

Stephanie Grossano:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Stephanie Grossano:

Welcome to Morning Prayers at Appleton Chapel. My name is Stephanie Bersano, and I'm one of the seminarians this year. Our speaker this morning will be Naomi Washington-Leapheart. She's the Religion and Public Life Fellow at Harvard Divinity School, and the Director of Strategic Partnerships for Political Research Associates.

We'll begin today with a responsive reading from the Black Appleton Psalter book. Please rise, in body or spirit, as we read Psalm 65, found on page 33.

You are to be praised, O God, in Zion; to you shall vows be performed in Jerusalem.

Congregation:

To you that hear prayer shall all flesh come, because of their transgressions.

Stephanie Grossano:

Our sins are stronger than we are, but you will blot them out.

Congregation:

Happy are they whom you choose and draw to your courts to dwell there. They will be satisfied by the beauty of your house, by the holiness of your temple.

Stephanie Grossano:

Awesome things will you show us in your righteousness, O God of our salvation, O hope of all the ends of the earth and of the seas that are far away.

Congregation:

You make fast the mountains by your power; they are girded about with might.

Stephanie Grossano:

You still the roaring seas, the roaring of their waves, and the clamor of the peoples.

Congregation:

You drench the furrows and smooth out the ridges; with heavy rain you soften the ground and bless its increase.

Stephanie Grossano:

You crown the year with your goodness, and your paths overflow with plenty.

Congregation:

May the fields of the wilderness be rich for grazing, and the hills be clothed with joy.

Stephanie Grossano:

Please be seated.

(singing)

Naomi Washington-Leapheart:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Naomi Washington-Leapheart:

A reading from First Kings, the 19th chapter.

"When Ahab arrived in Jezreel, he told Jezebel about everything that had taken place. He told her how Elijah had executed all of the prophets of Baal with a sword, and she became furious. Jezebel sent an urgent message to Elijah. May the Gods kill me and worse, if I haven't killed you the way you killed their priests by this time tomorrow. Your end is near, Elijah.

"Terrified, Elijah ran quickly for his life. He traveled the length of Israel in one day and finally arrived at Beersheba, the southern point of God's territory, which is in Judah. When he arrived, he instructed his servant to remain there while he sought solitude. He journeyed into the desert for one day and then decided to rest beneath the limbs of a broom tree. There he prayed that his life would be over quickly and that he could die there beneath the tree.

"He said, 'I'm finished, Eternal one. Please end my life here and now, even though I have failed, and I know better than my ancestors.'

"Elijah then laid himself down under the broom tree and entered into a deep sleep. While he was sleeping, a heavenly messenger. While he was sleeping a heavenly messenger came to him and gave him instructions. 'Get up and eat.'

"Elijah looked and found a bread cake sitting over charcoal near his head. There was also a jar of water. And he ate the food and drank the water, and then he laid back down.

"Often the only thing growing in the desert, the small broom tree has enough substance to save Elijah." A parenthetical commentary note.

"The Eternal's messenger visited him again, touched him, gave him instructions. 'Get up and eat. Your journey ahead is great and you need plenty of nourishment.'

"So Elijah got up and ate the food and drank the water. His body felt strong again, and he journeyed for 40 days and 40 more nights. He got to Horeb, and he walked into a cave and rested for the night. And the Eternal one said to him, 'Why are you here, Elijah? What is it that you desire?'

"Elijah said, 'Well, as you know, all my passion has been devoted to the Eternal one, the God of heavenly armies. The Israelites have abandoned your covenant with them, they've torn down every single one of your altars, they've executed by the sword all those who prophesy in your name. And I am the last remaining prophet, and they now seek to execute me as well.'

"The Eternal one said, 'Leave here and go stand on the mountain side in my presence.'"

"The Eternal passed by Elijah. The mighty wind separated the mountains and crumbled every stone before the Eternal. This was not a divine wind, for the Eternal was not in the wind. After the wind passed through, an earthquake shook the earth. But this was not a divine quake, for the Eternal was not in the earthquake. After the earthquake was over, there was a fire. But this was not a divine fire, the Eternal was not within the fire.

"After the fire died out, there was nothing but the sound of a calm breeze. And through this breeze, a gentle, quiet voice entered into Elijah's ears. He covered his face with his cloak and went to the mouth of the cave, and suddenly Elijah was surprised." Here ends the biblical reading.

Grief darkened my heart. Everything on which I set my gaze was death. My hometown became a torture to me. My father's house, a strange world of unhappiness. All that I had shared with him was without him transformed into a cool torment. My eyes looked for him everywhere, and he was not there. I hated everything, because it did not have him. Nor could they tell me, "Look, he's on the way.", as used to be the case when he was alive and absent from me. I had become to myself a vast problem and I questioned my soul, "Why are you sad? And why are you very distressed?" But my soul did not know what reply to give. Only tears were sweet to me. And in my soul's delights, weeping had replaced my friend.

