

Conspiracies

BREATHING TOGETHER THE BREATH OF LIFE

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# Conspiracies

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# EXCERPTS FROM *DIRTY WATER*

ARIELLA RUTH

EVENTS COORDINATOR, CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF WORLD RELIGIONS



Poet and CSWR staff member Ariella Ruth read these excerpts from her poem “Dirty Water” at the Wednesday Noon Service hosted by the HDS Staff on February 20, 2019.

## who may float

too many people all say  
the earth say the water say  
great blue heron say the light is far  
too bright say time say  
a way  
to remove ourselves  
say plastic  
say the drowning  
say  
those who may  
float

\*

barnacles are bible verses inscribed  
a palimpsest in their repetitive visits  
by newly formed waves, solid and open  
toward the sun, rewritten again  
until illuminated by new shapes, additions gather  
beings nurtured and sustained  
within waves' curvature, held there

i want to love the ocean  
in a way that doesn't constitute consumption  
then abandon

when i lived landlocked the mountains caught fire and air  
turned brown from the burning drift and inched  
toward my home

then later – inversion, a flooding creek  
spilled and erupted, it took  
to the canyon and effortlessly chipped away  
at earth, arid ground  
altered by a thirty foot wave

\*

to seek  
out  
suffering  
go  
to the  
shore

waves  
wash up fears  
up  
to the ankles  
our truest  
selves  
in bright  
blushed  
serrated  
shards

bright  
as the manufacturer  
birthed them

# EXCERPTS FROM *DIRTY WATER*

ARIELLA RUTH

EVENTS COORDINATOR, CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF WORLD RELIGIONS

these colors  
could  
be  
different

could be  
come  
ground

where  
does it

go

now

heavy  
imbedded in  
our  
forms

\*

that seagull feather  
is not trash  
is actually  
a feather

wind

forms a circle  
of sand  
around points  
that rest toward earth

ground soft  
to make sand  
the short  
list of what we don't  
deserve

move  
your path  
let the gull  
pass by

this  
is not  
your  
dumping  
ground

\*

it is important  
to surround  
oneself  
with things  
that  
are  
living

\*

## EXCERPTS FROM *DIRTY WATER*

ARIELLA RUTH

EVENTS COORDINATOR, CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF WORLD RELIGIONS

i am most concerned with what comprises the clarity of water

this home is not pure, not distilled  
when it holds what we've discarded

our garbage is imbedded here, it floats  
a resistant roof shades the beings it shelters

we should all  
be forced  
to live  
with our  
remnants



Photo by Kristie Welsh

## LEGACIES AND COMPLEX HISTORIES: A MEMPHIS NARRATIVE

KAYLA J. SMITH  
MDIV '21



*Kayla J. Smith delivered the following remarks during the Wednesday Noon Service hosted by the HDS Socialists on April 3, 2019.*

April 4, 2019, marked the 51st anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in my hometown, Memphis, Tennessee. I still

remember attending the 40th anniversary in downtown Memphis in 2008. I did not know then the interconnectedness of marching the same streets Dr. King, my grandfather, my grandmother, my aunts, and so many more did. As I come close to the end of year one at HDS, I am embracing the beauty of legacies, complex narratives, and always being fueled with some hope to never give up—because people before surely did not.

It is imperative to not become cynical in a White supremacist, patriarchal-ruling world that tries to take every ounce of hope from so many people. Hopelessness was not infused in any of our ancestors, especially mine, and thus it is the very reason why I can get to attend HDS today. For anyone who has ever interacted with me long enough, I am positive you have heard me mention Memphis and Orange Mound probably more times than you ever have heard beforehand in your entire life. Moving to New England straight from undergrad and having previously spent all my life in the South, it has been a deeply reflective and nostalgic experience on thoughts of home and my heritage. My choice to attend HDS is profoundly personal and an avenue for me to continue the lineage of activism that is in my bloodstream.

Some of my classes this semester, such as "The Ethical and Religious Thought of Martin Luther King, Jr. Seminar" with Dr. Preston Williams and "Race and Religion in the United States" with Dr. Todne Thomas, have caused me to reflect on the meaning of my ancestry and family history. My family is from Orange Mound, a neighborhood in Memphis that was

the first neighborhood in the country built for and by former enslaved Black people. The house my Grandma Delores currently resides in is a home that was built in 1936 by my Great Aunt Mary and Uncle C (Ella Mae Adams and Charles Christopher Adams) and was a part of the original blueprint mapping of the neighborhood. Today, there are three generations of family living on the same street. I also have pondered the significance of attending Birmingham-Southern College in Birmingham, Alabama, where I was only 10 minutes from the neighborhood referred to as Dynamite Hill that infamously gave the city the nickname Bombingham. Also, I was only 10 minutes from 16th Street Baptist Church and Kelly Ingram Park where thousands marched and were water-hosed and attacked by dogs through the racist local policing.

On an even more personal level, my Granddaddy George Lee Gossett, Jr., who I unfortunately never got to personally meet, participated in the lock-in takeover of the local historically Black college in Memphis, LeMoyne-Owen College, demanding a Black studies department and better community engagement as a Black institution. He was also a member of the Invaders—a Black radical militant group who protected Dr. King during his time in Memphis, but not without initial tensions between Black Power youth and the older Civil Rights leaders who asked for Dr. King's presence. The cause of the 1968 sanitation strike occurred on the same corner of the middle school I attended (Colonial Middle), where two Black sanitation workers were killed by faulty machinery when trying to take cover from the rain.

The scholarship I am reading in class on Black resistance and hope for a better future has connected me to the meaningful groundwork my family did for my existence before I was even thought of. The love and support I have personally witnessed and know that existed even before I was created inspires me to do the same for people especially like myself, but for all people as well. Dr. King once said in a speech at a youth march in 1959 that we should "Make a career of humanity. Commit yourself to the noble struggle for equal

## LEGACIES AND COMPLEX HISTORIES: A MEMPHIS NARRATIVE

KAYLA J. SMITH  
MDIV '21

rights. You will make a greater person of yourself, a greater nation of your country, and a finer world to live in". Another moving quote from Dr. King was from his Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech in 1964 when he said, "I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits." I am sure we are all aware of the complex and imperfect life of Dr. King, and I hope we know or will get to know more of the life that is beyond the commercialized and apolitical version of him this nation has created—especially after the 1999 Memphis court unanimous decision that agreed with the King family belief that there was high-level governmental conspiracy involvement in Dr. King's death.

maintaining schoolwork, and being scolded from their parents that "they better finish up school while they marching in them streets." I am fortunate to have heard the stories from my older family members of the massive eerie feeling in the city, and all throughout the world, once it was announced that Dr. King had died, and then having the National Guard bring in tanks as Memphis was put on a city curfew immediately following the assassination. This is real history that only occurred decades ago. People like my family members and others had courage and believed and literally fought for the freedom for all to live peacefully and for the possible opportunity to have their granddaughter attend Harvard Divinity to tell their stories and continue the legacies.



Photo by Brian Tortora

There is so much untold and altered history of freedom fighters. The beauty of cross-cultural and cross-generational dialogue and education is the chance to hear some unfiltered truths. I am thankful to have now spent some time listening to aunts who shared the tension and excitement of marching in the streets before and during Dr. King's time in Memphis. They also spoke to me about students juggling to balance fighting for the revolution,

Everything has much deeper meaning and importance to communities than what is generally told. Take the song, "We Shall Overcome" for example, a song that has become the cliché go-to song for activist groups and movements today. This is the same song, with Southern roots, that was sung by freedom fighters all throughout this country and internationally who were envisioning a radically different future. The intentionality in language and the history of the spaces we live in or visit must be acknowledged and honored. Even my Granddaddy George Jr. lived and traveled through this same Boston area that I now get to explore in ways perhaps unimaginable just a few decades prior. The legacies and discipline from everyday people in never giving up should be all the aspiration we need to fully commit and embody the idea that we truly can and shall overcome.

# REPETITION

STEPHANIE PAULSELL  
SUSAN SHALLCROSS SWARTZ PROFESSOR OF THE PRACTICE OF CHRISTIAN  
STUDIES

*Professor Stephanie Paulsell preached this homily on Tuesday of the Christian observance of Holy Week at HDS's Tuesday Morning Eucharist, April 16, 2019.*

In my contemplative prayer class, we're experimenting with rereading. Rather than reading our way through twelve weeks' worth of books on contemplative prayer, we read five books, and now we're reading them again.

Last week, one of the students shared with us a florilegium—a collection of short bits from her reading—that she had created out of Teresa of Avila's Interior Castle and other readings that Teresa's words recalled for her—passages from Blaise Pascal, Virginia Woolf and others. We took turns going around the room, each of us reading a passage aloud. It was a surprisingly intimate look into the student's spirit. Seeing how a book we had read in common had mixed in her mind with her other reading felt like a privilege, and the resulting florilegium was revelatory. It placed a book we'd all read together in a new context and helped us hear it again, differently.

