

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Welcome to Morning Prayers here in the Appleton Chapel of the Memorial Church. I invite you, please, to rise for our responsorial Psalm, which is number 114 in your black psalter.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

"When Israel went out from Egypt, the house of Jacob from a people of strange language."

Congregation:

"Judah became God's sanctuary, Israel his dominion."

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

"The sea looked and fled, Jordan turned back."

Congregation:

"The mountains skipped like rams, the hills like lambs."

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

"Why is it, O sea, that you flee? O Jordan, that you turn back?"

Congregation:

"O mountains, that you skip like rams? O hills, like lambs?"

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

"Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the God of Jacob."

Congregation:

"Who turns the rock into a pool of water, the flint into a spring of water."

Choir:

(singing)

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

This is a reading from the second chapter of the gospel of Mark, beginning at the 18th verse. "Now, John's disciples and the Pharisees were fasting and people came and said to him, 'Why do John's disciples and the disciples of the Pharisees fast, but your disciples do not fast?' Jesus said to them, 'The wedding guests cannot fast while the bride groom is with them, can they? As long as they have the bride groom with them, they cannot fast. The days will come when the bride groom is taken away from them

and they will fast on that day. No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth from an old cloak, otherwise the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and the worst tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins, otherwise the wine will burst the skins and the wine is lost and so were the skins. But one puts new wine into fresh wineskins."

Here endeth the lesson. It's a season of Lent, a season of fasting, so you might wonder why I chose a lesson about not fasting for this morning. The reason is because this is the gospel passage assigned for our Saint of the Day, Gregory the Illuminator, who sounds a little bit like a superhero and whose story is a little bit like a superhero story, honestly.

Gregory is a third and fourth century Armenian Saint, the apostle to the Armenians. And as I said, his life sounds a little bit like an adventure tale. He was the child of local royalty. He came from the Parthian people, who were from Northern Iran. He was a prince, the Parthians controlled Northern Iran and what is now Armenia. It was a complicated politics, I guess that's redundant, politics is always complicated. The Sassanids of Persia had conquered Parthian, Northern Iran. And so the Parthians were in Armenia. They ruled there. The king of Armenia was Parthian, but they did not have their home, their own land. All of these folks were members of the ancient monotheistic religion of Zoroastrianism.

So, Gregory was a prince and his father, Anak, attempted to assassinate the Armenian king and was executed. And to atone for their father's crimes, the Armenian king wanted to execute all of Gregory's father's family as well. Gregory narrowly escaped, two of his caretakers smuggled him out of Armenia and took him to Cappadocia, to what is today Turkey. And they gave him to a Christian priest in Cappadocia, and he was raised there by that priest as a Christian.

Gregory eventually married and had two sons. But after he had two sons, he decided he wanted to be a monk. I don't know if those things are related. So, he separated from his wife and entered monastic life. While in prayer, serving as a monk, he became convinced that he's had to atone for his father's sins. So, he returned to Armenia to convert the Armenian people as his atonements. When he arrived, he refused to offer religious sacrifice in the manner of the Armenians. And this did not make the Armenian king happy.

And when the Armenian king learned, his name was Tiridates III, when he learned that Gregory was the son of the person who had tried to kill his father, or who had killed his father, he had Gregory tortured and then thrown into a pit where he lived as a prisoner for 13 years. Tiridates committed some awful murders of some Christian people. And then, he descended into madness. And in his madness, he had a dream that Gregory could heal him. So, he called Gregory up from the pit and he asked Gregory for healing and Gregory healed him. Then, the king pronounced Armenia Christian. The first Christian nation in history.

So, much of this story makes us squirm. It makes me squirm. The declarations of conversion. We're all Christian now as king Tiridates said, all the intrigue and violence, even the idea of evangelization that a good form of atonement would be to convert a bunch of people away from a beautiful ancient religion. So, what do we do with Gregory this morning in this season of fasting and Lent? I think his eagerness, Gregory's eagerness to atone for the crimes of his ancestors, that's something we can learn. Our own

moral intuitions, as we have received them in the modern West, is that we should be accountable for our own actions.

If my father or ancestor did something, I didn't do it, why am I guilty? As William Faulkner has said, "The past is never dead. It's not even past." The sins of our forebears structure this world. So, it's not enough to say, "I didn't do it," when I still live off the structure of the world their sins made. It is a season of fasting and Jesus, in this passage, tells us not to fast, but he also has this line about putting a patch on a piece of cloth, "An old piece of cloth can't accommodate a new patch," He says, "it'll just make the tear worse, because when the unshrunk cloth shrinks, it'll pull at a tear."

And the way this has traditionally been interpreted is that, "Oh, the old stuff, we got new stuff, just worry about the new stuff. Don't worry about the old stuff." I don't like that interpretation. Because what is implied in this example, in this analogy, is that this cloak is torn. There is still a tear that needs repair. And part, I think, of what Jesus is saying is that, unless we in gauge the past on its own terms, we will make that tear worse.

It is a season of fasting. It is Lent and I am avoiding sweets and screen time and it's going okay, to be honest. But perhaps these individual fasts are not the ones or the only ones we are meant to keep in this penitential season. Perhaps we are meant, like Gregory the Illuminator, to pursue some more corporate and ancient atonement. Please, rise for the prayers. The Lord be with you.

Congregation:

And with your spirit.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Let us pray. Almighty God, who raised up your servant Gregory to be a light in the world and to preach the gospel to the people of Armenia, illuminate our hearts that we also, in our own generation, may show forth your praise, who called us out of darkness and into your marvelous life. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

And now let us pray the words Jesus taught us saying. Our father.

Congregation:

Our father.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Who art in heaven.

Congregation:

Who art in heaven.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:
Hallowed be Thy name.

Congregation:
Hallowed be Thy name.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:
Thy kingdom come.

Congregation:
Thy kingdom come.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:
Thy will be done.

Congregation:
Thy will be done.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:
On earth as it is in heaven.

Congregation:
On earth as it is in heaven.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:
Give us this day our daily bread.

Congregation:
Give us this day our daily bread.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:
And forgive us our trespasses.

Congregation:
And forgive us our trespasses.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:
As we forgive those who trespass against us.

Congregation:
As we forgive those who trespass against us.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

And lead us not into temptation.

Congregation:

And lead us not into temptation.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

But deliver us from evil.

Congregation:

But deliver us from evil.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Divine is the kingdom.

Congregation:

Divine is the kingdom.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

And the power.

Congregation:

And the power.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

And the glory.

Congregation:

And the glory.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Forever and ever.

Congregation:

Forever and ever.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Please join in singing our concluding hymn, number 212.

Congregation:

(singing).

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Now, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all this day and always. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Let us bless the Lord.

Congregation:

Thanks be to God.