



Con*Spiracies*

BREATHING TOGETHER THE BREATH OF LIFE

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Conspiracies

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INTRODUCTION

This issue of *ConSpiracies* features many of the sermons preached in Harvard Divinity School's 2015 Billings Preaching Competition. In 1904, Robert Charles Billings established a fund to recognize preaching and "pulpit delivery" among HDS students. This bequest continues to fund the Billings Preaching Prize through a preaching contest open to second and third year HDS MDiv students.

Nearly two dozen MDiv students, representing a variety of religious and non-religious traditions, participated in the competition in April 2015. Four finalists were chosen from among the pool, and they preached at a special Wednesday Noon Service of the School. You can watch them [here](#). (Spoiler alert: Christopher Whiteman won first place.)

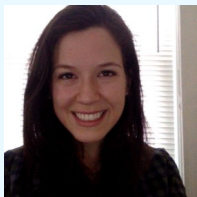
Many of those of who were not chosen as finalists graciously allowed us to publish their manuscripts in this issue of *ConSpiracies*. We hope you will enjoy them as you catch a glimpse of the breadth and significance of the art of preaching as it is taught and practiced at HDS.



The lectern in Andover Chapel at Andover Hall, where the annual Billings Preaching Prize finals takes place.
Photo: J. Beasley

TAKE OFF YOUR SHOES - YOU'RE WALKING ON JESUS!

AMY NORTON
MDiv '16



Amy Norton is a second-year MDiv, focusing on Christian ministry. She is currently a Member in Discernment for ordination within the United Church of Christ.

Exodus 3:2-6. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, "I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up." When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then he said, "Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground." He said further, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

"Take off your sandals- remove your shoes from your feet [...] the ground you are standing on is Holy." Holy ground, sacred landscape, this concept is present from the very beginnings of the Judeo-Christian tradition, and yet as Christianity developed, we became hesitant to acknowledge the sanctity of our land, afraid that our reverence may devolve, or evolve, depending on where we are standing, into heresy.

We are afraid to acknowledge sacred ground. And yet our prayers, our scriptures, our traditions abound with mentions of elemental epiphanies - sacred fire, sacred

water, sacred wind. Moses alone could tell you stories upon stories about that. Sacred flames that engulfed and yet preserved a nearby shrub, that stretched into a pillar of holy light to guide the Israelites as they escaped slavery in the night, sacred water whose vapor formed the pillar of cloud that lead the way to freedom during the day; sacred wind that parted the Red Sea, providing a passageway out of bondage. Our God is an elemental God, an all-encompassing God, abiding between and beyond; in our midst and yet entirely ungraspable. Have you ever tried grabbing a handful of fire? Hopefully no one's answer to that is actually 'yes.' Taking hold of fire is just about as hard as grasping a fistful of water...or air. All of these things can touch us, our bodies can feel them, we need all three to sustain our life, and yet, we cannot hold them.

Earth, however. We can hold onto earth pretty easily. We can scoop nice big fistfuls of it, and it stays right there in our hands, teeming with potential life. And maybe that's why we're so scared to acknowledge it as an epiphany. Maybe we are overwhelmed by its immediacy. Maybe we assume that its stationary, graspable, stable nature lends itself too easily to becoming an idol; we can imagine Rachel's idols of the 'old gods' carried alongside a pocketful of earth as she travels to a new home with Jacob.

Now, I recently read an essay by eco-theologian Catherine Keller, who laments the "absence of earth-epiphany" in our scripture, and yet, I think in our reading from exodus today, God makes it clear that the dusty earth is just as much an epiphany as the flames that engulfed the burning bush, or the wind that parted the

ocean (Kearns & Keller, 73). Take off your sandals, for the ground on which you stand is holy. It's tempting to think that this refers to a location, the way we might say the site where God revealed the Quran to the prophet Mohammed is sacred, or the tomb from which Jesus was resurrected is sacred. But what if God is telling Moses, what if God is telling us, that the substance is what's holy, the very earth itself? After all, is this not the same earth from which God scooped up the dust to create the first man in God's own image?