After we read it, another student said that what the practice of rereading had revealed to him was that he craves repetition. I crave it, he said, because it's healing.

I've been thinking about that ever since: that there is something healing about repetition. It's counter-intuitive in a culture that so values novelty (and by "culture," I mean our culture; I mean HDS). Repetition gets associated with words like "rote", as in "rote learning"; it can seem to keep us within the safe boundaries of what we know rather than leading us into new territory.

And repetition can do all that—keep us from taking risks, keep us spinning our wheels. But there are also zones of risk that require repetition, because we don't reach them our first time through—or the second, or the third, or the tenth... Holy Week, I think, is like that. Holy Week offers repetition—another chance to lay our lives down next to Jesus's life, our death down next to his death. On Sunday, we waved our palms as Jesus made a spectacle of himself, riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. And now the familiar fear and dread set in. We see the same man bent over the dirty feet of his friends. We reenact their same last meal together. We witness the same violence and cruelty. The same silence. The same glory.

And in this morning's reading, the same betrayal is repeated. Once again, Jesus says to Judas: "do quickly what you are going to do." Once again, Judas reaches out for the bread that Jesus passes him. Once again, he slips away into the



Photo by Tony Rinaldo

# REPETITION

STEPHANIE PAULSELL

SUSAN SHALLCROSS SWARTZ PROFESSOR OF THE PRACTICE OF CHRISTIAN STUDIES

night.

This is another reason that repetition can be healing I think. It gives us another chance to interrupt the story, to enter it at the place of its most unfinished business. This story is the unfinished business of Holy Week.

In my first teaching job, at Valparaiso University, a Lutheran school in Indiana, I had a colleague named Fred Niedner, a Lutheran pastor and a scholar of the Bible. He had walked through Holy Week over and over throughout his life. And every year, this story about Judas bothered him more and more. It follows, in the gospel of John, right after Jesus washes the feet of his disciples. If I have washed your feet, Jesus says, you ought to wash each other's feet. What I do for you, you ought to do for one another.

What bothered Fred was that, having been given this mandate to care for one another, no one among them followed Judas out into the night. No one asked him what he was going through. No one asked him what hidden hell he was experiencing that would lead him to take those thirty pieces of silver, no one asked him why he was so angry. I can remember Fred preaching during Holy Week about how, if we are Jesus's disciples, we must head into the dark to look for those who are lost, those who are pushed to the margins, and those who are suffering, as he thought Judas must have been, in their own private hells. He's still out there, I remember Fred saying, wandering out there in the dark, and he needs someone to come and find him. He's been forsaken, Fred said, "by every generation of disciples." Every time we gather at this table, we speak of "the night when Jesus was betrayed." But we do not speak Judas's name. We have not searched for him, and we have not found him. "His place at the Lord's table," Fred says, "remains empty."

As Fred preached, "For each of us, at least one Judas wanders about in the night unforgiven. From another perspective, each of us is Judas, slipping about in the shadows, unforgiven, unloved, utterly alone."

We've had a lot of conflict at HDS this year. And I'm certainly not standing in any pure place. I've pleaded busyness, kept my head down. But I've been listening over these past few weeks. And as I read this story again, what I hear now is Fred's question: who will go out into the night to look for Judas? We've faced off across from each other about issues that matter; I don't mean to diminish them. But are we going to leave each other out in the night? At what point do we go looking for each other?

Fred believes that if we go looking for each other, we'll find ourselves. At the end of his sermon, Fred imagines the heavenly banquet.

Will Judas be present? Dare we hope that? I suspect we can. He will sit amongst all the rest of us who bear the scars of our own treachery beneath our white robes. For so long as Judas remains out there in the night, wandering alone or swinging lifeless in the breeze, there will be tears and aching in the community where his place is still set at the table, but where he does not sit. When he has been found, then I know that I, too, shall have been found, and forgiven, and loved.

# RAMADAN: AN EXERCISE IN MERCY

SIDRA ALI  
MDIV '19



Sidra Ali, MDiv '19 offered these reflections at the Wednesday Noon Service hosted by the HDS Muslims on May 1, 2019 in preparation for Ramadan.

As a failed linguistic anthropologist, and a weary amateur academic,

there is a particular allure to learning the etymological roots of words. Or more specifically, Quranic words. With Ramadan around the corner, and with my recent confession as a Ramadan Muslim, I've been meditating on two words: *Ummah* and *Rahma*. Or, roughly translated, community and mercy.

Ramadan commemorates the descent of the Quran to the world as a shower of stars upon Muhammad's heart. The process of revelation serves as a process of purification for the soul—one that allows the soul to become *ummi*. Quranically, *ummi* in the singular, refers to the Prophet Muhammad. In the plural, however, it refers to the community, the *ummah*. How do we take these concepts of purification through revelation and embody them in ourselves? Moreover, how do we embody this as a community? As an *ummah*? Ibn Arabi encourages us to embrace the concept of *ummiyya* in the tradition of the Prophet. Just as the Prophet opened himself to the lights of grace in Revelation, so too should we pursue *ummiyya* by renouncing judgement and fostering spiritual perfection. We are not alone nor unequipped in this process, however. Allah, through the Quran, offers us some understanding of infinite divine mercy.

In Surah *al-A'raf*, verse 156, God narrates, "Wa rahmati wasi'at kulla shay'in." "And My mercy embraces all things." God's mercy, as manifested in God's forgiveness, is said to be so vast, that even Iblis will stretch forth his neck on the Day of Resurrection, hoping to be touched by it. This is profound in that there is a fundamental connection between Divine Mercy and existence itself. In one of his books, Ibn

Arabi tells us about a dialogue that takes place between Iblis and a ninth-century Sufi. In it, Iblis tells the Sufi, "God said, 'My Mercy embraces all things.' Surely, you must have noticed that I am a part of the universal all, and that I am a thing. Therefore, God's Mercy must embrace me." Scandalized by the notion that Iblis might be privy to God's infinite and all-encompassing mercy, the Sufi scoffs and says, "I didn't think you were so lacking in knowledge." Iblis, sassy as ever, responds, "Do you not know, O Sufi, that the limit of your understanding is not shared in God's unlimited mercy?"

Almost every chapter of the Quran is prefaced by "Ar-Rahman, Ar-Raheem," the most merciful, the most compassionate. Iblis, in his teaching moment with the Sufi, reminds us that Divine Mercy is universal, it is infinite, and bestowed upon all creatures in this world. As we prepare ourselves for Ramadan and for purifying our souls to become *ummi*, let us reflect on what it means to embody mercy as a corollary to existence. Let us turn to mercy as a practice in creating the *ummah*.

While we prepare ourselves to celebrate the descent of the Quran from the heavens, I am reminded another descent from the heavens—one also cloaked in mercy and hope: The descent of Adam and Eve to earth. In the Quran, the divine command God gives Adam and Eve while they're hanging out in heaven is not, technically, a prohibition for eating the forbidden fruit of a tree. Rather, it is a command of 'not approaching the tree.' This is where it gets interesting. According to Ibn Arabi, the tree is a metaphor. In Arabic, the word for tree is 'shajara.' The root of this word, in the verb form, however is "tashajur" or, "the act of dividing." If we look at the verse again with this meaning in mind, it reads, "We said, 'O Adam, dwell thou and thy wife in the Garden and eat freely thereof, wheresoever you will. *But approach not the act of division*, lest you be among the wrongdoers." The transgression they made is not about picking the wrong tree, but rather, committing an act of division, of rupturing the unity that affirms the one-ness of God and creation. Ibn Arabi takes it a step further. In another verse that parallels

# RAMADAN: AN EXERCISE IN MERCY

SIDRA ALI  
MDIV '19

the story of Genesis, the verse reads, “They ate of it and their nudity became apparent to them.” The word for nudity, *saw’atuhuma*, refers to *pudenda*, or, Adam and Eve’s sexual organs. In other words, sexual differentiation, the most elementary manifestation, the most evident of the *division*, or the rupture of unity. This is, for ibn Arabi, the unity symbolized by the whole form of what was originally the human being.

What do we make of this story of trees and *pudenda*? Why do etymological examinations of random verses in the Quran matter when we consider Ramadan?

It matters because to discuss Ramadan is to inherently discuss the ummah. The holiness of Ramadan is not incidental. It is believed that other holy scriptures like the Torah and Injeel were revealed during Ramadan as well. In fact, fasting during Ramadan is not unique. According to the Quran, fasting for the sake of God was not a new innovation in monotheism, but rather, an obligation practiced by those truly devoted to the one-ness of God, devoted to unity. Fasting, then, is not just a practice of self-discipline and spiritual rejuvenation, but an exercise in mercy. It is an opportunity to return once more to our roots; to pay homage and to rejoice in a rich and shared history of a blessed community that extends beyond this world, that transcends time, and traverses geographical boundaries. This year, inshAllah, there will be over 1 billion Muslims across the world partaking in Ramadan. If we are to take Ibn Arabi’s account of creation, then the first transgression humanity committed was the act of division. As an act of divine mercy, Adam and Eve descended to the earth to remember God, to multiply, and to grow into nations so that we may know one another. It is in this vein that we commemorate the descent of scripture and celebrate the perfection of our religion.

