

Elizabeth Propst:

Good morning, y'all.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Elizabeth Propst:

Welcome to Morning Prayers here in the Appleton Chapel. Our speaker this morning is Sarah Kariko, Associate of the Department of Organismic and Evolutionary Biology. Thanks for the patience with the slightly elevated noise level this morning. Tuesday mornings are hard for all of us, but everything's fine, under control, and let's get on with our service. Please rise as you're able and join in our responsive Psalm 139.

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.

Elizabeth Propst:

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

Congregation:

Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, You know it completely.

Elizabeth Propst:

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.

Elizabeth Propst:

Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence?

Congregation:

If I ascend to heaven, You are there. If I make my bed in Sheol, You are there.

Elizabeth Propst:

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 me fast.

Elizabeth Propst:

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

Congregation:

Even the darkness is not dark to you, the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to You.

Choir:

(Singing).

Sarah Kariko:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Sarah Kariko:

It's a joy to be with you here this morning. Last week, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released a sobering synthesis report about the tangled web of challenges facing us today. I often turn to beauty and wonder during these times. So this morning, I offer a reflection I'm calling, Bridges, Webs and Beyond: in Service of Better Caring for Our Interdependence, In Part to Spark Our Imaginations.

I study spiders. It's an unexpected outcome of my own Harvard education. I began my formal studies of them my first semester, first year, under the mentorship of the late Professor Herbert Levi. Before I go any further, I'd like to pause and acknowledge the land that we're gathered upon as the traditional territory of the Massachusett, and recognize that Indigenous peoples are safeguarding the remaining 80% of the biodiversity that sustains us all, although being less than 6% of global populations. And I want to celebrate the shift back to the Stony Brook Watershed, after last semester's tapping the Quabbin and Wachusett, when toxic levels of PFAS, toxic chemicals, forever chemicals, were found in Cambridge's water supply, combined with the supply chain issue with the filter. And especially, I want to acknowledge the plankton who are producing the oxygen powering every second breath I'll be taking this morning.

So, back to spiders. Spiders seemed like a narrow field, until I realized they touch nearly everything; from military to medical advances to fashion and food. They're critical to ecological balance. They've evolved over 400 million years into over 50,000 species, adapting to nearly every habitat on Earth during changing planetary conditions. They can do seemingly impossible things, like ballooning over mountain tops and skyscrapers, living underwater in silken diving bells of their own creation, creating silken staircases between worlds. Some give each other nuptial gifts and spin bridal veils. In studying the beauty and wonder of spiders, I've lived in a remote bush camp, working under a large tarp without walls in Madagascar, living among lemurs, thumb-size chameleons, terrestrial leeches, living amidst tree ferns and vines, amidst silken mists and orchids beyond imagination.

One of the things that happened by living in a place this teeming with life is that I could see the impact in my own actions in bold relief, just in what I crushed under my boots moving through the forest, the number of buckets of water we carried each day, and the amount of wood we burned to keep our team fed. This allowed me the possibility to pivot, and make adjustments in my daily life to decrease our deleterious impact in this sensitive environment, and to increase the beneficial role we could play. Back here, sometimes it can seem difficult to understand how things are connected, to be as aware of all the little creatures who are contributing behind the scenes of our daily lives, whether we recognize it or not; to be aware of the vibrational impact we have, especially at this time of year here on our pollinators, seeking their mates.

Orb-weaving spiders remind me how inextricably connected we are. Orb-weavers are the one who spin those wheel-shaped webs you might see shimmering with diamond dew in the morning. They remind me that impact anywhere on a web affects even seemingly distant parts. They stay connected to the center, in part to listen to the surrounding world to inform decisive action.

The first painting I want to draw your attention to this morning is a painting my spider mentor Herb made in the 1930s that his daughter, Frances, gifted to me. It's the bridge over the Bronx River. It's a gritty scene, made with loose, expressive strokes. You can see rooftops, a skyscraper, a moody sky, dense buildings, no trees or greenery are visible. It's unfinished. There's still raw canvas yellowing in the background. Painted in a palette of grays, white, a dash of crimson. This bridge over troubled waters was painted during a time when it was a polluted industrial corridor. But over the decades, with the efforts of many people, this place has become a story of regeneration. This past January, a pair of dolphins was seen, and the first beaver in over 200 years was spotted there, first time in New York City.

This painting makes me wonder, how can we span the divides, bridge the gaps, find common ground, better care for the air and waters we share? This bridge makes me think of Hyptiotes, the spider. It's the only other animal besides humans who makes a tool to amplify power. They use their body as a bridge to hold their pie-shaped web. They hold the web in their legs under tension, then release the web, flinging their own bodies out into space to ensnare a meal in the air. They do this without any venom. What structures can help us amplify our power to affect change that can ripple out in a beneficial way for ecological and societal systems together?

The second painting I want to talk about is The Peaceable Kingdom by the Quaker minister Edward Hicks from a hundred years earlier, in the 1830s. In it, you can see the leopard lying with the lamb, Native Americans and colonizers together. It's a scene that the minister painted at least 62 times, giving us an example of iteration, and perhaps his passion to manifest peace. We who are gathered here today in this space of grace, with its eight columns on each side, crowned as they are with carvings of the lion and the ram, the eagle and the man. How can we heal past harms and harmonize the relationships among us?

I'm reminded of some mighty females in the Rocky Mountains who find a nook in a rock to lay their eggs. I've observed them throughout the night, spinning their silken egg sacs. I've watched a female work from sunup to sundown as she gathers what she finds; pebbles, and ant parts, and spider molts, and half-rotten rubber. She carries stones, and logs, and snail shells, and cricket legs, purple blossoms and corkscrew seeds, crumpled leaves to build an intricate mound over her young. I'm inspired by the way they start where they are, with what they find around them, and silk them together to create these intricate mounds to protect future generations. What are we doing for future generations?

In closing, I want to propose another painting, one that we create together, a painting with the working title, Our Flourishing Future. We may not have silk, but we can draw from deep within upon our creativity and our capacity to collaborate. I imagine this painting helping us meet, and possibly exceed, the UN's 2030 sustainability goals, bringing us together to create a hopeful story, like the Bronx waterway. That we can do this by each contributing, like the mound-building spider, starting from where we are, with what we have around us, and drawing from deep within. When that lens of our interconnectedness starts coming into focus, it can open possibilities for seeing other connections, and for innovating new approaches to help us move differently together. So my hope lies here this morning with the possibilities of us; with inspiration for creative adaptation and resilience all around. We may find that we already have what we need to address past harms and create a flourishing future. That together, we can transform how we move across Earth, and increase the beneficial way our impact ripples out across the web of life.

Please join me in a moment of silent reflection or prayer.

Please rise and bow your spirit for the Lord's Prayer. 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, for ever and ever. Amen.

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

Sarah Kariko:

Please join in our closing hymn, Dear Mother God, number 204.

Congregation/Choir:

(Singing).

Sarah Kariko:

Christ has no hands in this world but your hands, and no voice in this world but your voice. May our hands and our voices do the work of justice and love today and all days. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.