

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

Good morning. Welcome to morning prayers at the Memorial Church. Our responsorial psalm this morning is Psalm 31 on page 16 in your psalter. Please rise as you are able and make the responses in bold. In thee, oh Lord, do I put my trust? Let me never be ashamed. Deliver me in my righteousness.

Congregation:

Bow down thine ear to me; deliver me speedily: be thou my strong rock, for an house of defense to save me.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

For thou art my rock and my fortress; therefore for thy name's sake lead me, and guide me.

Congregation:

Pull me out of the net that they have laid privily for me: for thou art my strength.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

Into thine hand I commit my spirit: thou hast redeemed me, O Lord God of truth.

Congregation:

I will be glad and rejoice in thy mercy: for thou hast considered my trouble; thou hast known my soul in adversities.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

And hast not shut me up into the hand of the enemy: thou set my feet in a large room.

Congregation:

For I said in my haste, I am cut off from before thine eyes: nevertheless thou heardest the voice of my supplications when I cried unto thee.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

O love the Lord, all ye his saints: for the Lord preserveth the faithful, and plentifully rewardeth the proud doer.

Congregation:

Be of good courage, and he shall strengthen your heart, all ye that hope in the Lord.

Choir:

(Singing)

David N. Hempton:

Good morning, everyone. Welcome to this new academic year, strange to be addressing an audience so distant in mass, but we're very glad to be back. The reading is from a poem called "Once the World was Perfect" by American poet laureate, Joy Harjo from her collection, "Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings."

We destroy the world we've been given for inspiration for life. Each stone of jealousy, each stone of fear, greed, envy, and hatred put out the light. No one was without a stone in his or her hand. There we were right back where we had started. We were bumping into each other in the dark, and now we have no place to live, since we didn't know how to live with each other.

Then one of the stumbling ones took pity on another and shared a blanket. A spark of kindness made a light. The light made an opening in the darkness, everyone worked together to make a ladder, a wind clan person climbed up first into the next world, and then the other clans, the children of those clans, their children and their children, all the way through time, to now into this morning light to you.

Earlier this summer, I partnered with Ray Hammond, the pastor of the Bethel AME Church in Boston and co-founder of the 10 Point Coalition to offer some reflections for a talk on the theme of looking back while looking forward. It was a way of taking a sober and honest look at where we are at this challenging time in our collective consciousness, while offering some kind of hopeful roadmap for the future.

He came up with a metaphor of a car journey, which he embellished with his experience as a pastor, and need from my vantage point as an educator, we started our car journey with a look in the rear view mirror to see where we were coming from emotionally, psychologically, intellectually. As you can imagine, the view from the rear view mirror is not very encouraging. It has to reckon with at least five major crises of our times. The first and most obvious is the COVID 19 global pandemic, which has taken such a toll on our lives over the past 18 months, and as with all public health crises in our world. This one has disproportionately hurt those at the bottom of the economic and social pyramid, and the pandemic has brought into sharp focus what we already knew, that there are enormous structural inequalities in our social fabric, resulting in profound inequality of care and opportunity.

A second crisis facing us is perhaps the greatest racial justice reckoning since the civil rights movement in the 1960s. So far, the signs are not at all clear that we really understand the depth of this crisis or have any genuine, as distinct from performative, intention of doing anything about it.

A third crisis is perhaps the deepest polarization in American politics since the Civil War era, culminating in the Capitol Hill insurrection. We still cannot agree about what actually happened, or even how to find out what happened.

The fourth crisis is global warming. We have just come through the hottest decade on record with dire predictions for the future. As we cope with the tragic realities of the present with fires, floods, and fury all over the country and the world.

Fifth, we have a profound sense of unease about the international order and the role we should be playing in it. Last month's dismal departure from Afghanistan seemed to be a depressing finale to two decades of violent American foreign publicity constructed in response to, and partly in revenge for, the terrorist attacks in 9/11. So our news stories have been dominated by these five crises for as long as we can remember. All this can leave us feeling tired and discouraged. Professionals call it crisis fatigue. We talk about languishing, muddling through, sucking it up. Many of us are just plain tired and a little fed up.

Mental health concerns are top of our agendas as never before. Unfortunately, the traffic chaos we see in our rear view mirror is still all around us and will be for the foreseeable future. How do we negotiate this traffic? How do we take care of ourselves and each other in the meantime? How do we travel safely and well?

Crucially, what are our side mirror blind spots? Produced by our backgrounds, our unacknowledged privileges and assumptions, our ideological certainties and our cultural conditioning. Our sense of self-righteousness reinforced by our social media communities. How do we come to know what we don't know? Universities at their best can be great places to discover our blind spots, which we all have, and to reckon with them. Universities are not and should never become silos for a single point of view. So what does the road ahead look like? Where are we going from here, and what excites us about the journey ahead? Let's be honest, the big crises facing us are going to take sustained and disciplined thought and action over all of our lifetimes to make a real difference, but what can we do now to promote human flourishing to ourselves and to our communities? In addition to the wisdom embodied in our faith traditions, there are piles of experimental data from college campuses and other communities showing that we flourish best when we cultivate gratitude.

When we perform acts of kindness, when we volunteer, when we celebrate and savor small things, when we find meaning and purpose in everyday routines. We, when we maintain our sense of adventure and curiosity, by trying something new, when we feel we belong somewhere, and are not just attending or passing through. The philosopher and ethicist, Peter Singer, summarizes much of this under the phrase, "effective altruism," which not only makes the world a better place, but makes us happier and more fulfilled people as we engage in it, to double win. In our journey, the traffic all around us as noisy and ugly. As you start this new and strange academic year, settle in gently, be safe, take care of your physical and mental health. Pay attention to public health protocols, evaluate risks carefully, not just for your own safety, but for the wellbeing of others. This year, more than most, we're going to need each other enjoy Harjo's words. We desperately need a spark of kindness to bring in the light.

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

Please rise for the prayers, as you are able. The Lord be with you, let us pray. Oh God, who art the author of peace and lover of Concorde, in knowledge of whom spendeth our eternal life, who services perfect freedom. Defend us, thy humble servants in all assaults of our enemies, that we surely trusting in that defense may not fear the power of any adversaries through the might of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen. And let us pray together the words Jesus taught us saying 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, forever and ever. Amen. Our concluding hymn is hymn number 12.

Congregation:

(Singing)

The Rev. Matthew I. Potts:

Lord God, whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine. Glory to God from generation to generation in our church, and in Christ Jesus forever and ever. Amen. Let us bless the Lord.

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