We have inherited a religion that spans continents and decades, and yet sometimes, we struggle to embrace one another in mercy and community. From one Ramadan Muslim, to another, may we purify our souls and become *ummi*, May we remember mercy, in all its forms. May we make space for our ummah in the ranks of prayer and our hearts in *dua*, and may we stand shoulder to shoulder in a tradition that has lifted those who have come before us, those who stand with us, and those who will come after us. Ameen.



Photo by Tony Rinaldo

# HARRY POTTER AND GRIEF, LOSS, AND DEATH

KATIE CAPONERA

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR FOR STUDENT SERVICES PROGRAMMING



Katie Caponera, HDS's Assistant Director for Student Services Programming, delivered these remarks at the Wednesday Noon Service hosted by the HDS Harry Potter and the Sacred Text group on March 27, 2019.

*"Harry's extremities seemed to have gone numb. He stood quite still, holding the miraculous paper in his nerveless fingers while inside him a kind of quiet eruption sent joy and grief thundering in equal measure through his veins. Lurching to the bed, he sat down.*

*He read the letter again, but could not take in any more meaning than he had done the first time, and was reduced to staring at the handwriting itself. She had made her "g's" the same way he did: he searched the letter for every one of them, and each felt like a friendly little wave glimpsed from behind a veil. The letter was an incredible treasure, proof that Lily Potter had lived, really lived, that her warm hand had once moved across this parchment, tracing into these letters, words about him, Harry, her son."*

*Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, J.K. Rowling*

The Harry Potter series covers many themes, some well - such as family, both the one you are born with and the one you choose; the impact and consequences of choice; and the inevitability of grief, loss, and death; and other themes not so well – just google Dumbledore, Rowling, and ret-con.

The passage I shared with you today is by no means the most often quoted or referenced when one looks to Rowling's work for words on loss and grief – but it is the one that stays with me. Deathly Hallows is by no means my favorite of the series. It is the book I go back to least often and have read the fewest times – it's sad, it's not as fun as the others, it's not set at Hogwarts, it has a distinct and different narrative structure, characters act in uncharacteristic ways...however this passage stays with me.

The first time I re-read the entirety of the Harry Potter series from book 1 to book 7 was when I participated in the Harry Potter and the Sacred Text community group. I honestly started going to the group because I felt there should be at least one night a week when I didn't immediately go home after work and put my pajamas on. This was back when I was still new-ish to the area and looking to make new adult friends which is a terrifying prospect. Anyway, I thought this group would be a fun way to meet other folks who liked Harry Potter even though I wasn't really sold on the whole "sacred" thing.

I had re-read some of the books over the years since they were first released – often in conjunction with a new book or movie. However, this was the first time I was reading them all, consecutively, and in order. I was also reading them sloooowly, a few chapters at a time, and not skipping the parts that weren't my favorite.

This was also the first time I was discussing and dissecting the themes with rigor and in community. It was also the first time I read them all since I lost both my father and my aunt Kathy – two individuals who had an immeasurable impact on me.

I saw my own experiences reflected back at me – not just in the pages of the book but in my fellows of this community

# HARRY POTTER AND GRIEF, LOSS, AND DEATH

KATIE CAPONERA

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR FOR STUDENT SERVICES PROGRAMMING

group. I was able to talk about my interpretations as well as hear and integrate the interpretations of others to deepen and broaden my understanding. This experience is likely familiar to those of you currently immersed in classrooms, but for me this was revelatory. The process and tenets of the Harry Potter and the Scared Text community allowed me to actively engage with the transformative abilities of art and literature.

The explorations these books offer of grief and loss and death and the related denial and rage had a new impact on me. The Harry of the first chapters of Order of the Phoenix in his fury and angst and pettiness now seemed like a reasonable reaction to the loss he witnessed the year prior. The Harry of Deathly Hallows whose recognition of his mother within his own handwriting reminded me so clearly of the time my mother teared up over a card I had given her because my handwriting was the same as my fathers. It reminds me of the times I've searched through saved mementos to glimpse a card Kathy wrote to me from the perspective of my cat wishing me a happy birthday.

This particular passage encourages me not just to remember grief and sadness from these treasures, but the joy of the memory as well. That while the pain may still be sharp, there is a contentment in knowing that those lost are still carried forward – whether through physical reminders of photos or birthday cards or the smell of an eggplant parmesan sub or the taste of a cold Coca-Cola or visit to a dimly lit flower shop or the sensory overload of a casino. For me, grief is not a linear process. It ebbs and flows, some days far from my mind and some days close and acute. My relationship to it changes as time and life come and go. Exploring this relationship in the context of the Harry Potter books within this community, helped me build an understanding of the secular as sacred. It gave me the tools to look to fiction and music and film and find what resonated with me – what I deemed sacred. To seek out the “friendly little waves glimpsed from behind a veil” in my own life.



Photo by Tony Rinaldo

# INTIMACY WITH NO EXIT

WILSON HOOD  
MDIV '19



Wilson Hood, MDiv '19 preached this sermon at HDS's Tuesday Morning Eucharist on February 12, 2019. The lectionary texts of the day were Genesis 1:20-2:4 and Mark 7:1-13.

What did you have for breakfast yesterday? No, I don't mean this morning- that would be far too easy. I

mean yesterday. Was it a bowl of cereal or oatmeal, perhaps? Some fruit? Or maybe, like me, you dashed out the door with a cup of coffee and plans to eat a healthy snack later, only to inhale the first unfortunate scone that crossed your path. Regardless of what you had (*if you can even remember*), I think we can all acknowledge that, at first, that was probably a hard question to answer.

I think our difficulty in remembering what we've eaten says a lot about how our culture often treats the small, daily meals (and other rituals) that literally keep us alive. At best, we're told to forget them once they've happened. At worst, we're told to skip them altogether. Maybe we're told to down a protein bar and charge ahead to yet another email or meeting, in order to produce more value for those in power. Or, perhaps more sinisterly, perhaps we're told to skip a meal because our bodies, in all their shapes and sizes, do not deserve life and nourishment exactly as they are.

And yet, despite this toxic cultural messaging, in our readings from both the Hebrew Bible and the Gospel of Mark this morning, the daily act of eating is no marginal or forgettable occasion. Instead, in both narratives, the act of eating provides a particular window into the way God moves within and among us every single day.

In our reading from the Gospel of Mark, Jesus and his disciples are confronted by some fellow Jews, leaders and teachers of the Pharisaic sect of Judaism, during a regular meal together, much like the ordinary breakfast we just struggled to remember. Upon seeing that some of Jesus's

disciples had not performed a ceremonial hand-washing before eating their meal, the teachers begin to criticize them, only to have Jesus respond in kind.

When engaging with this story, I think it's important to own that centuries of Christians have willfully misread Jesus's response to legitimize anti-Semitism, often with fatal consequences. And, importantly, it's critical to note that Jesus draws on his *own* practice and reading of Judaism in his response to these leaders.

Instead of viewing this story as some kind of half-baked rebuke of Jewish ritual, what if we instead open our ears to a much simpler (and yet much more radical) conclusion: what if we hear Jesus reminding us that eating *itself* constitutes a sacred act? Indeed, perhaps what Jesus is saying here is that the everyday, utterly ordinary participation in life we choose every time we nourish ourselves and one another- our choice to show up and be present in appreciation and awe to the miraculous fact that we even exist at all- is itself an act of worship, independent of any additional rituals or human traditions we might attach to it.

This isn't to say that ritual is not important, and indeed, pre-meal rituals like ceremonial hand-washing or "saying grace" can be and often are mirrors for the divine at the meal table. But this is exactly what they are-*mirrors*. They *reflect* what is *already* holy about the moment when we decide, in small moments every single day, that life is worth choosing once again.

In the daily, utterly ordinary sacraments of eating, bathing, falling asleep, waking up- even in the act of taking the breath you are having right this very second- we can once more become aware of the divine, extravagant *gift* of life we have been given.

This life, however, is *not for us alone*, and the myth of our utter independence from the world around us- the story we tell about ourselves that so often keeps us present to the

# INTIMACY WITH NO EXIT

WILSON HOOD  
MDIV '19

email inbox or the bathroom scale instead of to our lives as they are happening- is often what makes us forgetful or dismissive of what nourishes us in the first place.

In defense of this myth of independence and autonomy, so many readers have cited this morning's text from Genesis as a way to legitimize our domination of the planet and all the beings who live here with us, repeating the word "dominion" as they continually turn a blind eye to the pain and suffering we cause in pursuit of our fantasies of absolute sovereignty.



