

Harriet Lindman:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning. Good morning.

Harriet Lindman:

Welcome to Morning Prayers here at Appleton Chapel. Our speaker this morning will be Judah Lampkin, choral fellow here at Morning Prayers, and Senior at the college. Welcome. Please rise in body or in spirit, for a responsive reading of Psalm 61, found in your black psaltar.

Hear my cry, O God, attend unto my prayer.

Congregation:

From the end of the earth will I cry unto thee. When my heart is overwhelmed, lead me to the rock that is higher than I.

Harriet Lindman:

For thou hast been a shelter for me, and a strong tower from the enemy.

Congregation:

I will abide in thy tabernacle for ever. I will trust in the covert of thy wings.

Harriet Lindman:

For thou, O God, hast heard my vows. Thou hast given me the heritage of those that fear thy name.

Congregation:

Thou wilt prolong the king's life, and his years as many generations.

Harriet Lindman:

He shall abide before God forever. Oh, prepare mercy and truth, which may preserve him.

Congregation:

So will I sing praise unto thy name for ever, that I may daily perform my vows.

Choir:

(Singing)

Judah Lampkin:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Judah Lampkin:

I'd like to speak about death. I know it's a very chipper topic for a Thursday morning. About my death, specifically. I don't know anything really about your death, because I haven't lived through it, but I've lived through mine many times and in many ways. There are quite a lot of ways to die after all. And many of them, it turns out, are not quite as fatal as they're advertised to be. What do I mean by that exactly?

Well, here's an interesting story, a parable of sorts. Once upon a time, I was lucky enough to be taken on a snorkeling expedition off the coast of Puerto Rico. Having never been snorkeling, nor swimming out in the open ocean before, I figured it would be a wonderful idea to daydream during all the portions of the trip where they were explaining the basics of snorkeling. I didn't miss anything important, except for a few details, like how to breathe through the little snorkeling tube, and also, how to use the little flippers that they put on your feet. And I also thought it would be fun to jump into the ocean without a life jacket, and then to immediately swim as far away from the boat as humanly possible. This was a brilliant plan, I know. And I do go to Harvard, I should like to remind you. But it was only after having done this quite some distance away from the boats, that I came to the realization that I had no idea what I was doing.

My goggles were not properly secured to my face. So when I tried to breathe through the little tube, I just got a mouth full of water and yeah. "All right.", I thought, "That's probably not good. Maybe I should swim back to the boat." But there was a current, and it was quite strong, and I'm not the strongest swimmer, and it was pushing me farther and farther away from the boat, and I was getting very tired. And you can probably see where this is going.

So I struggled for a while, and then a thought came to my head clear as day. It was like the ringing of a bell. It said, you are going to die. Period, end of the sentence, declamatory, certainty. And then after that, there was just an eerie silence, and it just sort of settled over the moment, and there was just the gentle hissing of the sea. And it was a really strange moment, and I thought, "Man, this is real. I'm actually dying."

And I struggled for a bit longer until my legs gave out, and then I sank below the waves. And that was that. There was nothing I could do. That was the end. Well, sort of. I mean obviously, I lived, right? There were several people who were swimming nearby, and they saw me go under, and they fished me out of the ocean like a little wet dog, and I was brought back to the boat. And I remember being so surprised by the fact that I was still alive. I had come so close to death, that I had sort of resigned myself to the idea that I was already dead. And I had no idea what to do with myself now that I was back, breathing air instead of water, feeling the warmth of the sun as I had never felt it before. I stayed in that moment for a long time, just sitting there on the boat, shivering and marveling at the whole thing. And in some ways, I'm still there in that moment out at sea. So ends my parable.

What's the moral of the story? Well, I don't know. That's one way to die, and to tell the tale about it afterwards, but that sort of death is actually not really the kind of thing I'm talking about today. There are other ways to die, actually, subtler ways. The ocean is by no means the only abyss that can swallow you up. The course of my life has brought me to the brink many times. I've always been a seeker, always questioning, always searching. Searching for what exactly? I think, for that thing that would make me whole. Searching for the answer that would sort of justify my place in the world.

And I have grieved in my seeking. I dig and I dig, retreating deep inside myself, sacrificing everything I have to the pursuit, until there is nothing left. I do this, and every time the result is the same. There are no answers at the end of this path. There is nothing at the end of this path, save despair. It's the kind of despair that makes you question the value of life itself. That's the kind of death I'm talking about. It's the

abyss, the dark, the wasteland, the paths there are many. One need not be a seeker to find one's self confronted with this kind of despair, life will thrust it upon you. Your sense of self will be shattered, your life will come apart at the seams. You will have nothing left. You will know the dark, and you will die.

I have spent so much of my life in that place, grieving, questioning. I've been homeless. I have wandered. I've lied, I have cheated. I have been sick at heart, even unto death. I've woken up at the very bottom of things, in places where the light of the sun can neither be nor remembered. But there, in the midst of the darkness, when I have surrendered myself to death, abandoned the very idea that I was ever fit to live in the first place, a miraculous thing happens. I hear a voice calling my name. It always calls for me. Always, always. No matter how far I wander. It's the voice of a mother, and this is what it says. Even now, shalt be a light to burn a while on the benighted earth. Even you are loved. Even you, wretched, and lost, and lowly, and sickly thing that you are. Or, I have always been with you even in the darkness.

Perhaps I've lost you at this point, and that's fair. Whose voice is this? What am I talking about? Where does any of this come from? What I said doesn't really make any sense, or at least, it doesn't follow from anything I've said previously. But it's true. It's true. How fiercely the light shines when all else is dark. How loud the call when all is quiet. It cannot be denied, it cannot not be refused. And I can't explain what it means, but I felt it. I felt it more viscerally than anything else.

At our lowest points, in these moments passed in death's womb, we are forced to accept the truth of the most fundamental of life's mysteries, which is as follows. We are wretched and yet we are loved. We are destined to die, and yet we live. We here together in this moment, sharing this story. And in this story, in the weeping, in the sighing, in the dying, I'm brought to my knees. I'm made to rejoice, or I have seen a kind of beauty that defies my understanding. I've been allowed to burn a while in this wearing world of ours, and that is miraculous.

I thank you for your attention this morning. I have not deserved it. I've done my best to try to explain what I mean. I have not succeeded, but I have tried. And I will leave you where we began.

[foreign language 00:13:50]. If I flee from you, you come to me. If I lose myself, so do I find you, oh goodness, above being. Thank you.

Congregation:

Thank you.

Harriet Lindman:

Please rise in body or in spirit for prayer.

Mother God, let us hear you in the places beyond our comprehension. Open us to the wonder of each fragile breath, and strengthen us to meet one another, even in what seems like an end. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

Harriet Lindman:

And then now, we pray as 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 the hymn, Love's Redeeming Work is Done, number 167.

Congregation/Choir:
(singing)

Harriet Lindman:

And now, may the Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make her face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. The Lord lift up her countenance upon you, and give you peace. Go in peace. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.