

Anna Burnham:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Anna Burnham:

And welcome to morning prayers at Memorial Church. Today's service will begin with a responsive reading from the black Appleton psalter book, Psalm 113, found on page 57. Please remain masked and stand, as you are able, to read responsively, that full verse.

Anna Burnham:

"Hallelujah! O servants of the Lord, give praise. Praise the name of the Lord.

Congregation:

"Let the name of the Lord be blessed for now and forever.

Anna Burnham:

"From east to west the name of the Lord is praised.

Congregation:

"The Lord is exalted above all nations. His glory is above the heavens.

Anna Burnham:

"Who is like the Lord, our God, who enthroned on high,

Congregation:

"sees what is below, in heaven and on earth?

Anna Burnham:

"He raises the poor from the dust, lifts up the needy from the refuse heap;

Congregation:

"to set them with the great, with the great men of His people.

Anna Burnham:

"He sets the childless woman among her household as a happy mother of children. Halleluyah!"

Congregation:

Halleluyah!

Choir:

(singing).

Anna Burnham:

The following is an excerpt from, *Illness as Metaphor*, by Susan Sontag. "Illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later, each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place"

Towards the end of September, my dad called me. He was in the hospital, he said, after a sudden onset of acute and mysterious symptoms brought him to the ER, where a series of tests and scans found a tumor wrapped around his right kidney. The doctor had used, as my dad put it, the C word. He couldn't bring himself to say cancer to me.

I'd always been afraid of this exact thing. The call that shifts the axis of your world in two minutes, and it had come. Suddenly, my time passed, not in seconds, minutes, or hours, but in the gap between a new test and its results. In the time waiting for the hospitals to schedule the surgery, to get this thing out of him. Did the scans catch anything else? Had the cancer spread? Does my dad having a tumor mean, my dad has cancer? Are they the same thing? Am I now someone whose dad has cancer?

A great gift of being a divinity school graduate is that I have many people in my life who are, or have been, hospital chaplains. The day after, I called my friend, Wilson, who works as a hospice chaplain in Providence. "I feel like I'm in this club now.", I said. Like, you're either in the club or you're not. And once you're in it, you in it. My dad has cancer club, but of course, you don't want to be in it. And you kind of wonder how the world just goes on. Like everything is normal.

I wondered, literally, how am I supposed to like go to the grocery store, or send emails, when there is a tumor wrapped around my dad's kidney? Wilson recommended I turn to some of his most deeply held whole holy scripture, Virginia Wolf and Susan Sontag. He pointed me to a line in a Sontag essay, the one I opened this address with, about all of us being born with two passports, one to the kingdom of the well, and one to the kingdom of the sick. Eventually, no matter how long we can avoid it, we are forced to pull that other passport out of its drawer. And we live, whether permanently or temporarily, in the kingdom of the sick.

These texts gave me language, finally, for the place I suddenly found myself in. This place, shaped by test results and panic. By frustration at the seeming lack of urgency on the part of the hospitals.

That weekend, I stayed in my apartment with the blinds pulled low. When I would periodically emerge for a walk, I was struck again by the absurdity of it all. The feeling that it was so strange, offensive even, that the world outside was just going on as normal. I wanted to grab people's shoulder and shake them. I looked at the faces of people walking by, wondering if they were in this club, this land of the sick, with me. "Are you here?", I wondered, "Are you?"

In her essay on being ill, Virginia Wolf asserts, that if we could bring ourselves to really face it, illness would take its place with love, war, and jealousy, among the primary themes of literature. It is so omnipresent. So common, so profound, so earth shaking, and yet, somehow so mundane. But, she

laments, we lack the language to really describe what's happening to us. What it feels like. "My dad has cancer.", I might say. But as Wolf wonders, what does that convey of the great experience? How the world has changed its shape. That disconnect between experience and the language to describe it.

The sense of inhabiting an unknown land, accompanied me to the surgery in October. The absurd banality of the waiting room, knowing that life and death were unfolding all around me in the corridors of that hospital, while I ate snacks, and scrolled through Instagram for the 10th time. Somewhere in the depths of the hospital, my dad was lying on a table, cut open from breast bone to pelvis. A doctor's skilled hands removing one of his internal organs, while I watched five hours of a HDTV marathon on the waiting room television, and nervously ran a rosary through my fingers.

How, I wondered, does anyone who works in a hospital ever talk about anything else? What in the world could be more urgent than this? How are healthcare workers not angry all the time at the world outside that just keeps going on as normal? How do you live a normal life when you know all of this is here?

Crafting some tangible message that those listening can take with them is always the hardest part of preaching for me. I often prefer to just ask questions and walk away. And really, I wonder what wisdom can be found in the random growth of malignant cells in my dad's body? I think, maybe the one thing I can offer up here is curiosity. Curiosity for the lands that others inhabit. Invisible lands, unknown countries, to which they have a passport and must fly back and forth regularly. We all hold multiple passports to vast countries. We navigate complicated geographies. Perhaps, wondering where those around us go when they're home, or they're alone, might be a small way to begin to bridge those borders.

Let us pray. God of love, you are the golden thread that ties all of us together. Help us see each other. Help us help each other. Help us be curious about our neighbor's burdens, joys, and fears. Because it is in turning our faces to each other, that we turn our faces to you. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

Anna Burnham:

Please stand, as you are able, and together, let us recite the hymn that 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.

Anna Burnham:

Together, let us sing the hymn, How firm a foundation, ye Saints of the Lord, number 282, found in your crimson Harvard.

Congregation:

(singing)

Anna Burnham:

Go forth into the world in peace. Be of good courage. Hold fast to that which is good. May the love of God draw us closer to God and to each other. May the love of God strengthen us in God's service today and every day. And together, let us say, amen.