Photo by Tony Rinaldo

But notice, in the very next verse, that God grants the first humans (and all other living beings) plants for food. From this moment onward, humans must eat to live. In essence, God is blessing us here not with *independence*, but with *interdependence*. We must, in the sacred act of nourishment, acknowledge our utter dependence on other living things in order to remain alive. I suspect this blessing may well have been on Jesus's mind when he responded to the criticism of his disciples, and it is a blessing we can carry forward with us as we go into another day together. We *need* other people and other living beings in order to live- and thank God for that.

A good friend of mine once told me a story about his teacher in the Zen Buddhist tradition. During a weekend meditation retreat, a student raised his hand to ask the teacher a question at the end of that day's dharma talk. After sauntering up to the microphone in the gathering space, lips curled in a slightly self-satisfied grin at the difficulty of the question he was about to throw her way, the student asked: "Can you define Zen in 4 words or less?"

My friend's teacher paused thoughtfully, nodded her head, and then responded: "Intimacy with no exit."

Intimacy with no exit. This is the blessing of Genesis and the divine presence at the heart of every breath, every bite, every new morning we are given. This is the meaning lying just behind every little ritual that sustains us, every daily moment of grace that has brought us to where we are, sitting here, right now. Breathe it in, the breath of life.

You, and me, and everyone else sitting in this building, and every being who has ever existed, need one another to live. There's no exit, no way out of needing one another. And that is a gift worth celebrating.

# OUR SICK, SINFUL FAMILY SAGA

KERRY MALONEY

CHAPLAIN AND DIRECTOR OF RELIGIOUS AND SPIRITUAL LIFE



Kerry Maloney, HDS Chaplain and Director of Religious and Spiritual Life, preached this homily at HDS's weekly Tuesday Morning Eucharist on January 29, 2019.

Lectionary texts for Tuesday of the Third Week of Ordinary Time:

*Here I am, Lord.... I come to do your will. - Psalm 40: 7-8*

*The mother of Jesus and his brothers arrived at the house. Standing outside, they sent word to Jesus and called him. A crowd seated around him told him, "Your mother and your brothers and your sisters are outside asking for you."*

*But he said to them in reply, "Who are my mother and my brothers?" And looking around at those seated in the circle he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." - Mk. 3: 31-35*

Ten days ago, a group of white teenage boys wearing MAGA hats surrounded an elderly Indigenous American man on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, chanting "Make America great again," menacing him, and taunting him in racially charged ways. At the center of the original video that circulated globally was Nick Sandmann, one of the boys from Covington Catholic High School, getting up in the face of Nathan Phillips, a Native American elder. There was Mr. Sandmann, standing his ground just two feet in front of Mr. Phillips, smirking as the indigenous man drummed and chanted. Of course, in the days since that first video made the rounds, many other longer videos have come to light, making clear that there were other actors in this harrowing snapshot of white supremacy and some of the twisted responses it can spawn—chiefly, a tiny, religiously unhinged sect known as the Black Hebrew Israelites.

As you know, there has been much finger-pointing and hand-wringing and back-peddling and man-splaining in all the days since January 18; and while the original impressions

and denunciations (and even the endorsements) of Nick Sandmann's and his colleagues' behavior may not have been as nuanced as they ought to have been, the fact remains: that encounter at the base of the Lincoln Memorial ten days ago – and perhaps, even more, the endless spin on it in all the days since—reveals something terrible and terrifying about the soul of our nation.

Lest we forget, this incident happened in the midst of the federal government shut-down over the great Border Wall Dispute, a border at which children have been ripped from their parents' arms in the name of national safety; a border along which the U.S. military has been unconstitutionally deployed as a racial police force; a border that has become the reigning symbol and fact not of a political boundary between nations but of an insurmountable social and economic barrier to the oppressed, to the poor, to people who are brown. An insurmountable wall to separate those who are in "our" family from those who are not—those who are white from those who are not.

I confess that I was one of the people who read Nick Sandmann's smirk as proxy for the smug triumphalism over, defiant disdain for, and unapologetic disrespect of people of color and of all racially and sexually "non-conforming" people—even (even!) of the holy *elders* in those communities—a posture we are unveiling at the center of our national life ever more boldly every single day. White children mocking and humiliating brown elders. Nick and his brothers from Covington Catholic looked to me like the very face of white supremacy on January 18, 2019, there in our nation's capital. They looked like me—or at least a part of my spiritual DNA, even if it is a part I have been arrayed against since my birthright into it.

And of course, there's nothing new there, right? We recoil from it so fiercely not because it's shocking but because it's true. "This is what 'democracy' looks like" – historically, in a country like ours built on slavery and genocide. It looks *just like* that showdown at the foot of the Lincoln Memorial. And

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whether we're the ones staring out from under the brim of a MAGA cap or the ones being stared down or the ones caught in between, we recognize ourselves *somewhere* in that chilling scene. It's our sick, sad, sinful story as a nation. It's our family saga.

Jesus and the early disciples had a great deal to say about families – usually, “Leave them!”

Today's gospel is no different, if a bit less stark. Here we find Jesus once again breaking down the great border walls of his own day, redefining and reconfiguring the all-determinant bonds of ancient family life. If Jesus' apparent denial of his birth family in this text seems harsh, his embrace of the new order he declares is gloriously healing...and utterly revolutionary. “*Here are my mother and my brothers. For whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.*”

It might be a lazy homilist who would draw a straight line from the stand-off at the Lincoln Memorial to today's Gospel passage or from the showdown at the US-Mexico border to this new kind of family gathered around Jesus in this morning's text; but I might just be that homilist. There's something disruptively real and ineluctably liberating in the simple invitation Jesus offers us here. And it's not a pass. We don't get to walk away from our history or from our responsibilities to and for it; but we *can* find our relationships to that history, and to one another, radically rearranged... and, mercifully, redeemed in the household of God. In Jesus, we are offered a *new* family story, one with a promise of love so deep, so attractive, and so true that it up-ends everything and outstrips anything we can ask or imagine (Ephesians 3:20). It can break any stare-down, stalemate, showdown, or shutdown we find ourselves in. And we find ourselves in countless these days.

In light of our family history, in light of the original sin of racism—and all its unspeakable violence, all its smug swagger, all its primal grief—I'm not sure how else except

through Jesus' gracious declaration of a new order we could ever dare say with the Psalmist, “Here I am, Lord. I come to do your will.” But, somehow, today, we do. By the grace of God, may it be so.

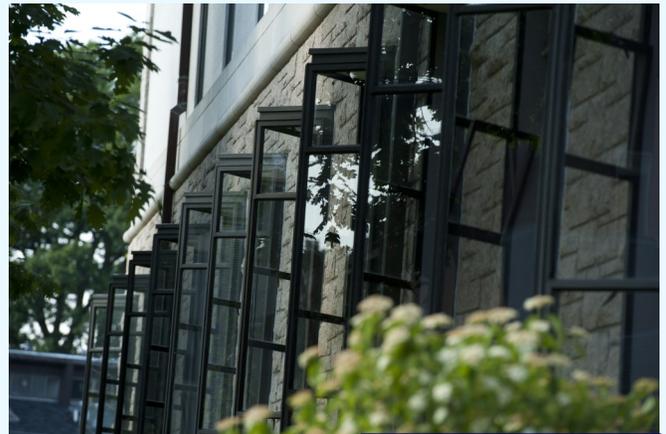


Photo by Tony Rinaldo

# ABIDING WITH EVIL

SARAH FLEMING  
MDIV '21



*Sarah Fleming, MDiv '21 preached this homily at HDS's Tuesday Morning Eucharist on February 19, 2019. The lectionary text of the day was Genesis 6.*

Right now the earth is looking a lot like the pre-Ark earth of Genesis 6—and not just because of the rising sea levels and impending atmospheric doom. Yes, there are glaring ecological similarities, and each day as we continue to exploit and destroy this planet's resources, a literal flood seems all the more likely.

But that's not what I want to talk about today, that's not what I mean—no, there is a wickedness that goes deeper. I mean the wickedness of humanity on broad display that we encounter day by day in this country, in this world. As we watch those in power abuse their positions and rule with no regard for the lives of those beneath them, as we watch this country's government continue to restrict the rights and destroy the livelihoods of the poor and marginalized, as we, perhaps, continue to believe that it can't possibly get any worse only to be confronted yet again with a further instance of racist, xenophobic, homophobic, transphobic violence and oppression in action, YES, it does seem like every inclination of the thoughts of the hearts of those in power is “only evil continually.” This evil, it doesn't stop, it doesn't let us catch our breath, it doesn't even give us a moment to grieve. Continuous evil, perpetual evil, nothing *but* evil without bound of end. Seeing such a saturation of evil would be enough to cause any creator grief and regret in their heart—to see the creatures they created so lovingly and thoughtfully not only disrespect but downright *destroy* each other and the earth they are standing on.

And I'll be honest with you, given these similarities, a restart sounds pretty good right about now—just imagine, a way to reset the clocks to whatever we believe will be the time before this unceasing wickedness, *before* this saturation of evil. A way to “blot out from the earth” all of the evil, all the corruption, all the injustice, and begin anew.

