

Stef Grossano:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Stef Grossano:

And welcome to Morning Prayers at Appleton Chapel. This morning, our speaker will be Reverend Kevin Kitrell Ross, a friend and colleague who graduated from the MRLP program last year, and who's the lead minister at Unity Sacramento. Today's service will begin with a responsive reading from the black Appleton psalter book. Please rise, in body or spirit, as we read Psalm 139, found on page 70. "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."

Stef Grossano:

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

Congregation:

"Even before a word is upon my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely."

Stef Grossano:

"You hem me in, behind and before, and you lay your hand upon me."

Congregation:

"Such knowledge is too wonderful for me. It is so high, that I cannot attain it."

Stef Grossano:

"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."

Stef Grossano:

"If I take the wings of the morning, and settle at the farthest limits of the sea..."

Congregation:

"... even there, your hand shall be, and your right hand shall hold me fast."

Stef Grossano:

"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."

Stef Grossano:

Please be seated.

Choir:

(Singing).

Kevin Kitrell Ross:

This morning's text-

Speaker 5:

Good morning.

Kevin Kitrell Ross:

... is an Afro hermeneutic drawn from the words of The Hill We Climb. "Somehow, we've weathered and witnessed a nation that isn't broken, but simply unfinished. We the successors of a country and a time where a skinny Black girl descended from slaves and raised by a single mother can dream of becoming president." Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Kevin Kitrell Ross:

On January 14th, 2021, at 9:16 PM, sitting in my email inbox, was a message from a former board of trustee member of Unity of Sacramento, the church where I serve as the senior minister. This person also happens to be the grandmother of a then recent Harvard College graduate. She was seeking the prayers and blessings of her pastor and her community, and the message read, in part, thusly. Quote:

"I am proud to inform you that my granddaughter, Amanda Gorman, will present an inaugural poem at the opening ceremony of the inauguration of President Biden and Vice President Harris. She is the fifth inaugural poet in the tradition started with Robert Frost's presentation at President John F. Kennedy's inauguration in 1961. She is the third woman, and follows her hero, Maya Angelou, as the second Black woman to hold this honor. Not yet 23 years of age, Amanda is the youngest inaugural poet. Her voice of reason, unity, love, and hope is historic, and so needed for our country at this time. Please keep Amanda in your prayers." End quote.

This prayer request came from Bertha Gorman, the grandmother of Amanda Gorman, just days before she was to light up the world with her inaugural poem, The Hill We Climb. And while she was confident in Amanda's gifts and skills, and the shining moment that she would undoubtedly have, she was also aware that the heights that her granddaughter was ascending to would need more than talent and skill to thrive in such rarefied, and sometimes dangerous, atmosphere. And so at 9:16 PM on a Thursday night, in keeping with the tradition of generations of her foremothers, she not only prayed, but with six words, she made a bold request of me. "Please keep Amanda in your-" What about it? "Prayers."

Congregation:

Prayers.

Kevin Kitrell Ross:

And here on this 23rd day of September, 2023, the eve of yet another historic inauguration moment for another esteemed Black alumni of this 368-year-old institution, we have crammed into these ancient wooden pews in the Appleton Chapel at the center of campus, with a spirit of anticipation and anxiety. We're here because we recognize the unprecedented nature of this moment in Harvard's history, but we're also here because we want this moment to be more than the change of complexion for our leadership, but a substantive change in the direction of this institution. We're here in high celebration, because we are aware that our new sister president has great promise with her spirit of excellence, innovation, and impact, and we believe it can have a profound effect on our dear Harvard.

But we're also here because we are aware that she enters office at one of the most embattled times for a college president in human history. And for all of her sober optimism, years of experience, and deep commitment to be of service, it will take more than this for her to thrive at this rarefied, and sometimes dangerous, atmosphere. As Dr. Johnnetta Cole, the first African-American woman president of Spelman College, has said, quote, "Faced with what seems like an impossible task, a group of folks will do well to remember the African proverb, when spiders unite, they can tie up a lion." End quote.

And that's where I come in. I am here because I need a few folks to spin some spiderwebs of prayer, so that we can tie up any oppositional lions to our incoming sister president. I'm here because I can hear, from the ancestral balconies, a message from President Gay's late mother, Claudette Gay, that not days ago in this very spot she spoke of, with great endearment. With my prophetic imagination, I can hear her mother saying, "Dear Harvard community, I am proud to inform you that my daughter, Claudine Gay, will be installed as the 30th president of Harvard University. She is the second female to be installed in this position, and the first Black to hold this post in the institution's 368-year history. Just barely 53 years of age, her vision of academic excellence and equity, and her humble spirit of service, is historic, and so needed for our country at this time. Please keep Claudine in your..."

Congregation:

Prayers.

Kevin Kitrell Ross:

And while tomorrow's festivities will commemorate what we all hope and dream will be a thrilling, and reparative, and restorative new chapter in Harvard's history, long after the confetti has been swept up, and the band has stopped playing, the realities and the weight of the giant shoes that our new sister president must fill will be what occupies her days. And it is for this reason that I ask you to search yourselves now, because I know you're all wondering what can you do to help? There, you've got it. Please keep our sister president in your prayers.

And so let's begin this praying business right now. Let us pray. God of glory, Lord of light, crown our leader with insight. Bless the working of her hands, surround her with devoted friends. Dye her heart in crimson pride, guide her footsteps as she strides. Give her strength to bear her cross, fill her words with [Latin 00:16:27]. Shine your light upon her way, O dear God, bless Claudine Gay. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

Stef Grossano:

Please rise, in body or spirit, as we continue in the spirit of prayer, and together let us pray as Jesus taught us. "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."

Stef Grossano:

And let us sing hymn 194 in your crimson Harvard hymnal.

Congregation:

(Singing).

Stef Grossano:

Before we depart, I have one announcement. As Rev Kev has been referencing, tomorrow morning is the inauguration of President Claudine Gay, which means that Harvard Yard will be closed to non-ID holders until 8:00 PM. Let us pray. As we go into this day, good and gracious God, let us remember that in your goodness, we were born into this world. By your grace, O God, you have kept us all the day long, even unto this hour. And by your love, O God, we are being made whole. Go in peace.

Speaker 5:

[inaudible 00:21:17].