Ashes to ashes, dust to dust. From dust you came and to dust you shall return. These familiar phrases go to show how embedded in our cultural consciousness the idea of our earthly, or rather, earthy, origin is. And while scripture tells us that God breathed divine breath into the earthen form to create a living, soulful being, we humans, dusty as we are, are not considered divine revelations. Well, none of us, except for one. And I bet you can guess who I'm talking about. I'll give you a hint. In 1st Corinthians, Paul tells the story of two Adams, two beings of adamah, of earth. Paul says, "thus it is written, 'the first man became a living being' the last Adam became a life-giving spirit". Now, we know who this first man, this first Adam is: it's Adam, the first man, created by God out of dust, in the Genesis story. But what about the other Adam Paul mentions? This "last Adam" who became a "life-giving spirit"? Spoiler alert, it's Jesus. We often talk about Jesus as being fully divine, and fully human. Well if to be human means to be dust, if to be of Adam means to be of the adamah, in the words of Karen Baker Fletcher, "Jesus is fully spirit and fully dust. Jesus as God incarnate is spirit embodied in dust" (Baker-Fletcher, 17-18).

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And why shouldn't that be our earth-epiphany? Jesus was as graspable as the earth under our feet. Though some might say he was as fleeting as the wind or the fire, Jesus was the logos, the wisdom of God, incarnate in flesh. So there you have it, folks. Jesus is our earth epiphany. Jesus was the dusty fleshy incarnation of God. That's all there is to it, right? Wrong. This being the season of Easter, you probably can guess that I still have a few more themes up my sleeve. It's like when you're watching House of Cards on Netflix and everything seems neatly tied up and you think the episode must be over until you see that there are still fifteen minutes left and so you know the real juicy stuff is yet to come.

In pursuit of that juicy stuff, I want us to take a step back and recap where we are at this moment, theologically. We've heard about God being present in the wind and the fire and the water, and now we're talking about how Jesus is God's presence in the dust, in the earth. Liturgically, we are in the season of Easter, marking the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, this dusty incarnation of God. Easter brings with it the hope for new life, the promise of resurrection, renewal, and rejuvenation. In many ways, so does Earth Day. Earth Day is a time when we recommit to God's creation, when we recognize all the ways we may have stumbled in our roles as stewards, and when we renew our promise to take better care of God's earth, of our earth. Tying together the earth's renewal with our spiritual renewal is not a modern concept. As Mark Wallace points out, even the apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans (8:19-23), tells of how Creation waits to be "set free from its bondage to decay, and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of

God." Paul continues, "We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies". We await the resurrection and deliverance of our earth, just as we await each year the resurrection of Christ come Easter. If we are to make that connection, however, if we are hold on to Jesus as an earth epiphany, if we are to acknowledge the sanctity of the spirit incarnate in the dusty earth, we must also acknowledge that we are presently recreating Christ's wounds by way of our planet. I return here to Mark Wallace, who explains that,

"when we plunder and lay waste to the earth, the Spirit suffers as God's presence on a planet that is enduring the loss of natural resources and cascading species extinction. The spirit is the injured sacred, the enfleshed reality of the divine life who grieves over what may become a lost planet, at least for human habitation and that of countless other species. As the Spirit is the suffering God, so also is the body, so to speak, of the Spirit's worldly presence, the earth itself, the wounded sacred"(301).

We are in the middle of earth's Maundy Thursday, the night of betrayal, headed swiftly toward Good Friday, the day of its crucifixion and death. Now I tend to try to err on the side of hopeful, to not be a fire and brimstone type of preacher, and I promise you the hopeful part of this sermon is coming, but just as we can't arrive at Easter without passing through Good Friday, I can't get to the hope for earth's renewal without lamenting the fact that each species extinction is a lash on the

body of Christ. Each forest cut down, each oilrig in the North Sea, each smokestack spewing smog into the atmosphere is a thorn in the crown atop Christ's head. We celebrate Easter every year and yet we continue to crucify creation, the very substance of our dusty, earthy Christ.

After his resurrection, when Jesus appeared to his disciples, all Thomas could touch was his wounds. Christ's spirit went by way of the ungraspable water, fire, and wind. All that was left was the wounded flesh, the wounded dust embodied. As Wallace remarks, "The spirit of God and an earth scarred by human greed body forth the wounded sacred in our time" (301). If we continue to degrade and crucify the Spirit as it resides in our earth, all we will be left with are its wounds.

