

Courtney Godwin:

Good morning.

Congregation:

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Courtney Godwin:

Welcome to Prayers here at Appleton Chapel. Our speaker this morning will be Reverend Jonathan C. Page, Senior Minister Wellesley Hills Congregational Church. Welcome. Please rise in body and Spirit for a responsive reading of Psalm 114 found in your black Psalter.

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.

Courtney Godwin:

The sea looked and fled. Jordan turned back.

Congregation:

The mountains skipped like rams, the hills like lambs.

Courtney Godwin:

Why is it, oh sea, that you flee? Oh, Jordan, that you turn back.

Congregation:

Oh mountains, that you skipped like rams, oh hills like lambs?

Courtney Godwin:

Tremble, oh earth, at the presence of the Lord, at the presence of the God of Jacob.

Congregation:

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

Choir:

(singing)

Jonathan C. Page:

Our reading this morning comes from the prophet Joel chapter two, beginning with the first verse. It is the traditional reading to open the season of Lent, "Blow the trumpet in Zion; sound the alarm on my holy mountain! Let all the inhabitants of the land tremble, for the day of the LORD is coming; it is near. Even now, says the Lord. Return to me with all your heart, with fasting, with weeping and with mourning; rend your hearts and not your clothing. Return to the Lord your God, for he's gracious and

merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love; and relents from punishing." Here ends our reading.

I have to say it's a pleasure to be back here in Appleton Chapel after so many years. As some of you might know, I served as the eps fellow or undergraduate chaplain here from 2007 to 2010. It was a special time in my life. I was just out of Yale Divinity School and had the opportunity to return to the yard to work with students. It was also during the final years of Peter Gomes as Plummer Professor of Christian Morals. So I had the privilege of having him as my mentor. One of the things that makes Harvard so special is that the great figures of the past still walk these halls. They leave an imprint that enriches the place in ways that those new to the university oftentimes miss. Peter knew that, which is one reason why he taught courses on Harvard's history. I suspect he also knew that he one day would be one of those ghosts who still lovingly looks after the institution and as many foster children.

One thing about Peter Gomes was that he loved Lent, and this always cracked me up because here was a man who certainly enjoyed the finer things in life. No one would ever have accused Peter of being an aesthetic, but I think it was his own internal honesty about his appetites and his own foibles that brought to focus the importance of this season. He saw the value even, and especially, for those who believed they were redeemed by the grace of God to spend time wrestling with their sins so they could strive to be better and less judgmental of others. What a profound concept. Peter used to use the old confession from the 1928 Episcopal Book of Common Prayer during Lent. I don't know if you still do that now, and I'll be honest, as a good liberal UCC person, I hated it. It was so at odds with my theology. For those of you who aren't familiar with it is a good old-fashioned Calvinist confession among other things that includes the words like miserable offenders and quote, "There is no health in us."

So for one morning prayer, back when I was eps fellow the morning after Ash Wednesday, this very day I preached about the many reasons, for my disliking this prayer of confession. Thankfully, Peter was not there for that morning prayers, but he certainly heard about it and that was always one thing I appreciated about Peter. We didn't always see eye to eye about things, but he let me be me. He loved me and I treasured that love. But beyond any personal reasons Peter might have had for embracing Lent, as a pastor he knew that this season mattered and Peter was first and foremost a pastor. In our secular society there are so few things that mark true seasons. One day bleeds into another, before you know it, one year passes and another one arrives. When do we set aside seasons for particular purposes? When do we appreciate the rhythms and patterns of life?

There is this modernist conceit that America and indeed Harvard loves to celebrate, that everything is always onward and upward. We buy into the constant culture of improvement like good Pelagians. There's a good theological terms for all you nerds out there, but the Orthodox Christian tradition, one that Peter appreciated enshrines the importance of seasons. There are certain times when we should reflect on sin, other times when we should celebrate joy, still others when we should honor silence in darkness or focus on growth. We are humans. We are not redeemed by our own efforts, but by God's. We live in patterns and cycles. You can buy every self-help book on the planet, but we only evolve as people over time and with experience. The Orthodox Christian tradition knows this and therefore gives us the liturgical calendar.

