

Laurie Sedgwick:

(music) Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Laurie Sedgwick:

And welcome to morning prayers. Please stand as you are able for our responsive reading from the Black Appleton Psalter book. Today we'll be reading Psalm 72, found on page 36. Give the king thy justice, O God, and thy righteousness to the royal son.

Congregation:

Me he judge thy people with righteousness, and they poor with justice!

Laurie Sedgwick:

Let the mountains bear prosperity for the people and the hills in righteousness.

Congregation:

Me he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor!

Laurie Sedgwick:

May he live while the sun endures, and as long as the moon throughout all generations.

Congregation:

Me he be like rain that falls on the mown grass, like showers that water the earth.

Laurie Sedgwick:

In his days, may righteousness flourish and peace abound till the moon be no more.

Congregation:

May he have dominion from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth.

Laurie Sedgwick:

May all Kings fall down before him, all nations serve him.

Congregation:

For he delivers the needy when he calls, the poor and him who has no helper.

Choir:

(Singing)

Alden Fossett:

A reading from the book of Deuteronomy, chapter 21, beginning at the 22nd verse. "When someone is convicted of a crime punishable by death and is executed, and you hang him on a tree, his corpse must not remain all night upon the tree. You shall bury him that same day, for anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse. You must not defile the land that the Lord your God is giving you for the possession." Here ends the lesson.

Two hundred and sixty-six years ago, two enslaved Africans named Phyllis and Mark were brutally executed in the Cambridge Gallows lot that sat on Lancaster Street at the corner of Humboldt Street. And this could not have happened if Harvard University did not exist.

Mark was hanged and gibbeted. Phyllis was burned. This public display of violence was not just a reminder of the state's power and the judiciary's influence. It was also a public deterrent to prevent the future disruption of the civic order as set by the elite, almost all of whom were Harvard graduates. Mark and Phyllis were enslaved by John Codman of Charlestown. Codman owned several slaves. They remain unknown to us in many ways, their given names stolen, their age uncertain, their passions and dreams ignored.

All that is left is an archive that has been kept intentionally clean. To learn about them I visited a late 19th century text written as a study in case law, and not as a study in inequity. The record says the enslaved found the rigid discipline of a master, Codman, untenable. This thinly veiled euphemism reveals that slavery was not designed to be a solely legal designation, but also a spiritual one. Orlando Patterson writes that the slave undergoes social death, a condition wherein one's sacred dignity, autonomy, and soul are structurally abhorred. But God will not let this be so.

The humanity of Mark and Phyllis leaps off the page. Mark had made previous attempts to destroy Codman's property. Daily acts of resistance, both big and small, were very common for the enslaved. Their very breath conjures a temporal fire, the warmth of which will save us all. They declare life in the face of death.

Having a place in an impossible and incomprehensible position, Mark, Phyllis and other enslaved Africans poisoned John Codman's drinking chocolate with arsenic. They were not convicted of murder, but of petty treason, the most heinous designation requiring the most heinous punishment. The case was decided by three Harvard graduates.

On September 18th, 1755, the smell of burning flesh and the cries of my God, my God, why have you forsaken me, rattled at the gates of Harvard yard. In these same classrooms, students were trained as the new class of the elite, doctors, lawyers, ministers. They would decide what was justice and what was truth and what was mercy. In this case, Harvard taught these justices how to decide wrong.

Jesus's death on the lynching tree is the sign of our salvation. Christ's unwavering allegiance and solidarity with the black people who were lynched in the United States declares that the very fabric of our American Christian tradition is sewn together by white supremacy.

What if the black theological commitment to the breath of life in the face of terror were the center of our discourse? What if we studied the history of lynching as the living history of Jesus's death? Who is Jesus, if not a black person lynched because he spoke the truth while we shriek and fight in this pit of death.

Unlike Jesus, Mark was not buried. He remained hanged for 20 years. His body was placed on a gibbet in Charleston Common. In 1775, Paul Revere noted Mark's body as a landmark on his midnight ride to Lexington. "I had passed Charleston Neck," he writes in his 1798 letter to Jeremy Belknap. "And got opposite where Mark was hung in chains. 20 years under the curse of God. Forever a reminder of all that had been prophesied."

Yes, the Christians of Harvard have defiled this land, this land that was never theirs to have in the first place. For anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse. For anyone hung on a tree is beloved of God. May my life glorify the precious humanity of Mark and Phyllis.

Let us pray. Blessed Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms of love on the hardwood of a cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace. So clothe us and your spirit that we, reaching forth our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you for the honor of your name. Amen.

And will you please stand as you are able and let us pray the prayer that Jesus taught us, saying together, "Our father who art heaven, hallowed be name. Thy kingdom to 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, the power, and the glory forever and ever. Amen."

Laurie Sedgwick:

And let us sing the hymn, Lead Kindly Light, number 310 found in your Crimson Harvard hymnal. (music)

Laurie Sedgwick:

Mighty God who speaks a word of peace to calm our troubled sea, caring God who nudges us away from fear and toward faith, ever present God who fills us with awe, but also raises many question without easy answers. Open our eyes to see you in today, strengthen our hearts for the challenges that lie ahead, open our ears this hour to hear the word you speak. This we pray in Jesus name. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen. (music)