

Anna Burnham:

Good morning.

Congregation:

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 139, found on page 70. Please... Nope, you don't need to remain masked. Stand as you are able to read responsibly by the whole verse. "O Lord, you have searched me and known me."

Congregation:

"You know when I sit down and when I rise up. You discern my thoughts from far away."

Anna Burnham:

"You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways."

Congregation:

"Even before a words is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely."

Anna Burnham:

"You hem me in, behind and before and lay your hand upon me."

Congregation:

"Such knowledge is too wonderful for me. It is so high that I cannot attain it."

Anna Burnham:

"Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?"

Congregation:

"If I ascend to heaven, if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there."

Anna Burnham:

"If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea."

Congregation:

"Even there, your hand shall lead me and your right hand shall hold fast."

Anna Burnham:

"If I say, surely the darkness shall cover me and the light around me become night."

Congregation:

"Even the darkness is not dark for you. The night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you."

Choir:
(singing)

Madeline Bugeau-Heartt:
Good morning.

Congregation:
Morning.

Madeline Bugeau-Heartt:

That was so beautiful. My heart is beating fast, so. First and foremost, I will offer a reading from the children's Bible. It's a fiction book by Lydia Millet and the reading goes, "You're right. It's more like art, poetry, but it still comes from what they used to call God, doesn't it? What they used to call God, he murmured. I think you solved it Jack, in your notebook. Jesus was science, knowing stuff, right? And the Holy Ghost was all the things that people make. You remember? The diagram said, making stuff. Yes, it did. So maybe art is the Holy Ghost. Maybe art is the ghost in the machine. Art is the ghost."

So, good morning again. And it's so good to see you all here. My family's here and that's exciting for me. Recently, I thought of a person I had not thought of in years, his name was Ben and he was a fellow acting student of mine when I was at NYU doing undergrad for theater. He was a frequent scene partner of mine and coveted. He was handsome and an amazing storyteller, honest, vulnerable, and nuanced. I was not the only one disappointed to learn, he had a beautiful French girlfriend. After our first year of the program, however, I learned that Ben had dropped out of school to become an EMT. I saw him at a party some weeks later and I asked, why had he dropped out? He told me it was because he'd had some kind of a reckoning. And even though he loved to act, he could not stand by with all the suffering in the world and do nothing. Now that he was an EMT, he felt he could be of service in a tactile and real way.

That was 10 years ago. But despite that, and the many changes that have occurred in my own life, I never lost or could quite kick the bug for theater. It's what prompted me to apply to Harvard Divinity School with hopes of melding theater, as a sacred space with timely, deep questions of the spirit and how we search for meaning amidst the great mystery of things. I want to deepen the container, I tell anyone who'd listen. But a few months prior to arriving here, I began to feel a little creep of anxiety set in. When I thought about the process of making art, be it, how to create or what to create, I drew blank after blank. This kind of panic and amnesia comes with the territory of being an artist. Not one project has gone by wherein I didn't start from a place of doubt surrounding the skills I've been honing for over 15 years.

But something was different this time. And I knew it had to do with the fact that the world now felt very different to me. What with the past several years, Ooh, the nerves, building to a cacophony of pandemic, racially motivated murders, the realities of climate collapse galloping ever near, the general chaos, division and violence within our country and the world, I did not know how to make work for

such times, times that reek of collapse. The thought of making art felt like a luxury, a tone deaf response, and certainly not a necessity. I began to think like Ben had, how I might forego the dream I've had since I was a teenager to be an artist in order to be a more immediate, tangible service.

This spring, I am studying in an independent reading group as an offshoot of the Reverend Matthew Pott's class, Apocalyptic Grief. We meet every week and hungrily discuss the imminent demise of our time on this planet. We reckon with everything from the question of God's place and suffering to how to love the dying, be it the planet, each other, or ourselves. It was to this special concerned group of people that I brought the question I'd been wrestling with, why does story, why does making art matter? The conclusion we collectively drew was this, what else can we do? Storytelling, making art, is at its basis a way of putting seemingly random pieces together in order to create some semblance of meaning. And so, as long as we are living, what else can we do but try to make sense of such chaos, to bring the pieces together that on their own feel forsaken, in hopes of construing a narrative beyond just base suffering in which we might remember the things we live for, the people we live for.

I used to believe that I made art in order to shine light on the seemingly mundane. Why not expand this mission to include shining light amidst horror, a kind of revelation within the swirl of apocalyptic grief. The scales just gotten bigger. Our souls do not choir saving from the middle class suburban malaise I was lucky enough to grow up in and vowed to combat as a younger artist. That world no longer exists. For many, it never did. It is for the acute, existential woes, as great as our possible extinction and all the suffering that will surely lead up to this for which our souls need bong. The stories will not save us, this I know, but if there is meaning to be found, perhaps it will not all be for naught. At the very least, as long as there is someone to tell and someone to listen, we are not yet alone amidst the great unknown.

So with all the gratitude, for a purpose tentatively rekindled and profoundly altered, I go forward to make a new piece this summer, the one about vampires and the end of the world and menstrual blood and beauty and horror entwined. I am scared silly, of course. I still don't know how to make work for such times. Though, I know I must, if only to help myself and others try to make meaning of the things we are living through. And I ask God for help in this. Thank you.

Anna Burnham:

God of creativity, God of beauty, God of the great story, you gave human beings the sacred capacity and desire to make art. Guide us as we continue to write and make sense of that great story, as we strive to deepen the container. May our creativity soothe us, challenge us and draw us closer to you and to each other. May we serve as prisms, refracting the light around us and to colors ever more vibrant. Amen.

Anna Burnham:

Please stand as you are able and together, let us recite the prayer that Jesus taught us saying.

Anna Burnham and congregation:

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, the power and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.

Anna Burnham:

And together, let us sing the hymn, Awake My Soul and With The Sun, verses one, two and three.
Number 43 found in your Crimson Harvard hymnal.

Choir/Congregation:

(singing).

Anna Burnham:

The Lord be with you.

Congregation:

And also with your spirit.

Anna Burnham:

The service has ended. Let us go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

Congregation:

Thanks be to God.