Lent is a very rare opportunity for intentional reflection. We miss something important when we let it pass by without embracing it. And what we should do is reflect on spiritual matters. This is a time when you should take on something new, be it a discipline of reading the Bible or some other book. Perhaps you always wanted to try out meditation. Well, this is the season to start that. Come to morning prayers, that's certainly a worthwhile discipline. But don't let this time pass you by. Life is far too short for that. There are new experiences to have and the cycles of the seasons remind us of that. It breaks us from our complacency when we realize that some new fad won't transform us, but the cycle of the seasons might

just, and that's the first thing about Lent I want you to remember and it comes straight from the memory of Peter.

Embrace the season. This is an opportunity. Do not let it pass you by. The second thing about Lent that I would encourage you to embrace is a deep consideration of the nature of sin. I can't think of a less popular topic in our society today. No one likes to think about sin that our use of the word makes us shudder. But the reality is that we are all broken people. Not only do we do things we regret, that is virtually a tautology, we all harm others and ourselves in ways we regret at some time or another. But more than that, we all carry deep wounds within us. I'm a gay man and I came out at a time when homophobia was rampant. That left deep scars in my soul that I had to wrestle with. But there are other scars that we carry as well.

I have officiated many funerals and before them I meet with the family of the deceased. After we get through talking about how much we love the deceased, I have the opportunity to ask the family about the bad parts of the person who died. And let me tell you, that is a very revealing time. Everyone carries burdens from their families in one way or another. The expectations of society, the pressures to succeed, to make a mark. Lent is a time when we get to think deeply on these things. When we truly understand our own brokenness, we are far more compassionate towards others. That I would argue is a true root of compassion, reflecting on sin is a spiritual discipline. And this season is a season for spiritual disciplines.

The final thing that we should consider during Lent is death itself. For those of you who attended Ash Wednesday service yesterday, you had ashes placed on your forehead while the minister proclaimed, "Remember that you are dust and to dust you shall return." Our society is petrified by death. It marks an end, a final end, oblivion. Especially at Harvard, the prospect that our own greatness will end frightens us. To consider death, makes us appreciate the great gift that life is. It helps clarify our priorities in life, and it forces us to think about what actually matters, questions of meaning and purpose, the relationships that sustain us, and yes, the role of God herself in our lives.

So as the ghost of Peter looks down upon all of us, let us commit to the season of Lent, reflect on spiritual matters and take on something new. Think deeply about the broken places in your life, honestly and with courage. Seek healing that comes through faith. Whether it be your faith in God, in Jesus, or some of the faith that you hold dear. And consider death that which awaits us all. Even the Silicon Valley moguls who try so hard to defeat it.

When you do these things, I can promise you that the dawning of Easter will hit you in a whole new way. As the stone is rolled aside and the women stand as witnesses to that miracle, you'll be able to discover once again the continual power of that event. But you can only appreciate it when you have pondered the meaning of the cross, of death, of sin, and of our own failures. That is where you appreciate the value of resurrection and what truth veritas actually means. In the words of Harvard graduate James Russell Lowell, "Though the cause of evil prosper, yet tis Truth alone is strong. Though her portion be the scaffold and upon the throne be wrong. Yet that scaffold sways the future. And behind the dim unknown, standeth God within the shadows, keeping watch above his own."

Let's pray.

Lord Jesus Christ, who for our sake, drew to yourself the world's hate. Grant us courage to be vulnerable, grace to expose ourselves to the furies without, and the furies within. And in our frailty, send your holy angels to minister to us. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen. Amen.

Jonathan C. Page:

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.

Congregation:

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Courtney Godwin:

Please rise in body and in spirit and join in singing the hymn, He Leadeth Me, Oh Blessed Thought, number 224.

Congregation:

(singing)

Jonathan C. Page:

And now receive this benediction. The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you. The Lord lift up her countenance upon you and grant you peace. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.