

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. Our speaker this morning is Sheila Thimba, the Harvard College Dean of Administration and Finance. I invite you, please, to rise and join in saying our responsorial psalm number 33.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Sing forth, O you righteous, to the Lord; it is fit that the upright acclaim Him.

Congregation:

Praise the Lord with the lyre; with a ten-stringed harp sing to Him.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Sing Him a new song; play sweetly with shouts of joy.

Congregation:

For the word of the Lord is right, His every deed is faithful.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

He loves what is right and just; the earth is full of the Lord's faithful care.

Congregation:

By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and by the breath of His mouth, all their host.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

He heaps up the ocean waters like a mound; stores the deep in vaults.

Congregation:

Let all the earth fear the LORD; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of Him.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

For He spoke and it was; He commanded, and it endured.

Congregation:

The Lord frustrates the plans of the nations, brings to naught the designs of the peoples.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

What the LORD plans endures forever; what He designs for ages on end.

Shiela Thimba:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Shiela Thimba:

I take my inspiration this morning from this passage in the Old Testament, book of Job 6:10: "Then I would still have this consolation— my joy in unrelenting pain— that I had not denied the words of the Holy One."

Shiela Thimba:

This summer while I was recovering from my first bout with COVID and marveling at how mild symptoms nevertheless left me feeling so crushed, my first cousin died unexpectedly and tragically. His passing came after a long string of other tragic and unexpected deaths in our family: my beloved grandmother, my mother, several uncles including two of my favorites, my father, my grandmother, my other grandmother, and a beloved and young aunt. So in one respect, the wrenching ritual of grief is familiar and I am accustomed to the work of finalizing a life. Nonetheless, late one evening six weeks ago, during that awful interim between the between learning of the death and the burial, I found myself in this book of Job, casually thumbing through the long litany of blows that befell him.

Shiela Thimba:

My attention landed on this passage in chapter six, which I could not remember having read before. Job has been arguing with his friend Eliphaz who is standing in for all of Job's friends, and Job tells him he feels that they have abandoned him in his suffering. And in an extended soliloquy that meanders between self pity and self consolation, he recounts his losses and tells of his awful pain. Few of us can marshal jokes, with eloquence, about suffering. Our culture valorizes positivity and sunny dispositions. We speak of a mental health crisis in this period after the pandemic, in part because our capacities to sit with prolonged discomfort and loss have been taxed in unprecedented ways. We lack sufficient tools to attend to the shifting and often negative emotions that surface when we suffer. Where does one put self-pity? How do you bind guilt? With what do you address blinding anger?

Shiela Thimba:

As I reflect on the depth of Job's despair, I'm awed by how articulate he is about the all-encompassing sorrow that has engulfed him. To our modern minds, that he is able to move between the stages of grief so flexibly: at once angry, then resigned, bargaining, and back to denial, seems almost incoherent, but it is also so recognizable. As I mourned our most recent loss, I immediately found myself back in the old grief of my mother who died 28 years ago, and for my father, who died just four years ago.

Shiela Thimba:

In the numbness of this combined sorrow, I'm focused and confused. I read Job and found an anchor and a sail; an anchor for my negative emotions in the concreteness of his lamentations for sure, using his words to give voice to my own pain. And in that short verse in chapter six, I was surprised to also find a sail that pulled me out of the worst of the grief. In the tradition of my African and Anglican families, we knew to sit vigil each night after my cousin's death reading scripture together and singing hymns that we

remembered from years of recitation, but we also received guests from our Baptist church who shared their practice rituals of comforting the grieving. Our in-laws and extended families from Guyana and Ghana and Jamaica and Belize brought their customs for final rites and taught us new ways to mourn. Through these varied ways, we made our way through our sorrow and we could echo Job's insight about the source of hope and healing.

Shiela Thimba:

"Then I would still have this consolation- my joy in relenting pain- that I had not denied the words of the Holy One." Because indeed, we too found solace in the enduring promises that God will see us through.

Shiela Thimba:

And so I invite you to continue to pray with me as I continue to pray.

Shiela Thimba:

Almighty God, teach me anew, each day, to hold fast to Your word. When grief over overwhelms me, when loss is rife, when we find ourselves adrift, teach us all anew each day to console ourselves with Your promises. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

I invite you now, please rise and join in saying the prayer Jesus taught.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

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.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Please join in singing our concluding hymn, number 1, page 9.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

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

Congregation:

Amen.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Let us bless the Lord.