But it isn't so simple. There are many problems with such wishful thinking, but I'll name just a few.

Let's say we imagine ourselves Noah, righteous and free from blame, ready to restart and rebuild humanity anew. Let's say we're venturing out on this ark, braving the seas and bracing ourselves for a fresh start. But let's think, for a second, of what it would actually be *like* to be on the ark, squashed between the seven pairs of all clean animals and the seven pairs of all the birds of the air, not to mention all the pairs of unclean animals and unclean birds of the air, in a vessel only thirty cubits wide, crowded in for forty days and forty nights, rocked about by the very waves that are destroying all of humankind, all our family, all our friends, essentially everyone we have ever known, trapped in a cramped, dark, claustrophobia-inducing cacophony of creatures, dodging birds above and creeping things below, fighting for air, and *alone*.

The only way we can get by is by telling ourselves this is how it should be. Yes, we convince ourselves that it is better to be inside this ark than out—that it is better not only for *us* but for the future of the world that we are *in* and the rest of humankind is out. We seal ourselves off from those around us with the belief that ultimately it is for the better, and we begin to rationalize our enclosure and the inherent exclusion it necessitates. Setting up barriers ultimately destroys the world around us, but we can imagine ourselves saved, free from blame, even saviors.

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But supposing we do follow Noah's example. If we simply start over with the same raw materials, won't we just run into the same problems further down the line? What good does restarting the clock do if it just postpones the appearance of this wickedness and corruption? We can't expect a different result if we don't put in the work of changing the fundamental building blocks.

Reading the story of Noah has me wondering how, instead of fancying ourselves blameless and turning our back on the rest of the world or, worse, erecting walls both literal and metaphorical to distinguish ourselves from those who don't deserve a fresh start, we can stay with the wickedness of the world and transform it.

Learning from Noah, we must examine critically the ways we justify our own superiority and to think deeply about who we are blaming, who we are excluding, and who we are casting out. We must refuse to close ourselves off in a hermetically sealed ark of righteousness and to look deeper at the roots of evil and injustice around us, abandoning escapist fantasies that prevent us from doing the everyday work of being in this world now and working with what we *have* to build a better future for all.



Photo by Kristie Welsh

# AS ELEPHANTS PARADE

MARY BALKON  
MDIV '20

Mary Balkon, MDiv'20, preached this sermon in the Billings Preaching Prize Finals at the HDS Wednesday Noon Service on April 10, 2019. Watch all three finalists deliver their sermons.

If you don't know the kind of person I am  
and I don't know the kind of person you are  
a pattern that others made may prevail in the world  
and following the wrong god home we may miss our star.

For there is many a small betrayal in the mind,  
a shrug that lets the fragile sequence break  
sending with shouts the horrible errors of childhood  
storming out to play through the broken dike.

And as elephants parade holding each elephant's tail,  
but if one wanders the circus won't find the park,  
I call it cruel and maybe the root of all cruelty  
to know what occurs but not recognize the fact.

And so I appeal to a voice, to something shadowy,  
a remote important region in all who talk:  
though we could fool each other, we should consider—  
lest the parade of our mutual life get lost in the dark.

For it is important that awake people be awake,  
or a breaking line may discourage them back to sleep;  
the signals we give — yes or no, or maybe —  
should be clear: the darkness around us is deep.

-A Ritual to Read to Each Other by William  
Stafford

I hear echoes of this poem in the vision statement of the Harvard Divinity School:

*To provide an intellectual home where scholars and professionals from around the globe research and teach the varieties of religion, in service of a just world at peace across religious and cultural divides.*

Everyone has religion, whether we call it that or not.

Whether we find it in a scripture, a laboratory, a forest or a human community, we all have fundamental questions and certainties about the world and about our own nature, by which we live our lives.

To dismiss or invalidate our beliefs is to deny the very ground of our being.

People fight wars about religion because religion *matters*. It can't *not* matter, if we're human.

And here at the Divinity School we converse about what matters. We confront the fact that our existential truths are not the same. That what is deeply moral and utterly obvious to me, may be nonsensical, sacrilegious, and even obscene to you. We take the differences that are worth waging wars for, and we *talk* about them.

If there is any hope for a “just world at peace,” this conversation, that we're having right here, is it.

I find that hope in a black man who heard me rage about the “cultural suppression of female emotions,” and returned to me the horrifying history of the phrase “white women's tears.” And we sat in that tense and unresolved space, hurt and angry.

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I find it in a Greek orthodox woman who explained to me why the “Saints of Star Wars” exhibit was a violation of something sacred, and also recognized that it was healing and holy for the man who painted it.

I find it in my generous queer friend who offered to “clicker train” me in pronoun usage,

and in the kind Jewish professor who asked about my beliefs, and listened, and said, “So you're an idol worshipper!”

We're laughing, but these were difficult conversations. All over the world, people are hating and *killing* each other over these very differences.

Since the death of the oak tree, people have been asking me how I am. I couldn't answer them. But I think I can now:

“If you don't know the kind of person I am, and I don't know the kind of person you are, a pattern others made, may prevail in the world.”

If we can't look each other in the eye and tell each other who we are at the foundational level of religion, if we can't hold our unresolved differences honestly and respectfully, then hate--and violence-- and political lies--are what will prevail in the world.

This is our vision.

And I think the world can see its value, because at a time when other schools are closing across the country, Harvard Divinity School has been able to raise the money to renovate a century-old building to make a space where we can live our vision.

Henry David Thoreau said of architectural beauty that it grows “from within outward, out of the necessities and character of the indweller.” Whatever beauty may be in our

renovation will be a result of who we are in building it, shaped by our vision, by our conversation.

When the oak tree entered this conversation, it revealed profound differences between religions. Deep and painful conflicts in our beliefs about the nature of the world, about what is sacred, what is moral.

When we were told that the tree was decayed and hollow inside, that it was dying, this opened up a further divide. And it was harder to talk with each other across it.

To some people, safety was an overriding concern, and barriers were erected to protect us.

But ministry often calls people into danger. It calls us into prisons and hospitals, slums and war zones. Not to mention all of the broken and dangerous places of the human heart. So others climbed over the fences and scaffolding to offer the tree a ministry of presence.

And we spent days planning ritual, talking about what the tree was to us in our various religions, and how we could

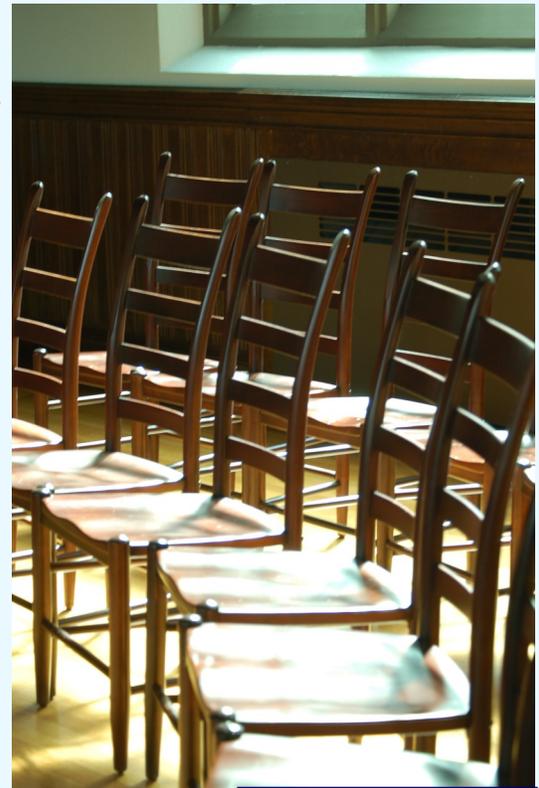


Photo by Kristie Welsh

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honor it without disrespecting each other. It's always hardest to talk about differences when it comes to actual practice.

Some of us felt called to witness, to extend our ministry to the actual death of the tree, and we sat across the green in the cold and watched as it was dismember.

In my religion, it was a person that we killed last week. It was very hard to respect that other people truly believed that this was the right thing to do.

But that's the vision. That is what a "just world at peace" requires of us. It requires that we find a way to live together, even when my sacred is your blasphemy, and your truth is my violation.

In the midst of these open wounds, it requires us to trust each other enough to keep talking.

I thought about this when I saw that the entire body of the tree was solid and healthy, and I thought about it the next day when I heard, "We had to take it down, it was decayed. It was hollow." And I knew that if I hadn't been there, if I hadn't seen and touched that rich, red wood, I would have believed this. I would have *chosen* to believe. Because we can't have this conversation if we don't trust each other, "as elephants parade, holding each elephant's tail--

but if one wanders, the circus won't find the park."

Stafford calls it "cruel and maybe the root of all cruelty, to know what occurs but not recognize the fact."

Because this is how "the fragile sequence breaks."

Because, if we tell this lie, then what else is a lie?

In all of our difficult conversations about history and politics, about social justice, about truth and how we ought to live in

the world? What else is a lie? How can we trust each other in any of it?

