

Harriet Lindeman:

(Music).

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

Harriet Lindeman:

And welcome to Morning Prayers, here at Appleton Chapel. Our speaker this morning will be James Geary, Professor of Public Policy at Harvard Kennedy School. Welcome. Please rise in body or in spirit for responsive reading of Psalm 23, found in your black Psalter.

The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.

Congregation:

Me maketh me to lie down in green pastures. He leadeth me beside the still waters.

Harriet Lindeman:

He restoreth my soul. He leadeth me in straight paths for his name's sake.

Congregation:

Yeah, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.

Harriet Lindeman:

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies. Thou has anointed my head with oil, my cup running over.

Congregation:

Surely, goodness and mercy shall follow me all days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord, forever.

James Geary:

(Singing).

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good morning.

James Geary:

Thank you for rising in body and spirit, to be here this morning.

My wife, Linda and I, we moved this past summer from the big old beautiful house that we have been living in for the past 10 years, to a much smaller, slightly less old, definitely not as beautiful, apartment.

Our kids are out on their own, and we thought this was the right time for some personal and professional change. So, I stepped down from my job, and we decided to shake things up by moving to a part of Boston we hardly knew.

In the midst of the move, standing in my study among shoulder-high stacks of book boxes, surrounded by barren walls, punctuated by the nail holes where my favorite artworks recently hung, I had a moment of doubt, apprehension, and borderline panic, the feeling you have after committing to a dramatic course of action that is, you now suddenly realize, too late to reverse, "My God, what have I done?"

"Why?," I thought to myself, "were we leaving this big, old, beautiful house we love so much. Why were we moving to a part of Boston we had only visited twice, both times to look at the much smaller, slightly less old, definitely not as beautiful, apartment we live in now. And why was I stepping down from my job at a time of such economic, political, and climate uncertainty?"

Then, I thought of an aphorism from Outlandish Proverbs, a compilation of English sayings published in 1651 by the poet and priest, George Herbert. "After the house is finished, leave it." I've been obsessed by aphorisms, short, witty, philosophical sayings, since I was eight years old. And I've been collecting them all my life. The aphorism is the oldest written art form on the planet, invented in ancient time, in Egypt, some 5,000 years ago. And we still encounter aphorisms every day, emblazoned on t-shirts, coffee mugs, careening across social media. Aphorisms are, for me, sacred scripture, just the thing to get you through a rough day at the office or a dark night of the soul.

I recommend this one, by French artist, Jean Cocteau, as a helpful morning meditation. "Mirrors would do well to reflect a little longer before sending back images." And this one, by the Episcopal Bishop of Chicago, Gerald Burrow, the very first aphorism I remember reading when I was eight years old. "The difference between a rut and a grave is the death."

But this George Herbert aphorism always bothered me. I didn't get it. It seemed wrongheaded, so completely the opposite of what you should do. After the house is finished, live in it. And Herbert was a clergyman, too, no doubt dropping this bit of really bad advice into his sermons. But standing there in the midst of our move, with all my stuff in boxes, in what soon would not be my study anymore, I saw a different side to this saying. "We house our identities, our ambitions, ourselves, in so many different places, in jobs, on titles, bachelor's degrees, master's theses, doctoral dissertations, in social, professional, and physical spaces. We work hard to build careers, networks, portfolios. And these are important accomplishments that should be celebrated.

What I think George Herbert is trying to tell me, though, is that these things are milestones along a path, rather than final destinations in themselves, that once you've completed some important task, look for another important task to complete. It's time to build something new. This is, I think, why Linda and I moved. We had completed one important task as parents. We had raised our kids, provided a roof over their heads and foundations for their futures. Our kids are finished with our house, so they left it. Time for us all to build something new.

This morning, we have all come here to this big old, beautiful house just as people have been coming here for some 400 years. Soon, this service will end. And when we're finished, we will leave this house, not empty-handed, I hope, but with a piece of what brought us together in the first place, comfort, community, contemplation, something that might come in handy later. After the house is finished, leave it. Home is a place you take with you.

Harriet Lindeman:

Please rise, in body or in spirit, for prayer.

Creator God, we come together today with hearts that may be heavy, bodies that may be tired, with uncertainty and anxiety about all that is unknown. Be with us in finding hope and meeting this day with open hearts and minds, accepting the new bits of wisdom that emerge along the way. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

Harriet Lindeman:

And now, let us pray the Lord's prayer 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 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.

And now, let us sing the hymn, God is My Strong Salvation, Number 278.

Congregation:

(Singing).

Harriet Lindeman:

As we prepare to leave this place, the peace of God be in your hearts, the love of God be in your hands, the joy of God be in your soul. Go in peace. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.