

Courtney Godwin:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Courtney Godwin:

Welcome to Morning Prayers in Appleton Chapel. All who are able, please rise and join me for our responsive reading, Psalm number 136, found in your black psalter.

O give thanks unto to the Lord, for He is good, for His mercy endureth for ever.

Congregation:

O give thanks to the God of gods: for His mercy endureth for ever.

Courtney Godwin:

O give thanks to the Lord of lords: for His mercy endureth for ever.

Congregation:

To Him who alone doeth great wonders: for His mercy endureth for ever.

Courtney Godwin:

To Him that by wisdom made the heavens: for His mercy endureth for ever.

Congregation:

To Him that stretched out the earth above the waters: for His mercy endureth for ever.

Courtney Godwin:

To Him that made the great lights: for His mercy endureth for ever.

Congregation:

The sun to rule by day: for His mercy endureth for ever.

Courtney Godwin:

The moon and stars to rule by night: for His mercy endureth for ever.

Congregation:

And hath redeemed us from our enemies: for His mercy endureth for ever.

Courtney Godwin:

Who giveth food to all flesh: for His mercy endureth for ever.

Congregation:

O give thanks unto the God of heaven: for His mercy endureth for ever.

Courtney Godwin:

You may be seated.

Choir:

(singing)

Courtney Godwin:

The text this morning comes from the first page of my favorite book, *Anxious People*, by Swedish author, Fredrik Backman. The story is about a lot of things, but mostly about idiots.

It needs saying from the outset, that it's always very easy to declare that other people are idiots, but only if you forget how idiotically difficult being human is, especially if you have other people that you're trying to be a reasonably good human for. Because there's so much unbelievable amount that we're supposed to be able to cope with these days.

Some of us never manage to get the chaos under control, so our lives simply carry on. The world's spinning at through space at two million miles an hour while we bounce about on its surface. We're not in control, so we learn to pretend all the time. We don't have a plan, we just do our best to get through the day, because there'll be another one along tomorrow.

*Anxious People* opens the day before New Year's Eve. A real estate agency with a silly name is holding an apartment viewing in this small city in Sweden. What starts as one very bad decision to rob a cashless bank, quickly and accidentally devolves into the bank robber taking everyone in the apartment, open house hostage. It's a classic closed circle mystery. There's a singular exit that police scarred throughout the day, yet the bank robber escapes.

Everything I've told you so far is from the first three pages of the book, so no spoilers. But what follows in the next 300 pages is a story of mercy. In common use, mercy is found frequently in phrases such as, at the mercy of, qualifying mercy, to hold a hierarchy within itself, the power to punish, to harm, to judge. When we ask for mercy, compassion, or forgiveness, it is often because we are acknowledging a wrong.

When it comes to more Christian contexts, theologian James F. Keenan defines mercy as both the willingness to enter the chaos of another and the act of entering the chaos, the chaos of another. Psalm 136, which we just read together, has a refrain. God's mercy endureth for ever. God is forever entering our chaos, the individual chaos of each of our internal lives, and the collective chaos of this crazy world in which we live. *Anxious People* invites the reader to enter the chaos of each of the eight hostages, of the two police officers to investigate the case. The bank teller. The therapist of one of the hostages, and the bank robber. And throughout the story, each character enters the chaos of one another.

The hostages share their stories throughout the day, riddled with their faults and prior mistakes. But afterward, even when they're all at the mercy of one another's judgment, they find that when they know each other's stories, it's harder to dislike each other. They discover, that sometimes two strangers only need one thing in common to find each other's empathetic. And sometimes, that thing that we all have in common, it's just that we're in our swirls of chaos, caught up in our own anxieties and insecurities. The one thing we all have in common is the fact that it is idiotically difficult to be a human.

Another theme of *Anxious People*, besides this universality of anxiety and chaos, is a reminder that we are not the sum of our past experiences. We are not solely our mistakes, because we are also the lessons learned from those mistakes, and we are the future choices that we make. We are not only our pasts, but also our futures.

I reread this book every December 30th, as it takes place the day before New Year's, New Year's Eve. It still makes me laugh out loud and soak several tissues through with tears, but it reminds me that no matter the mistakes I've made in the past year, I have a fresh chance coming up. We are all anxious people all dealing with so much, but rereading *Anxious People* reminds me that mercy does endure forever. The mercy of God and the mercy of connection. Let us pray.

Merciful and compassionate God, in a world of chaos and change, your love and presence are constant. Thank you for guiding us to goodness amidst to the idiotic difficulties of being human. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

Courtney Godwin:

Together, please rise if you are able. Together, let us recite the prayer that Jesus taught us. Saying...

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.

Courtney Godwin:

Please join in singing the O Master, let me walk with Thee, hymn number 314 in your crimson Harvard hymnal.

Congregation:

(singing)

Courtney Godwin:

God, whose mercy endures forever, You are always with us in our anxiety and in our chaos. Help us to feel Your comforting embrace, and help us to step into the chaos of others, so that we may be embodiments of Your mercy. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.