This is the "broken line that discourages us back to sleep," and it often "prevails" in the world. It prevails every time we use the correct language and say the things we're supposed to say, and lie about the hard differences that don't have easy answers.

It prevails all the time.

But if we allow this brokenness to prevail here, if we turn away from these difficult discussions, if we shrug, and accept the "small betrayal" of a lie to make the hard conversations easier, then those will become the "necessities and character" out of which our building, and our community, grow. If what we're building to hold our vision doesn't hold our vision, then our grand new renovation will be just another pile of mortar with a bad foundation. And what hope will we have then, for a "just world at peace?"

We have a choice in this conversation. I think we always have a choice, in every hard conversation.

The tree wasn't rotten. The tree wasn't hollow. But it's up to us to choose whether we are.

# ON REFUGE & REMEMBRANCE

SHANE SNOWDON  
MDIV '20

*Shane Snowdon, MDiv '20, preached this sermon in the Billings Preaching Prize Marathon in Divinity Chapel on April 4, 2019. Watch the three Billings Preaching finalists deliver their sermons on April 10, 2019.*

I have a story I feel deeply compelled to tell. But every time I tell it, I worry about sounding preachy—so I was excited to see this opportunity to just go ahead and preach it.

But then I wondered if my story really met the Billings preaching guidelines. So I looked them up, and saw that they ask, twice: “Is your message vital? Is it of vital importance?”

And I thought, yes—because it’s about life and death. In fact, it’s about death in the midst of everyday life, a kind of death that’s all around us, that’s touched almost all of us one way or another, that’s featured in novels, films, and TV shows to get people’s adrenaline flowing. But a kind of death that, in real life, we often turn away from.

Hmmmm, you may be wondering—is Shane talking about some kind of metaphorical death?

No—I’m talking about ordinary physical death. But I’m not talking about the two illnesses that cause almost half the deaths in our country, heart disease and cancer.

I’m talking about the third leading cause of death in our country—in fact, the leading cause of death for people under 44. Namely, unintentional injuries. A high percentage of which involve someone bringing death to someone else in a motor vehicle.

I’m sure you can guess my story now.

One night when I was 41, I hit and killed someone in my car. He was an 18-year-old—man? Boy? A young person, with so much life ahead of him.

I was driving home along California’s famous oceanside Highway 1. He had just finished working on a nearby farm for the day and was crossing the highway to join some buddies down the road.

He didn’t see me, coming around a curve. And I didn’t see him. I’m told that he died instantly.

I wasn’t found legally at fault. I wasn’t drunk, or high, or speeding. And I don’t remember being distracted.

So I’ll never know exactly how or why it happened—but I brought death to another human being. Just driving home one night. As a woman who’d always hoped somehow to save lives.

In the months after the crash, I was shattered. Silent. Expressionless. Barely, barely able to go on living. And I felt

utterly alone: I couldn’t find anyone like me, in print or online.

You might wonder, as I did, how that could be, in a country full of self-help books, online support groups, and ultra-revealing memoirs. In a country where about 40,000 people die in crashes every year, and hundreds of thousands of us have been the drivers in those crashes.

I can only say that in this country, even now, there’s only one memoir in print about hitting and killing someone in a car. There’s one Facebook group for drivers in fatal crashes, and it was created recently, after the one article published in a mainstream magazine about “accidental killing.” There are a few driver talks and writings online, most by me and one other woman.

At the time of my crash, even these resources didn’t exist. I felt very, very alone.

But let me stop and acknowledge a question you may be having—one that certainly came up for me when I couldn’t find anything for, by, or about drivers in fatal crashes. And that is: what should happen for us? Do we deserve support? Or should we, as so many of us do, just isolate ourselves, one way or another?

These are hard questions. The kinds of questions that lead a lot of people—even the “spiritual but not religious”—to ask, “Does the Bible have anything to

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SHANE SNOWDON  
MDIV '20

say about this?”

The Bible actually does have something to say about this, in Numbers 35:9-11:

*The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Speak to the Israelites and say to them: when you cross the Jordan into the land of Canaan, then you shall select cities to be cities of refuge for you, so that a slayer who kills a person without intent may flee there.*

Passages in Deuteronomy and Joshua say the same thing: certain cities shall be designated as places of refuge for unintentional killers.

Those few obscure verses have brought me a lot of comfort.

For one thing, I'm touched that unintentional killers are even mentioned in the Bible. And I'm even more touched that we're mentioned with compassion, as people needing—even deserving?—refuge.

And there's something else I really appreciate about those verses. They declare that the cities of refuge are “for you”—not just for the slayers, but “for you,” for all of the Israelites. I'd like to think that's an affirmation that deep compassion can be a gift for the giver, as well as the receiver.

For me, the verses recognize that, yes, once you've killed unintentionally, you are apart. You are different. I think all

of us, as humans, intuitively sense this.

So the verses acknowledge my apartness, my differentness. But they also want me to experience refuge. They even let me hope that helping people like me could help the helper, as well as the helped.

So they prompt me to ask questions I never expected to be asking: “How can we live out Numbers 35 in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? How can we take its 2,500-year-old advice?”

We can't pick six major metropolitan areas to be cities of refuge. But we can create a virtual city of refuge—a city of connection, and communication, and caring.

In this city, we drivers in fatal crashes would, as possible, make a point of reaching out to people who've had our experience. And other folks would help us connect with each other.

In this city, we drivers would also talk publicly about our experiences, hard as I know that can be—both to heal ourselves,



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and to prevent other people from having our experiences.

And in this city, we drivers—with support—would develop a nationwide network of resources.

For ourselves, for people wanting to help (like counselors and clergy), and for all the people close to us, who suffer along with us: our friends, our parents, our partners, and our children.

Just as Numbers promises, our city of refuge would be . . . for everyone.

But I don't want to get so caught up in city-of-refuge planning that I don't get preachy, as I promised I would. Because if I don't get at least a little preachy, I won't be doing everything I can to honor the young man I hit and killed that night.

So, in his memory, let me do some down-to-earth—or down-to-pavement—preaching.

The next time you get behind the wheel, please remember that fatal crashes don't just happen in novels and films and TV shows. They happen in everyday life, all the time. To folks just driving home.

The next time you're cruising along with the unwanted power to kill in an instant, please remember that no text or email is worth risking a life.

The next time you're tempted to curse a low speed limit or a high speedbump,

please remember that it's there to keep you from hearing your car hit flesh and bone—a sound I'll never forget.

The next time you're out driving, please remember that young man I never knew, but will always hold close in my heart. And please remember all the others who've died on the roads around us, and all their loved ones.

And, if you would, please remember even those of us who, on an ordinary day just like today, unintentionally brought death. Amen.

# HURT NOT THE TREES

GRETCHEN LEGLER  
MDIV '20



Gretchen Legler, MDiv '20 preached this sermon in the Billings Preaching Marathon in Divinity Chapel on April 4, 2019. [Watch](#) the three finalists deliver their Billings sermon on April 10, 2019.

The scripture I'll speak from today is a poem by British poet Charlotte Mew who lived and wrote during the period of the late 1800s in London. Her poem is titled "The Trees Are Down." She begins with a line from the Book of Revelation: "And he cried with a loud voice: Hurt not the earth, neither the sea, nor the trees . . ." Here is the poem:

They are cutting down the great plane-trees at the  
end of the gardens.  
For days there has a been the grate of the saw, the  
swish of branches as they fall.  
The crash of the trunks, the rustle of trodden leaves.  
With the "whoops" and "whoas," the loud common  
talk, the loud common laughs of the men above it all.  
I remember one evening of a long past spring  
Turning in at a gate, getting out of a cart, and  
finding a large dead rat in the mud of the drive.  
I remember thinking: alive or dead, a rat is a god-  
forsaken thing,  
And at least in May, that even a rat should be alive.  
The weeks' work here is as good as done. There is  
just one bough  
On the roped bole, in a fine gray rain,  
Green and high and lonely against the sky  
(Down now!--)  
And but for that  
If an old dead rat  
Did once, for a moment, unmake Spring, I might

never have thought of it again.

It is not for a moment the Spring is unmade today;  
These were great trees, it was in them from root to  
stem:

When the men with the "Whoops" and the "Whoas"  
have carted the whole of the whispering loveliness  
away

Half the Spring , for me, will be gone with them.

It is going now, and my heart has been struck with  
the hearts of the planes;

Half my life it has beat with these, in the sun and the  
rains,

In the March wind, the May breeze,

In the great gales that came over to them across the  
roofs from the great seas.

There was only a quiet rain when they were dying;  
They must have heard the sparrows flying,  
And the small creeping creatures in the earth where  
they were lying—

But I, all day, I heard and angel crying:

Hurt not the trees.

