

Harriet Lendeman:

Good morning.

Congregants:

Good morning.

Harriet Lendeman:

Welcome to morning prayers here at Appleton Chapel. Our speaker this morning will be Reverend Rita Powell, chaplain of the Harvard Episcopal Community. Welcome.

Please rise and body or in spirit for a responsive reading of Psalm 139, found in your black psalter.

"O, Lord, you have searched me and known me."

Congregants:

"You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away."

Harriet Lendeman:

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

Congregants:

"Even before a word is on my tongue, behold, O Lord, you know it altogether."

Harriet Lendeman:

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

Congregants:

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

Harriet Lendeman:

"Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?"

Congregants:

"If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!"

Harriet Lendeman:

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

Congregants:

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

Harriet Lendeman:

If I say, 'Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me be night,'-

Congregants:

... "even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you."
(singing)

The Rev. Rita Powell:

The text I'm going to share with you this morning is a poem that I wrote. It's called Elegy for Communion.

"I remember how it felt to be with you, sweet fire of possibility.

When I sat with you and you touched my feet, I could taste, think, imagine, laugh, weep.

Why did you leave? Why did leave this bread and call it life?

It doesn't taste like life. It tastes like nothing.

It doesn't even taste of affliction or hardship or loss, just a taste I can't remember even when it's on my tongue.

And every year, I watch you die, tasting nothing, remembering only that I didn't taste anything as much as I wished."

I'm an Episcopal priest, and today in my and many Christian traditions begins the great liturgical enactment called the Triduum, the three days of Jesus's passion. The liturgies of the church seek to invite the gathered into a close remembrance of the final events of the last days of Jesus of Nazareth, the last supper, the washing of the feet, the vigil in the garden of Gethsemane, the betrayal, the trial before Pilate, the crucifixion, the burial, and then finally the miracle at the tomb.

The idea is that the story is so big, it must be broken down into its parts to savor each one, to reflect, to feel. And today, Maundy Thursday, we observe the last supper and the foot washing. It's meant to anchor our practice of communion in the perpetual memory of Jesus here, at this intimate meal, at the festival of the Passover, where Jesus takes the already symbolically-laden bread and wine and offers them anew in a new way, as His own body and blood. So communion is meant to carry the rich tenderness of that table, but not that only. In our eucharistic prayers, the whole of the Triduum is invoked. The sweetness of the intimate table gets braided with the terrifying sacrifice of His death as well as the triumph of His rising.

And all of this makes good sense to me. It's my tradition. And yet the making of coherent meaning from these events in some ways keeps them at arm's length for me. Religious practice can obscure the beating heart. As much as we must, as much as it is right to make sense of the loss of Jesus, to make meaning from these events, today, I don't want to accept it.

Many writers in the tradition, I'm thinking of Gregory of Nyssa for one, write beautifully about how the felt absence of God is a virtue. To feel loss is to discover the shape of desire. To grieve in some sense is to assert presence. We only grieve the loss of something we knew. And this may well be right, but if I grieve the loss of Jesus, it is for me doubled. I lament the loss of what I do not have now, and also what I never had. I never sat with Him. I never saw His way of drinking wine. Never heard His laugh, never saw His eyes blaze, never learned how he walks. There's something hard in the proposal of following Jesus today, of only ever meeting him veiled, in word, in image, in other people, maybe in sacrament. But today, I don't want the religion. I just want the person.

"I remember how it felt to be with you, sweet fire of possibility.

When I sat with you and you touched my feet, I could taste, think, imagine, laugh, weep.

Why did you leave? Why did leave this bread and call it life?

It doesn't taste like life. It tastes like nothing.

It doesn't even taste of affliction or hardship or loss, just a taste I can't remember even when it's on my tongue.

And every year, I watch you die tasting nothing, remembering only that I didn't taste anything as much as I wished."

Harriet Lendeman:

Will you join me in prayer?

Creator God,

We feel you with us as we gather together on this day. Meet us as we are entering this time where we experience this longing for your presence and to your absence. Guide us forward with hearts that are open to the longing, the messiness, the uncertainty, and the intimacy of your love.

Amen.

Congregants:

Amen.

Harriet Lendeman:

Please rise in body or in spirit as we pray as Jesus taught, saying:

All:

"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, for ever and ever. Amen."

Harriet Lendeman:

Let us sing the hymn My Faith Looks Up to Thee. That is, sorry, My Song is Love Unknown, number 150.

Congregants:

(singing)

Harriet Lendeman:

As we 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.

Congregants:

Amen.