

Harriet Lindman:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Harriet Lindman:

Welcome to Morning Prayers in Appleton Chapel. Our speaker this morning is Martha Whitehead, our university librarian. Welcome. Will you please rise in body or spirit for our responsive Psalm, number 48, found in your black psalter.

The Lord is great and much acclaimed in the city of our God, his holy mountain.

Congregation:

Fair-crested, joy of all the earth, Mount Zion, summit of Zaphon, city of the great king.

Harriet Lindman:

Through its citadels, God has made Himself known as a heaven.

Congregation:

See, the kings joined forces; they advanced together.

Harriet Lindman:

At the mere sight of it they were stunned, they were terrified, they panicked.

Congregation:

They were seized there with a trembling, like a woman in the throes of labor.

Harriet Lindman:

Let Mount Zion rejoice! Let the towns of Judah exult, because of Your judgments.

Congregation:

Walk around Zion, circle it; count its towers.

Harriet Lindman:

Take note of its ramparts; go through its citadels, that you may recount it to a future age.

Congregation:

For God, He is our God forever; He will lead us evermore.

Harriet Lindman:

You may be seated.

Choir:

(singing)

Martha Whitehead:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Martha Whitehead:

It's such a pleasure to be here with you today. After thinking for some time about what words to share this morning, and pondering the boundaries between sharing and oversharing, I decided to take this to a meta level, to muse about words themselves. More specifically, about the space between thoughts and words.

So I often start my day with a five senses meditation. This is where you sit quietly for even just a few minutes, noticing each sense. You smell the coffee, and I'm I told It's okay actually to treat coffee as a meditation. You taste the coffee, and then you hear the sounds around you, maybe the hum of the fridge, a car driving by, birds chirping. You feel the smooth, hard texture of the cup in one hand, and with the other, the soft softness of the blanket wrapped around you, keeping you warm.

Then you open your eyes and choose a shape in the room, perhaps all the circles. You choose a color, maybe find every shade of blue. And you look at shadows, and that's a whole mesmerizing practice. Observing the shadow that a shape makes like another object entirely.

And then as I do this, I notice the thoughts that float up from yesterday, or last night's dreams, or things I'm worried about in the day ahead. I watch them float up and I let them go, and I refocus on this moment, this sense here now. I put aside the to-do list for the moment, and I focus on the to be list.

So for me, this 15 minutes set aside for morning prayer is a similar kind of practice. The sublime voices of the choir, the visceral tones of the organ, the wise words. I've seen Morning Prayer described as a dedicated space for the Harvard community to gather, and to reflect daily upon our shared humanity. And I think of that both as a physical space and a space in time, because it's that space and time that we all need. We need it to practice awareness, to see beauty and feel awe in the ordinary.

As I was sitting here in late March, there was a moment, just a moment, it's happening right now, when the sunlight streaming through this window danced on a spiderweb on that candlestick. And we were listening to a talk about climate and all the creatures of the earth, and it was just a most incredible moment. So we need a space in time to cope with the everyday stresses of life. I've learned to notice my own agitation when I'm in full flight with a story of some old hurt, and how I can pull back and my heart slows, and the story becomes just something observed. So we practice this noticing of thoughts and we practice not being swept away by them. Our thoughts are just thoughts, they're not actions.

We need this kind of time to put a little space between thoughts, the thoughts we think, and the words we share, for words are actions. Words can be helpful, they can be harmful, they can spread love, and they can incite violence.

So I think about this a lot as a librarian. Libraries are a space, a physical space, a virtual space, an intellectual space, where we explore our thoughts, confirm or refute them with facts, synthesize them with other people's thoughts, and then express them in some way to someone. And we do that with considerable care.

I think about how this process of research and production of knowledge has sped up over time. Placed right in the heart of Widener Library is a Gutenberg Bible, the first major work printed in Europe with movable metal type in the middle of the 15th century. Now, this method of transmitting words was considerably faster than the laborious process of scribes writing each book by hand. But of course, this shift to typography was just a precursor to the speed we have today, where we can share a thought with the world in a nanosecond. But the library asks you to pause that nanosecond, to notice the world around you, to be immersed in it, and to think about what you want to contribute to it. Like this morning, prayer space, libraries are a place for reflection on our shared humanity.

One of my favorite moments of the day is stepping out of the front doors of Widener Library and pausing a moment to look at Memorial Church. The imposing mass of Widener declares that it's a center of knowledge, but it's the slender, soaring, glinting spire of Memorial Church that beckons people from afar. Together, these two buildings form a great open air theater, Tercentenary Theater, where each Spring we celebrate the hearts and minds of our students. Not their thoughts, but their words and their actions.

So I think that the space between thoughts and words is best filled with people. People represented in the collections of our libraries. People who come to our libraries, often to be alone together. People who gather in Morning Prayer, to share words carefully considered.

Harriet Lindman:

For all who are able, please rise for prayer. Let us pray. Eternal God, in whom we live, move, breathe, and have our being, accept, oh Lord, our thanks and praise for all that you have done for us. We thank you for the splendor of the whole creation, for the beauty of this world, for the wonder of life, and for the mystery of love. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

Harriet Lindman:

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

Harriet Lindman:

Please join in singing our concluding hymn, We Know That Christ Is Raised, hymn number 166, in your crimson Harvard hymnal.

Congregation/Choir:
(singing)

Harriet Lindman:

As we go into this day, I hope that you can find time, you can find space in time, to cope with the everyday stresses of life. And may you remember in that time that our thoughts are just our thoughts, but our words are actions. And let us use our words and our actions to do God's will, God's justice, and God's love. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.