Our tradition is a hopeful tradition. Our tradition is a tradition centered on the triumph of life over death, of liberation over oppression. Let us hold on to Easter's promise of resurrection as we turn our hearts and minds to the wounded sacred in our time. Let us acknowledge the sacred ground, the very substance of the revelation of the dusty, earthen Christ. Let us anoint the earth with our respect and gratitude, let us take up our crosses and in Jesus' words, "go and sin no more." Let us make a promise, with God's help, to cease our desecration of the Spirit.

Many Christians often think about what we would do or say were we living in Jesus' time, what we might do if we were in the crowd before Pontius Pilate on that fateful day of trial. What we need to recognize is that we are in that crowd today, that there is still hope to rescue God's spirit from a second crucifixion.

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Friends will you join me in prayer: Creator God, God of the mercurial winds and still waters alike, of the sacred fire and the dusty Christ, we pray today that you help us acknowledge and revere your spirit as it resides in our earth, in your earth. We ask that you instill in us the courage to speak out and halt the desecration of your creation, that you instill in us the wisdom to find you not just in moments of awe at the wind, the fire, or the water, but in the earth we trod daily. Let us make disciples of all nations, as we proclaim to our earthly brothers and sisters, "take off your shoes, for the ground on which you are standing is holy." Amen.

Work Cited:

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Ryan Cogswell, MDiv '15 and finalist in the annual Billings Preaching Prize competition, delivers his sermon entitled "Let's Talk About Sin."

Photo: Jonathan Beasley

A DIFFERENT KIND OF WORLD

ANGIE THURSTON
MDiv '16



Angie Thurston is a second-year MDiv focused on deepening spiritual community among young people amidst increasing religious disaffiliation.

I was a silent child. To keep busy, I made elaborate crayon drawings. They looked like commingled blotches of saturated color. When I finished each drawing, I named it. *A Different Kind of House. A Different Kind of Bird. A Different Kind of Rose.*

My mom framed *A Different Kind of Rose*. Like many great mothers before her, mine un-secretly believed she was harboring a prodigy.

To my mother's mind, two-year-old Angela had looked at the rose and thought: I see you, and I could draw you as you are, but I have no patience for the world as it is. I imagine a different kind of world. I will draw what I imagine.

In fact, I looked at the rose and thought: I see you, and I want so badly to draw you just as you are! But I have these fat, clumsy little hands, and I can't do it. I am frustrated and ashamed of my incompetence. I will hide it. I will pretend that the difference between what I meant to do, and what I did, was on purpose.

A Different Kind of Rose was a sham.

With this in mind, I'd like to talk about Harvard Business School.

The mission of Harvard Business School is to educate leaders who make a difference in the world.

I am taking my second class there now. A fellow student, I'll call her Melinda, told me about her first month of school. She said, I'm an engineer from Ohio. I came here to get an MBA. But after a month, things changed. I am now here to make a difference in the world. And I'm so in debt that I have to.

Melinda told me the mission was reiterated relentlessly in her first month of school. Drilled at orientation, discussed in small groups, and infused into classroom culture. She and her classmates are smart, and they readily identify the omission in the mission.

Educate leaders who make a difference in the world. What kind of difference? And why? What compass guides when difference is good, or necessary? In other words, what does it mean to be faithful to this text?

Forbes ranks business schools by a single metric: return on investment. How much more money does the average graduate make, five years out, than she did before the MBA. Harvard ranks third. The average 2008 graduate was making 80 thousand dollars when she got here, and now she's making 205. Her turnaround time to paying back the 127 thousand dollar tuition is 4 years.

So making a difference in the world must at least include making money.

I went to a memorial for my uncle Joe in October. He was 53. Joe graduated literally number one in his class from a similar top-ten business school and went on to open Morgan Stanley in Asia, among other things. By the money metric, he made a difference in the world.

