

Speaker 1:

Good morning.

Congregation:

Good Morning.

Speaker 1:

Welcome to Morning Prayers here in the Appleton Chapel on Good Friday 2024. We are blessed to have as our speaker this morning, the Reverend Carrie Ballenger, the Lutheran Pastor here at Harvard University, and the Harvard Square Chaplain. Please rise, in body or in spirit, for our responsive psalm, which is number 38 in your black psalter.

O Lord, do not punish me in wrath; do not chastise me in fury.

Congregation:

For Your arrows have struck me; Your blows have fallen upon me.

Speaker 1:

There is no soundness in my flesh because of Your rage, no wholeness in my bones because of my sin.

Congregation:

For my iniquities have overwhelmed me; they are like a heavy burden, more than I can bear.

Speaker 1:

My mind reels; my strength fails me; my eyes too have lost their luster.

Congregation:

My friends and companions stand back from my affliction; my kinsmen stand far off.

Speaker 1:

Those who seek my life lay traps; those who wish me harm speak malice; they utter deceit all the time.

Congregation:

But I am like a deaf man, unhearing, like a dumb man who cannot speak up.

Speaker 1:

Do not abandon me, O Lord; my God, be not far from me.

Congregation:

Hasten to my aid, O Lord, my deliverance.

(singing)

Reverend Carrie Ballenger:

Merciful God, your son was lifted up on the cross to draw all people to Himself. Now, let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you oh God, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

It may seem unnecessary to say, and yet it also needs to be said, Good Friday is complicated. It is always fraught for the preacher to explain the violence of this day and of the cross, and to talk about all the actors who were part of it and the context of place and time and what all of that means today. And then to balance that with the inherent goodness of God. But this year in particular, I feel the weight of it all. As a follower of Jesus, and as one who most recently lived and served as pastor with the Palestinian church in Jerusalem, I really am today feeling the weight of the cross.

I feel especially the weight of those who are carrying the cross today. I feel the weight of children carried out of destroyed buildings by weakened fathers and mothers who haven't had enough to eat for weeks and have nowhere to go. I feel the weight that families of hostages carry. The way they must drag their bodies out of bed each day heavy also with uncertainty about the bodies of their loved ones. And I feel the weight of my own sins, for the responsibility I carry as a broken human being, and maybe especially at this time, as an American citizen. It's heavy for all of us to carry the daily news of these and the many other atrocities in the world which betray the name, the nature, and the heart of the God that we love and know. Lord, have mercy. Christ have mercy. Lord have mercy on me, on the suffering, on us all.

Now, as a preacher, I have an often used and perhaps overused the phrase, death is not the end of the story. Amen? And indeed, as a Christian, I do believe that, and I try to live it. But there are days, and indeed, moments in history, when we are called not only to believe in, and hope for, and preach life, but also to be convicted, to remember, to feel, and to not look away from the reality of death, and sin, and sorrow. And this is one of those moments. We dare not look away from the cross, and especially from what is happening in the Holy Land.

In my corner of the Christian tradition, we often define sin as being "incurvatus in se", in other words, turned in on oneself. Another way of saying it might be navel gazing. I will stand by this definition of sin, perfect or not, because it fits with my experience of the sin in my heart and in the world. I have seen, that when we turn in on ourselves, when we are overly concerned with our own navels, we obviously cannot be looking outward. We're not able to consider carefully the sorrows of others, or the needs of others, or the identities of others, or the cries for justice of others, when we are considering our own belly buttons.

Now, sometime last year, I received an email from an artist, a young artist and culinary student in Boston, with an interesting proposal. She wrote me, "In my studies, I've learned that the pastry we know as the macaron was once upon a time called a priest's belly button. So I've been looking for an actual priest to let me come and take a mold of their belly button, which I will then use to make macarons." Well, I've always been up for an adventure. So I said, "Sure." And she replied, "Amazing. You're the first priest who has said yes." Imagine that.

Fun fact, macarons in the shape of my belly button did, in fact, sell at a local art show for the price of \$66.60 for three, which is hilarious on many levels. What a cool project that was, and I was thrilled to participate, but of course, it did make me think, "Why did so many others say no to preserving the shape and form of their navels?" Maybe because we are embarrassed of our bodies, and the shapes they take. But also, what's so interesting about our navels, it is one thing that we all do genuinely share. It's a mark of our shared humanity, as much as our brokenness is a mark of our shared humanity, because we are, all of us, beautifully and wonderfully made. And at the same time, we are prone to gazing, at long lengths, at those very marks of our own shared humanity and our wonderfulness.

Hear this, dear ones, you are worthy, you are precious, you are a gift to the world. Your belly button is beautiful, because it is a reminder that you are a beloved child of God. Even what you find in your belly button. That lint though, that fuzz, that detritus of our own living, that stuff that we are observing can become heavy if it's all we consider. That can become heavy with the weight of the pain of the others we are not considering. It is also heavy with the weight of what could be. And on this day, Good Friday, when we are so reminded of the weight of the cross of Christ, who sees not only our beauty, but also our lint. Who passed through a terrible trial for us and suffered greatly. And through this suffering, has released us from our sin and our navel gazing. Because of him, we no longer need to consider our belly buttons and our humanity with shame.

Because Jesus has sanctified us. Has cleaned us up, and then invites us to wake up. To wake up with Him as He did on the third day, as He will on the third day, to look around, to see others. To see how the sun is shining and the tomb will be empty. And how we have been gifted with proof that life is, life is and always will be the end of the story. Life is stronger than death, stronger than war, stronger than hatred of others, stronger than the occupation of others. If only we will look away from our own belly buttons and toward the light of truth, and join the risen Christ in His movement toward peace with justice for all of creation.

Let the peace of God which passes all understanding keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Speaker 1:

Will you join me in prayer? Holy one, as your son kept vigil in the garden last night, we fell asleep. Today we walk behind Him towards Golgotha, towards the cross, we feel caught, trapped, stuck, in our helplessness, in our failures, in our shame, in our inadequacy. Be with us throughout this journey. Strengthen us, as we dream three days from now, of a world in which your salvation, and your justice will be realized. Amen.

Congregation:

Amen.

Speaker 1:

Please rise, in body or in spirit, for the Lord's prayer.

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 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.

Speaker 1:

Please join in our concluding hymn, Go to Dark Gethsemane, number 151 in your hymnal.

(singing)

As you set out throughout the rest of Holy Week, may God be with you in your grief and in your joy. Bless you and keep you, give you strength for the journey. Amen.

Congregation:

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Amen.