Saint Augustine of Hippo wrote these words after his close friend died. I teach theology at Villanova University where the friendly ghost of Augustine haunts each hallway, every classroom, most syllabi. And in my eight years there, I have learned more than I ever thought I would know about him. His theological conclusions, his philosophical musings, his Africanness. And though there are centuries of time and miles of culture between us, of all the things that he wrote, this little snippet, this little passage and confessions is the one that vibrates in my ears, and in my heart, and in my life.

See, in this season of my life, the one I'm living right now today, I must confess, I mostly cannot stand to hear songs and sermons about miracles and signs and wonders. Lazarus was raised from the dead, but he died first, y'all. They had already had his funeral. Yes, the hemorrhaging woman finally got the healing that was apparently sewn into the hymn of Jesus's robe, but she couldn't get 12 years of her life back. She was healed but still destitute, because she had spent all that she had before she met Jesus that day. She was healed, but still a woman in a world that is okay with women suffering.

Now these days, I relish in the tormented witness. The one that gives voice to the agony, and the grief, and the rage, that accompany human existence. And a life of faith. I wish I could say to you this morning that the joy of the Lord has always been my strength, and always will be my strength. I wish I could say that my weeping ceases by the dawn of every morning. But every day with Jesus has not been sweeter than the day before. No.

Stubborn bleakness is what follows me, trampling over goodness and mercy. Like Elijah on the run, I feel daily, the terror of being found out, being exposed, being caught. I feel the pressure of the prophetic tasks to which I am called, from which I cannot escape, for which I feel unprepared and unqualified. Like Augustine in his grief, sometimes I question my own soul, and she is bereft too. We are both surviving on tears. The truth is, I'm tired. I'm tired of being chased by the threat of loss. I'm tired of being stuck in the madness of other people's expectations. I'm tired of being controlled by my own trauma and my own shame.

Maybe you know what it's like to be tired. To be secret friends with sorrow. Maybe you know what it's like to be haunted by your own imagination. Is this enough? Am I enough? Could I do better? Am I a disappointment? Will this discontent persist? Will people walk away from me? Does anybody see me? Does anybody know me? I mean, really?

Maybe you know what it's like to bury your fragilities under your busyness, under your schedule. Maybe your throat has been burned by the bitter pills you've had to swallow over and over again. Maybe you know what it's like to hide in plain view of the people closest to you, the people you live with, the people you study with, the people you work with. Maybe you know what it's like to be existentially afraid. To have a few dollars in your pocket, but be poor in spirit. To be empty, even as you fill other people's cups to overflowing. Maybe you know what it's like, to actually know what your heart desires, but your own satisfaction feels too costly, too selfish, too unfamiliar.

Maybe you know what it's like to change your address to 123 Broom Tree Street. Maybe you've made your bed under the only shade you could find in the desert of your life, and you've asked God, "Why won't you just let me be?" I'll just work from home, from under this tree, until life decides to let me go, that I'm no longer worth its attention.

Maybe it is just me, but I venture to guess not. And it's a strange consolation to me, as I stand before you, mired even right now in my own persistent darkness. It's a consolation to me that Elijah isn't simply ripped from the valley of his discontent. His problems don't go away. His sadness remains. His agony remains. His fear remains. His loneliness remains. His existential dread remains. The only miracle here, is in the mundanity of a meal. The relief is bread and water, a breeze, a whisper. The King James Bible says, "A still small voice."

Even the ordinary, especially the ordinary, can give us what we need to take the next breath, the next step. I just came by this morning, in the midst of the fog of my own life to say, that when the work, when the success, when the study, when the relationships, when the money, when all of the significant stuff ceases to fulfill, try the ordinary. Try whispering to yourself with the tenderness you deserve. I am still healing. And that's good enough. Nothing more is required.

I know you got deadlines. I know you got stuff to do, but cook yourself something. And give yourself permission to taste it, to savor it. To shake your head and wonder at this body, that carries you still. After all of this life that you've lived, all of the things you've been through, eat. And be surprised. Be surprised, and knew that you can still find the holy somehow, and the holy can still find you.

Lucille Clifton taught us to proclaim this good news, refined by the shade of the broom tree. Won't you celebrate with me, that every day something has tried to kill me and has failed? Thanks be to God. Amen.

Stephanie Grossano:

Please rise, in body or spirit, and let us pray.

Loving God, may you remember this day that you are with us, in our agony, in our grief, in our rage, in our weariness. And may we know that we can find you in the transcendent, but also in the ordinary and mundane parts of life. Let us celebrate that you have allowed us to still be here. And together, let us pray as Jesus taught us.

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

Stephanie Grossano:

And let us sing hymn 42, found in your Crimson Harvard hymnal.

(singing)

As we go into this day, let us remember, in the goodness of God, you are born into this world. By the grace of God, you have been kept all the day long, even unto this hour. And by the love of God, you are being made whole. Go in peace.