For reasons I may someday write a play about, I didn't know my uncle Joe. But I got to know him some at the memorial. In his high school yearbook, instead of a quote, he had a paragraph about the cult he was starting called Moosism. There was a video of him doing a song and dance about the tenets of the cult, wearing antlers. It was a joke, but who knew my MBA uncle was thinking about religion in high school. Who knew that his expensive art collection took root in a dreamy childhood, one where he always saw the beauty in things. Like houses, and birds, and roses.

I didn't know Joe, but I bore him a family resemblance.

There were good reasons why I missed my chance, in this life, to understand what compass guided the choices he made. But I wonder, was there any difference between what Joe meant to do, and what he did? Does family mean a responsibility to be part of that conversation?

A friend of mine, who wrote a book about Occupy Wall Street, says the young people protesting in front of churches were not saying, down with the church. They were saying, Church, Act like a church! Take responsibility for your brothers and sisters in that

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glass office tower next door. Sometimes what we do is different from what we mean to do. But we do it. Sometimes the world we make is different from the world we mean to make. But we make it. Help us make a better one.

We share a campus with 1800 brothers and sisters who are being enculturated to make a difference in the world while amassing a great deal of money. What is our responsibility, to them, for them, and with them?

I do this thing in my business school classroom. I look at each face around me and I feel this: Child of God. Child of God. Child of God.

Each one of them is what Desmond Tutu calls a God-carrier. And so am I. These would-be consultants and venture capitalists are my siblings. And to feel this is a dangerous game.

Because sometimes appalling things are said in that classroom. I want to hold on to my righteous indignation. How could she? But the sibling thing wins out. I have a vested interest in my sister, this other God-carrier. I desire to understand why she would say a thing like that. Really, how could she?

So I start finding out. I start getting to know the viewpoint, the reason, for such objectionable conduct. I start to understand her motives and sentiments. And, alarmingly, I start to love her.

Discussion is most of our grade, so I get to hear from these people a lot. And the more I learn of their intentions, their confusion, and sometimes, their nobility, the more I start to love them.

This loving is the desire to do good to them. What does that look like?

Around HDS, we often decry the systems of greed and oppression that hold our world hostage. We cite Harvard's role in all this, registering our discontent to be part of the institution that breeds the Jeffrey Skillings of the world. But we are part of it. This is our family.

Family, act like a family.

If Jeffrey Skilling was in a classroom across the river right now,

would we be doing anything to take responsibility for our brother? Would we dare reach forth to grasp him in love and sweep him on under spiritual guidance toward some higher and divine goal of existence? Or would we leave him to make a difference in the world by making money at all costs?

Who can we be for each other so that this time, this generation, there is no difference between what we mean to do, and what we do? So we don't have to dismantle new systems of greed and oppression because this time we took responsibility for making sure we didn't create them the first place?

Even better, what might we create together? 1800 people across the river are committed to making the world different. What if HDS actually provided the spiritual compass for that group project, to help guide different to better? Would we be up for that? Would we be ready to take responsibility for being that relevant? For looking each brother in the eye and saying, we're family, let's figure this out together?

And if not, then what kind of world are we making?



His Holiness the 17th Gyalwang Karmapa Ogyen Trinley Dorje blesses students and visitors in the Braun Room at HDS, by placing katas around their necks.
Credit: Kris Snibbe

LAYLAT AL-QADR Khatira: WON'T SOMEONE PLEASE THINK OF THE CHILDREN?

ANNE MYERS
MDiv '15



Anne Myers is a third year MDiv focusing on Muslim chaplaincy.

Note: This khatira is intended to be read on Laylat al-Qadr after 'isha prayer and before the Khatm al-Qur'an.

Bismillah ar-Rahman ar-Rahim.

Not much is known about little Yocheved Farber. We know that she was born into a devout Jewish family in Poland, daughter of Zipporah and Kalman. We know some of the toys she played with, including a loom and a small, knitted Torah scroll. We know she spent years living in the squalor and dire poverty of the Vilna Ghetto, surviving off of food that her father managed to smuggle in. And we know that in March 1944, when she was six years old, she and many other Jewish children were rounded up by the Nazis and murdered. As limited as this information about Yocheved is, we are lucky to have even this much; countless other children who were massacred during the Holocaust have left no traces of their existence and are known only to Allah.

