

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Welcome to the Appleton Chapel here in the Memorial Church for our daily service of morning prayers. I invite you, please, to rise and join in saying our responsorial Psalm, which is number 62 in your black psalter.

For God alone, my soul waits in silence, from Him comes my salvation.

Congregation:

He only is my rock and my salvation, my fortress, I shall not be greatly moved.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

For God alone, my soul waits in silence. For my hope is from Him.

Congregation:

He only is my rock and my salvation, my fortress, I shall not be shaken.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

On God rests my deliverance and my honor, my mighty rock. My refuge is God.

Congregation:

Trust in him at all times, you people. Pour out your hearts to Him, God is a refuge for us.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Men of low estate are but a breath, men of high estate are a delusion. In the balances they go up, they are together lighter than a breath.

Congregation:

[inaudible 00:03:47] in extortion, set no vain hopes on robbery. If riches increase, do not set your heart on them.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Once God has spoken, twice have I heard this, that power belongs to God.

Congregation:

And that to you, O Lord, belongs steadfast love, for Thou [inaudible 00:04:10] a man according to his work.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

This is a reading from the 10th chapter of the Gospel of John beginning at the 11th verse.

"Jesus said, 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me just as the Father knows me and I know the Father and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also and they will listen to my voice, so there will be one flock, one shepherd.'" Here ends the lesson.

Today is the feast day of early third century Saint Cyprian of Carthage. Tomorrow is the feast of the Holy Cross, otherwise known as Roodmas or Crouchmas, and so in addition to being Cyprian's day, it is also Crouchmas Eve. That's a real thing.

Cyprian was born around the year 200 to Pagan Berbers. He was a prominent trial lawyer in North Africa, a teacher of rhetoric. He became a Christian in the year 246 and then made Bishop of Carthage in 248, a quick ascent. In the year 249, a plague spread throughout the empire, which led to food shortages due to lack of laborers and a near collapse of the Roman army toward the end of the century. It lasted for several decades and led to something which is known as the Crisis of the Third Century in the Roman Empire. It's a crisis that interestingly enough by historical chance was only really resolved by the events surrounding the Feast of the Holy Cross. If you want to know about that, I'll be preaching about the Feast of the Holy Cross tonight at communion here in the chapel, shortly after 5:00 PM.

The plague came and the Emperor Decius, to appease the gods, required sacrifice. He exempted people who practiced the religion of Israel, but a persecution became of Christians who refused to sacrifice and it was especially severe in Carthage. Cyprian, who was bishop, fled.

When things cooled off he returned to Carthage and there was a schism in the church at Carthage. Some blamed him for fleeing using the verses that we began this with, "The good shepherd does not leave the sheep," but he defended himself citing the Holy Family's flight from persecution. The argument though was over what to do with the people who had stayed and offered sacrifice. Should they be allowed back into the church?

Some said, "Sure, come on back with no penance whatsoever." Others said, "Never. Under no circumstances would they be allowed back in the church." Cyprian took a middle path advocating mercy as long as folks repented and showed penance.

The plague surged again around the year 256 and this time Cyprian stayed and he offered medical care and nursing to the sick in Carthage regardless of their faith, but because many Christians did not offer sacrifice, the new emperor, Valerian, blamed them for their failure to offer sacrifice, blamed the plague upon them and began another persecution. This time, Cyprian did not flee. He was banished for a while, then brought back for house arrest, and then he was brought before the Imperial Court, sentenced to death. They pleaded with him to relent and just offer sacrifice and he said, "No," and they executed him.

I think what's useful for us in Cyprian and especially because of the circumstances of his fleeing persecution once and staying later, is how he might help us think about suffering and the meaning of suffering. We have a problem with this in Christianity, which I've spoken about before. We tend to valorize and glorify suffering for its own sake as if it were a good in itself, and I don't think that's what it is. I think Cyprian was navigating this problem, and I think he was probably right to flee when he fled. I think his approach to those who had offered sacrifice was merciful, and again, a sign that he didn't have this sort of valorization of sacrifice.

But the question I want to ask is why didn't he flee? If he fled the first time, why didn't he flee the second time? I think it's because this time he was doing work that he could not flee. When the second

plague came, he opened a hospital and began caring for sick people, caring for plague victims. He cared for them even though he knew many of them would die. He cared for them, not because he thought he could save them all, he cared for them because they deserved care and this was not work that he was willing to walk away from. In other words, in pursuit of alleviating suffering, he braved suffering. His virtue wasn't that he suffered. His virtue was courage. He refused to let the outcome of his struggle determine the value of that struggle.

I think this is the challenge of Christian disciple, really, and also of Christian witness. The task of Christian witness, I think, is not to convince the world of a happy ending that is difficult both for us and for others to see. It's to face problems we believe we may not be able to solve, but to know that struggling to solve them is itself a worthy fight.

We face a lot of problems, and I have to be honest, I'm pessimistic about many of them, the prospects for justice in this country, the prospects for democracy in this country, the future, or our climate future. I do get pessimistic, especially when I anticipate what those outcomes might be. But Cyprian tells us that our struggle and our work is not based upon what we predict to be the outcomes, but the value of that for which we struggle. In Cyprian's example and in his memory, I pray, we pray this day for courage. Please rise for the prayers.

The Lord be with you.

Congregation:

And also with you.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Let us pray. Almighty God who gave to your servant Cyprian boldness to confess the name of our savior Jesus Christ before the rulers of this world and courage to die for his faith, grant that we may always be ready to give a reason for the hope that is in us, for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God forever and ever. Amen.

Now let us pray the words Jesus taught us, saying, "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 to this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not to temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever, amen."

Please join in singing our concluding hymn number 260.

We are hosting our first MemCafé gathering this morning, so please join us in the undercroft for refreshments after this service.

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you now and always. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

The Rev. Matthew Potts:

Let us bless the Lord God.

Congregation:

This transcript was exported on Sep 13, 2023 - view latest version [here](#).

Thanks be to God.