The tree Charlotte mourns is the London Plane tree. We have cousins of the London Plane right here in Cambridge—the American Sycamore. Known as "Charles Eliot's Sycamores," they've lined Memorial Drive along the Charles River since 1897. They were slated to be cut down in mid 1960s for expanded traffic lanes and overpasses, but they were saved by protests from Harvard students and community members. The Plane Tree Family, which drops those spiky orbs that litter our neighborhood streets, is known for its trees of magnificent size, up to 131 feet tall with trunks up to ten feet across. Their gifts to us humans include their beauty, their shade and their ability to filter polluted air!

# HURT NOT THE TREES

GRETCHEN LEGLER  
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There is great sorrow in this poem as the speaker witnesses her beloved trees, these magnificent givers, being cut down. The whole experience “unmakes spring” for her. . . just like when she encountered a dead rat in her drive several springs earlier. What spoils spring for her is death. It is May when even the most God-forsaken thing (according to her), the rat, should be alive tending to its little pink newborn babies in a nest. The Great Plane Trees also should be swelling their buds, ready to unfurl their palm-sized leaves to the spring sun. But instead, there is death and destruction. The rat is dead. The trees are being cut down.

The tree cutters laugh, they *whoop* it up, as they dismantle the trees branch by branch. They call out “down now,” as they sever the last green branch from the last thick trunk and lower it to the ground, then they cart it away.



Photo by Kristie Welsh

“These were great trees, it was in them from root to stem” Mew writes. “*IT* was in them from root to stem” What *IT*? The stuff of life! Life was in them from root to stem! The same stuff was in the trees that is in you

and in me, and every other being on this earth, including the stones, the clouds, the spiders and the elephants. Different traditions and cultures have different words for *IT*: Zoe, vital matter, zest, energy, sacred breath, soul, spirit, psyche, prana, divine spark, mana, blood, heartbeat, anima, Atman. Call *IT* what makes the most sense to *you*. But know that the trees have it, and in taking down the trees, the cutters are undoing the handiwork of nature, the handiwork of God. Someone no doubt had “good reasons” for taking down the Plane Trees; reasons that had to do with human aspiration and convenience.

But, I ask you, who are we to undo the handiwork of God, and to laugh while we do it, as if it were all in a days work?

I was among those who gathered in late March to witness the 100 plus year-old Oak tree in the Harvard Divinity School courtyard being cut down. On that day there was a fine gray rain. The chainsaws screamed, giving off the sour burned smell of saw on fresh wood. Piece by piece, a tall crane picked up the crown of the tree, its thick branches, and finally its trunk, and moved them across the sky over Andover Hall’s Gothic roof. The great trunk hung eerily suspended above us. Some love-inspired vandal had written on it in white spray-paint :“Goodbye Humans. Good Luck. You’re going to Need It.” The parts of the tree were set down in a monstrous pile on the Andover green. An enormous truck with an arm and iron claw plucked the severed pieces from the pile and dropped them with loud THUNKS into the truck bed, then hauled them away. Many of us who witnessed the taking down of the Divinity Oak felt, like Mews, that the experience cast a shadow over *our* spring,

a time meant to be a season of renewal, not death. We were witnessing the ending of the life of an ancient tree, a being who was in the way of the forces of progress, right smack in the middle of where Harvard Divinity School wanted to build an addition to Andover Hall. And so,

# HURT NOT THE TREES

GRETCHEN LEGLER  
MDIV '20

despite our attempts to save it, the tree came down.

In Revelation 7, which the poet Mews quotes at the beginning of her poem, there is struggle going on between the forces of destruction and the forces of rebirth and renewal. The voice that cries out “Hurt not the trees” is the voice of an angel who calls out to four other angels who have been given power to destroy the earth. The one angel begs of the others, “Hurt not the earth or the sea or the trees.” Hold off, the one angel says, until it can be determined who on earth deserves to be saved and who doesn’t. Perhaps the angel is saying, WAIT, let’s give everyone here one last chance.

A last chance for what? It’s clear that as human beings we have given the earth, the sea and the trees, all of nature, a hard time. We are destroying faster than we are renewing. We are coming to painfully understand that the earth is much more fragile than we ever imagined. Despite this knowledge, there are people in our world, like Mew’s woodcutters, who go blithely about business as usual. Truly, in one way or another we ALL participate in this destruction. The truth is, we haven’t managed, yet, in all of our time on Earth, to fully embrace our call as stewards of creation. We have not stepped up to being co-creators with the Divine on this inexplicably bounteous and beautiful earth. We have not stepped up to speaking out for life and nature, to which we are so firmly bound.

Earth Day is approaching. The date, April 22, falls in Eastertide, a period for Christians that falls between Easter Sunday and Pentecost Sunday. It is the season of *Resurrection*. A season for the restoration of life.

Scientists tell us, that it’s too late. We cannot unwarm the seas, uncut the trees, un-mine the mountaintops, or bring extinct species back from the dead. The question is no longer *whether* our planet is going to change dramatically and with terrible consequences for those who have the least. This is certain. The question, writes journalist Dahr Jamail, “is how

are we going to comport ourselves in the future? We’re going to have to learn how to say goodbye. . . , part of which should involve doing everything we humanly can to save whatever is left, even knowing that the odds are stacked against us.”

If we can’t resurrect the animals and trees and oceans that we have damaged beyond our ability to repair, what hope is there? There is a different kind of resurrection we can participate in—the restoration of our own hearts, the restoration of our relationship with the spirit in all things. We can make amends. We can listen. We can unmask the fantasy of *homo-centricity*—the idea that we, humans, are at the center of everything. If we are spiritual people, and if our faith is to inform how we act in the world, then we need to question the notion that nothing else but us is really *alive*, that everything in the world is made for us to consume or use for our human happiness and comfort. Our dominion, according to Genesis, is for the purpose of care, not plunder.

Where is the good news for us today as we contemplate the hurt we have done to the Earth? If we believe in the promise of resurrection—the promise that God is always at work overcoming death with life, then that means we are a people of hope. Or at least we are a people who believe the ending is still unwritten. How might we challenge ourselves to help create a better ending to the story of our lack of stewardship of the Earth?

Perhaps there is an opportunity, on this coming Earth Day, and all throughout Eastertide, to begin simply. . . by listening, by making amends, by bearing witness to the trees. “Perhaps if we listen deeply enough and regularly enough, we ourselves will become the song this planet needs to hear,” writes journalist Dahr Jamail.

Take up the invitation to be with a tree, to sit beneath it, to touch its bark, to pay attention to the ways it is performing the miracle of resurrection, *making spring*.

# MAKING RADICAL PROVISION AGAINST THE POWERS THAT BE!

ARIC FLEMMING  
MDIV '19



*Aric Flemming, MDiv '19 preached this sermon as a finalist for the Billings Preaching Prize at the Wednesday Noon Service on April 10, 2019. [Watch](#) all three finalists deliver their sermons!*

Mark 2: 9-12: Then Jesus says to the religious leaders who questioned him, “Which is easier, to say to the paralytic, ‘Your sins are forgiven,’ or to say, ‘Stand up and take your mat and walk’? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has the Power to forgive sins”—he looked at the Man in the Urgency of the text and said— “I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home.” And then the man stood up, and immediately got off his stretcher, picked it up and walked out the door...

As we continue through the Lenten season, the season of struggle toward victory, we are situated in a time Jesus served unrelentingly for proof of God’s power, not just for the notice of religious leadership.

The contextual analysis of this text is simply that Jesus had returned to his house in Capernaum, after traveling a long distance, and many had heard he was in town and were determined to call virtue out of his body for their own healing, well-being, and victory over their imminent struggles, so they came to him in need of breakthrough and relief as word spread around that Jesus has returned. They saw his presence as an object of comfort and relief for their troubles. Just being around him was enough. May this Lenten season reveal to us the power in being present with the compulsory inescapable struggles of other people even as we struggle with the enemies that lurk within us.

And just as we would expect, as we would see, as we would collectively observe, Jesus begins ministering to them regardless of their exigencies to sacrifice more of himself and his virtue, even before taking one step on the Via Dolorosa to an inevitable crucifixion. And while knowing this, Jesus began to teach them. But he taught so well, until the house was completely full that no additional people were able to get in. (I’d like to parenthetically pause and tell you that whatever you do, do it so well until you fill the house.)

And not long after Jesus began teaching them, the narrative tells us that an ambulance of four men were carrying a paralyzed brother come rolling on a stretcher to the nearest Capernaum Home Medical Center to see Dr. Jesus, and they were just as determined to get to Jesus as everyone else crowded around him. But when they got there, they found out there was no more room for them. (I imagine that Jesus found solidarity with their experience because at his birth, the gospels suggest that there was no room made for them in the Inn.) So these brothers traveled to the roof of the house and began stripping it away in order to lay their friend down right at the feet of Jesus.

And of course, there were Pharisees—there are always Pharisees—those who marveled at the failure of Jesus, seeking an opportunity to catch him “slipping up” (in the words of Childish Gambino). They were quick to criticize and lackadaisical in their hearing, always anticipating a slip up until they slipped into exposure. And by this they questioned his desire to heal a man in need.