I "met" Yocheved at the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York City. Yocheved's story in particular stood out to me. Named after the mother of our Prophet Musa, her family was devout and committed to maintaining their religious observance even in the midst of unspeakable horror, as evidenced by reports that Kalman was a rabbinical student and that Zipporah ensured that their meager food rations were kosher. The toy Torah scroll, with the

message "Blessed is He Who has given us the Torah" embroidered on the front, indicates that Yocheved was being taught at a young age to love and show gratitude to Allah. Despite using different terminology and slightly different concepts, this level of observance is likely something with which many Muslims are familiar. This devotion and reliance on Allah even in the most trying circumstances is something that we as Muslims should take as a beautiful example. I'm sure it is our hope that if, Audhubillah, we were ever in a similar desperate situation, we would be like the Farbers and pass on our knowledge and love to our own Yocheveds.

It is estimated that around 1.5 million children were murdered during the Holocaust; the vast majority of these children were Jews, but Roma, Slavs, and disabled children were also among the victims, deemed "life unworthy of life" by the Nazis. Often, when folks today think about or discuss the Holocaust, we explain it as droves of people that were persecuted and tortured by a monstrous government due (in most cases) to their race and religious beliefs. However, this explanation, while not incorrect, is extremely simplistic and ignores the roots of the problem. The Nazis were not some mass of people that rose up out of the blue and started wreaking havoc on Europe, nor were they able to accomplish all that they did on their own. They also weren't born hating anyone. In a hadith narrated by Bukhari and Muslim which clarifies this ayah, the Prophet says that each child is born in a state of fitrah, meaning that every child is inherently inclined to worship Allah and to do good. Through education and societal conditions, children learn to value and normalize certain things, for

better or for worse. Yocheved and a German Aryan child born in the same year as her were, for all intents and purposes, equal. The social paradigm of Europe at that time, though, was such that the Aryan child was taught that they were inherently superior to everyone else, and that certain people, Yocheved included, deserved to suffer and die.

The culture of Nazi Germany was a culture of violence. Jews, Roma, homosexuals, disabled people, and other groups were obviously the targets of individual and state-sponsored violence, manifesting itself from the denial of basic civil rights to being rounded up and either killed or forced into slavery at concentration and death camps. One can argue that, albeit to a much less extreme extent, German Aryan children were also subjected to a more subtle kind of violence. The Nazi regime was one that made heavy use of propaganda to get the German public to support its domestic and international policies, and much of this propaganda was geared towards children in order to mold them into loyal supporters of Nazi ideology from a young age. Books and games, for example, were released that portrayed Germans as moral and innocent and Jews as sneaky and malicious that were out to corrupt Aryan children. The Hitler Youth and League of German Girls organizations further indoctrinated children, even encouraging children to report any family members that may speak out against the regime. Some guards and SS men who lived and worked at Auschwitz brought their families, including their children, to live with them on the grounds, where the children witnessed unspeakable horrors committed against other humans and children like themselves. Even though these actions didn't involve physical

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ANNE MYERS
MDiv '15

violence being imposed on them, they were socially and emotionally violent in that they were essentially teaching impressionable children to hate certain people and ideas, and preparing them to wage war to spread Nazism. Indeed, Hans and Sophie Scholl, two young people who led the White Rose resistance group, stated that Nazism "turns German young people into godless, shameless, unscrupulous murderers" (Bergin 210-211).

This culture of hate and violence is unfortunately not a thing of the past, far from it. Just this past summer, the world witnessed too many examples of this. In the offense on the people of Gaza by the Israeli military, a disproportionate amount of those injured and killed were Gazan children (may Allah grant all of them Paradise). Casualties continue to mount in Syria, with children being killed, dying of starvation and exposure, or being left orphans. Masses of children from Central America came to the United States border alone, hoping to find safety and opportunities, and were detained. Tamir Rice was murdered by a police officer for the "crime" of being black. When we are constantly bombarded with this terrible news, it's very easy for us to disengage, say "what a shame", maybe donate a few dollars to relief funds, and assume that all we can do is make du'a for those who are suffering. No one is discounting giving to charities or making du'a, of course, but these events do not happen in a vacuum. They are a result of ages of perpetuating structural injustice and inequalities, and the glorification of violence. Israeli children grow up with the expectation that one day they will have to perform military service, along with being exposed to a narrative that they live surrounded by people that

hate them and must be ready and willing to fight. Palestinian children, likewise, are negatively impacted on a daily basis by Israeli military occupation and are also fed a narrative that they are surrounded by people that hate them and must be ready and willing to fight. In places with longstanding conflict like Iraq and Somalia, some children grow up knowing nothing but a society devastated by violence. Across the world, children suffer from physical, emotional, verbal, and sexual abuse at the hands of adults in their lives. Is it any wonder, then, that in every generation there are so many people who resort to violence?

