston:

God, in this time of political instability and bewildering changes, of culture wars and climate wars, please grant us the serenity to embrace the many lessons of the past, the courage to address the challenges of the present and future, with every tool old and new at our disposal, and the wisdom to see both science and religion as valuable ways of knowing ourselves and our world.

Healan Gaston:

Help us remember that religion and science each possess their strengths and weaknesses, governed as they are by the mysteries and contradictions inherent in human nature and the whole of your Creation. As we employ these powerful ways of knowing, allow us to recognize the finiteness and contingency that creeps into the statement of even the sublimest truth. May we never forget that wisdom requires courage, curiosity, and humility in the face of both the verities and the uncertainties of our lives in this wondrous world. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

Healan Gaston:

And if you would please join me in the Lord's prayer.

Healan Gaston:

Our Father ...

Congregation:

Who art in Heaven, hallowed by 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.

Wes Conn:

Please join me in singing the hymn, Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing, number 312 in your Crimson Harvard Hymnal. Number 312.

Congregation:

(singing)

Wes Conn:

Receive now this benediction. May the Lord keep you from evil, and may the Lord keep you in your going out and in your coming in, from this time on and forevermore. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.