

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Welcome to the Memorial Church. Welcome back to the Memorial Church for this, our first service of morning prayers of the academic year. We are honored this morning to welcome as our speaker the 29th president of Harvard University, Larry Bacow. Please join in our responsorial psalm, which is number four in your black hymnal... Excuse me, your black psalter.

Answer me when I call, oh God of my rights. You gave me room when I was in distress. Be gracious to me and hear my prayer.

Congregation:

How long, you people, shall my honor suffer shame? How long will you love vain words, and seek out the lies?

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

But know that the Lord has set apart the faithful for himself. The Lord hears when I call to him.

Congregation:

When you are disturbed, do not sin. Ponder it on your beds, and be silent.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Offer right sacrifices and put your trust in the Lord.

Congregation:

There are many who say, "Oh that we might see some good. Let the light of your face shine on us, oh Lord."

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

You have put gladness in my heart more than when there are grain and wine abound.

Congregation:

I will both lie down and sleep in peace. For you alone, oh Lord, make me lie down in safety.

Choir:

(singing)

President Lawrence S. Bacow:

Good morning, friends.

Congregation:

Good morning.

President Lawrence S. Bacow:

Thank you for joining me here in this sacred space, in this moment, in truly the heart of our campus. I actually cannot imagine a better way to begin my last academic year as your president. What will this semester bring? What will it bring for me? What will it bring for you? What will it bring for all of us? What will it bring for our community? It's been years, actually, since these questions have existed outside of the pandemic, outside of testing cadences and dashboard statistics and contingency plans. Yet, despite the presence and procession and persistence of all these new variants that we continue to worry about, it finally feels as if we can live life again. And I want to take this moment to recognize that change, and I hope we all can be filled with gratitude and hope for it.

So here we are at this moment in time, imagining our collective future together. A lot could go right this semester or a lot could go wrong. Nothing is certain, I think, except for one thing. If you and I are all doing our jobs, all doing our jobs, doing what this institution demands and expects from each of us, what this nation needs from us at this moment, what the world needs of us, I guarantee you one thing: we will all be arguing. Now, everywhere, I think the stakes have gotten higher. And what we have to lose is truly at risk: a functioning democracy, a habit of the planet, the list goes on. And I think this has all become clearer and clearer to many of us.

Gone are the days of quiet assurance and polite acquiescence. If we stand for veritas, we must speak for veritas. We must be both its bearer and its defender. Being quick to understand and slow to judge does not mean being unwilling to argue. It means arguing in a way that celebrates and strengthens our mission, that demonstrates the power of knowledge and the forbearance of wisdom. Now, in my own tradition, in the Jewish religion, we have no definitive authority for resolving differences of agreement over the interpretation of texts or doctrine. None. There's no bishop. There's no pope. The way we resolve these differences is through argument. And indeed, if you were to go into any yeshiva or religious school and observe students who are studying our sacred texts, they always do it in pairs. In fact, the imperative is to study with someone else. Why? Because more emerges through the dialogue between two students, through the different interpretations, than one can ever hope to achieve on their own.

I think this concept was captured beautifully by Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks's argument for argument. And he said the following. We ought to argue, he asserts, quote, "Out of a desire to discover the truth, not out of cantankerousness or a wish to prevail over our fellows, not out of envy and contentiousness and ambition for victory. When we argue for the sake of the latter," he continues, "what is at stake is not truth but power. And the result is that both sides actually suffer. If you win, I lose. But if I win, I also lose. Because in diminishing you, I diminish myself. The opposite is the case when the argument is for the sake of truth. If I win, I win. But if I lose, I also, because being defeated by the truth is the only form of defeat that is also a victory." Rabbi Sacks referred to this type of argument as argument not for the sake of victory, but argument for the sake of heaven.

As we begin again to imagine the future as individuals and as a community, may we all find ways to resist the lure of righteousness, to resist the lure of moral certitude. May we embrace the possibility of transcendence through argument, and may we live life again with greater appreciation of its fragility and for our dependence also on one another. Our beloved Harvard and all the institutions that preserve and protect truth must endure. And we, all of us, must do all that we can to see that they do. And we do so with gratitude and hope for our time and for times to come. Thank you. Take care, be kind, engage. It is indeed a blessing to share this all with you.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

I invite you please to rise for the prayers. The Lord be with you.

Congregation:

And also with you.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Let us pray. Gracious God, in you we live and move and have our being. We humbly pray you so to guide and govern us by your holy spirit, that in all the cares and occupations of our life, we may not forget you, but may remember that we are ever walking in your sight. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Now let's pray the prayer. Jesus taught saying:

All:

Our Father who are 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. Lead us not to temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Please join in singing our concluding hymn, number 27.

Congregation:

(singing)

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Now may the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace and believing through the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

This transcript was exported on Aug 31, 2022 - view latest version [here](#).

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Let us bless the Lord.

All:

Thanks to you, God.