The text tells us before verse 9 that first, they interrogated his forgiving power, and had not considered the fact the Jesus had not healed man just yet, but all he did was forgive his sins, because the religious leaders believed that if your paraly-

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sis was likened to this man, it came as a result of a sin you or your parents had committed. BUT Jesus responded to them saying, "Which is easier to say? I forgive you, or stand and take up your bed?" Then he says. "But just so you know that I can do both, just so you know that I can forgive sins and heal, I'll prove it to you!" So often we fail to see the opportunities we possess as "children of light" to begin with forgiving the sins of those who wrongfully despise us and then continue by extending a hand of healing and hope for a world wrought with self-righteous capitalism, bondage of the oppressed, and no prescription for the broken in Ukraine, no solace for our indigenous brothers and sisters in Haiti, no valuable victories in an oppressive Trump Era for women and people of color, and no willingness to even imagine the lived experiences of someone other than ourselves!

And yet in the midst of this, Jesus says, regardless of what everyone else thinks about me extending my hand to you, "I say to you who are oppressed, I say to you who are burdened and heavy laden, I say to you who are being mistreated by the ills of an unjust society, I say to you who are homeless without a clue of where the next meal may appear, I say to you who are grieving the loss of loved ones, I say to you who were rejected from those schools that didn't deserve to have you, I say to you who struggle with mental illness, and even to you who are so alone that you don't have friends who will carry you to Dr. Jesus, I say to you, stand up take up your mat and go home.

But one must wonder why this man's healing was an issue for the Pharisees. This one had nothing to do with the time of day or reverence to a holy custom. However, there is a social system in place at the time of our text according to scholars of antiquity, a replica of any rites of passage that separates and segregates people by social class. (I'll tell you a little secret: In this rite of passage, in order for one to move into a higher social status, they had to pay a little something through the back door with the priest. What a shame when the mission of the church becomes co-opted by the corrupted state!)

Why are they so mad you ask? Well I'll tell you what's really going on, what's really happening in the text is that Jesus is breaking the Jewish Law, giving medical assistance and granting citizen access to someone who was not qualified for health insurance or immediate health-care of any kind.

Oh, yes, my brothers and sisters, the laws of antiquity said that if you were sick, lame, and broken, you were made an out-cast from society, therefore disqualified, not adequately fit to live, eat, breathe, see, or step foot on the grounds of the city; and *the only way* for you to come into the city, was to pay Top Dollar to the priests and religious leaders of the synagogue so they could pray a blessing over you, give you a new ID, and grant you access into the city.

And after you read the text, you see that Jewish leaders possessed all the Laws about qualification, but Jesus healed the man, and gave him a New Identity and did not charge him a dime. That is, indeed, the mission of his church.

And all of this happens at once because there was not room made for them in the beginning. I just want to ask you this afternoon that even while we are all hurting, while we are all in need of some degree of healing, wanting to pull virtue from Jesus, my question is, Who will you make room for even as you go after what you need? Who will you carry with you on your way toward wholeness, toward happiness, toward freedom, toward liberation? But not just those. Who will you carry with you on your way to forgiveness, to prayer, to justice, righteousness, and to peace?

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Jesus' radical empathy exemplified in the cosmological essence of the supernatural manifested on earth through the divine gifting that rests in each of us would suggest that even though I may be in need of a miracle myself, it will always be my responsibility to care for someone else. Because if I were in their shoes and could not get to Dr. Jesus on my own, I would want someone to make room for me and carry me to Jesus to get what I need!

Let us learn to make radical provisions against the Powers that Be! For those that need them, even as we co-exist in an inescapable web of mutual of struggle, hoping someone will live to fight another day for us!



Photo by Brian Tortora

# LOOK UP FROM YOUR SORROW

BRIDGET POWER  
MDIV '19



*Bridget Power, MDIV '19 preached this sermon in the Billings Preaching Marathon in Divinity Chapel on April 4, 2019. [Watch](#) the three Billings Preaching finalists preach their sermons on April 10, 2019!*

John 5:31-47

Jesus said to the Jews: "If I testify on my own behalf, my testimony is not true. But there is another who testifies on my behalf, and I know that the testimony he gives on my behalf is true. You sent emissaries to John, and he testified to the truth. I do not accept human testimony, but I say this so that you may be saved. He was a burning and shining lamp, and for a while you were content to rejoice in his light. But I have testimony greater than John's. The works that the Father gave me to accomplish, these works that I perform testify on my behalf that the Father has sent me. Moreover, the Father who sent me has testified on my behalf. But you have never heard his voice nor seen his form, and you do not have his word remaining in you, because you do not believe in the one whom he has sent. You search the Scriptures, because you think you have eternal life through them; even they testify on my behalf. But you do not want to come to me to have life.

"I do not accept human praise; moreover, I know that you do not have the love of God in you. I came in the name of my Father, but you do not accept me; yet if another comes in his own name, you will accept him. How can you believe, when you accept praise from one another and do not seek the praise that comes from the only God? Do not think that I will accuse you before the Father: the one who will accuse you is Moses, in whom you have placed your hope. For if you had believed Moses, you would have believed me, because he wrote about me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words?"

Before I begin, I want to thank my classmate, Shannon Boley, for inviting me to preach today. To my friend, Louisa Fish-Sadin, who inspired me with her preaching at this event last year. And to Patty Simpson, our HDS Catholic Chaplain, for encouraging me to participate.

As a Catholic woman, it is rare to have the opportunity to preach in a setting like this. To be able to reflect upon the Word of God, to take a few minutes to share that reflection, and to be heard.

This is not an experience that my mother, my grandmothers, my great-grandmothers ever had, but it is a privilege that I have been able to have now on three occasions at HDS.

First, in a class taught by Professor Stephanie Paulsell. Second, during a mass at the invitation of Fr. Frank Clooney, and third, today. Thank you.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus rebukes those listening to him for not believing in him. He seems frustrated, resentful, and maybe even a bit angry. These are qualities that I don't like to associate with Jesus, but here they are in John's fifth chapter. Underneath this frustration, resentment, and anger, I see disappointment.

Those who listen to Christ are not "getting it." They are not getting who he is, or what he is about. They are there. They are hearing him. But they are not understanding him.

And how does he cope? He continues on with his ministry. Jesus gets into a boat and travels across the Sea of Galilee. With loaves of bread and fish, he miraculously feeds the people who follow him. He nourishes them spiritually. He walks on water. He teaches. He goes on. Through his resilience, he sets an example of how to handle such disappointments.

Like Jesus, I experience frustration, anger, and sadness. I experience pain, and I see the pain of others. We all do.

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For example, one of the students who I work with is dealing with debilitating anxiety. Another one seems depressed and keeps sleeping through his classes. One of my family members recently got fired from his job. My college roommate has an eight-month old baby, and just left her husband. My friend's mom is dying of cancer. Wars wage on. Inequality persists and expands. This is what Ann Lamott calls "the grubbiness of suffering."

In these moments, when I am stressed and sad, I tend to focus on these sorrows, and then I sleep. I get into bed and hide. It may not be the healthiest strategy, but that's how I give myself time to cope. But eventually, my alarm rings. I have classes that I have to go to, commitments that I need to uphold, and so I usually drag myself out of bed. I leave my room, I go out into the world and I find myself inspired by the people who I encounter. I see people living courageously, and this brings me hope.

The other morning, my student emailed our dean that she needed help, and so she walked over to urgent care for a mental health appointment. Concerning situation, but still HOPE!

My college roommate has been able to meet up with her ex-husband so that he can see their child, and the meetings haven't been terrible. HOPE!

New buds are brimming along the pathways as I walk to HDS. The flowers will be here soon. Winter is ending. HOPE!

An acquaintance of mine took his first swimming lesson this week at the age of twenty-six. HOPE!

What I see in today's Gospel reading is Jesus, being fully human. He is frustrated. Maybe furious. He is pained by the lack of understanding that he perceives in others

But then chapter six of the Gospel of John begins. It says

that some time passes, and Jesus gets into the boat. Perhaps, like me, you sometimes find yourself stuck at this point, struggling to make the transition, to get into the boat. Instead of sailing ahead, the wind at my back, I'm pacing the shore, sweating and confused about what to do. And I forgot to pack a hat and sunscreen! So now my skin is burning, and I have sand in my eyes.

Or I find myself wading in the water with all my clothes on. Soaked, and weighed down by anxiety and grief, I am not able to hoist myself up into the boat.

I don't think we can do this – I don't think we can get into the boat - alone. At least I can't. I gain courage from the resilience that I see in others. They inspire me to look up from the sorrow, to look out, and to look around. To be able to see beautiful things and experience joy.

And maybe that joy is small - but I am experiencing it! Maybe it's just the sight of anticipation in the eyes of a cute dog looking for attention or a swarm of tourists and selfie sticks marching through Harvard Yard, clearly loving it, that can bring me joy. Maybe it's something more substantial, like a "hello" or a conversation with a friend.

These moments of recognition and connection, of realizing that I am not alone, help me to face my sorrow and get into the boat.

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