We now ask, "what can we do?" Recall the hadith of the Prophet (saw) where he says, "Whoever among you sees an evil action, let him change it with his hand; if he cannot, then with his tongue; and if he cannot, then with his heart—and that is the weakest of faith". We are commanded to enjoin the good and forbid the evil in whatever ways we can; inaction and indifference is simply not an option. The first thing we can do is to bear witness to the plight of children worldwide. Bearing witness, acknowledging the truth, is so crucial that it's the first and most important pillar of our entire religion. We need to educate ourselves and not shy away from uncomfortable truths. Read articles and books about children's issues. Attend lectures or rallies where survivors of childhood violence are speaking. If your child comes home from school saying they've been bullied or hurt by another child or adult, don't brush it off as "not that serious" or as an exaggeration. Let them see that you are concerned about them and will work on their behalf to ensure that this injustice will not continue. Allah is ash-

Shaheed, the Ultimate Witness, and we as humans are expected to exercise our limited witnessing power for the greater good.

The second thing we can do is to try to challenge the culture of violence and structural inequalities that exist in our society that harm both children and adults. This is, to be sure, no easy task, but unless people take active stands against these systems, they won't go anywhere and will continue to harm generation after generation. Write letters to your local and national representatives urging them to support policies that are non-oppressive to everyone. Get involved in community service work that cares for needy people. Even more critical is to involve your own children in all of these things. Have them come along with you to volunteer work, or organize community service projects through schools or scout groups. Teach them about racism, sexism, classism, and other systematic, societal oppressions. Education and modeling good character is absolutely essential to raising children that will be good Muslims and good world citizens. It's understandable to feel that our efforts are so small and pointless in the grand scheme of things, but we must not let this discourage us. Many Gentiles in Europe, including Muslims, risked their lives to save the lives of thousands of Jews during the Holocaust. While their efforts didn't stop the Holocaust, they did preserve the lives of people that would otherwise have been killed. Both the Qur'an and the Talmud state that whoever saves one life will be as if they had saved all of mankind. Change starts small and works its way up, and Insha'Allah Allah will not let our efforts ever go to waste.

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ANNE MYERS
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Finally, and most importantly, we can always make du'a. Du'a is the most powerful weapon in our arsenal and one that should never be overlooked, remembering that Allah has dominion over all the affairs of the world. Tonight especially on Laylat al-Qadr, the night that is better than a thousand months, situated in the holiest month of the year, I implore all of us to pray for all the children of the world. Ya Allah, let them learn peace and reject violence. Ya Allah, bless all the Yocheveds of the world who are suffering from violence and systematic oppression, and grant them comfort and freedom from their suffering. Ya Allah, as your appointed khalifahs for this planet, please help us to dismantle all the systems in place that perpetuate harm towards children and adults, and let us remember our responsibility to those who bear the brunt of this harm. Ya Allah, we lift up our hands to you in du'a, and ask you to guide us all to the Straight Path, the Path of those that You have favored, not the Path of those who earn Your Anger, nor of those who go astray. Ameen.

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The HDS Garden Group waters seedlings to be planted in the community garden once again.

Photo: Kristie Welsh

THE FEMININE FACE OF GOD

CHRIS ALBURGER
MDiv '15



Chris Alburger is a third year MDiv on the ordination track to be a Unitarian Universalist minister. Chris is currently a Ministerial Intern at University Lutheran Church.

Before Judaism became monotheistic, Yahweh had a wife. She was also a God: a Goddess. Her name was Asherah. She was powerful and nurturing. The ancient Israelites worshipped both Yahweh and Asherah in the same sacred temple in Jerusalem—as a divine pair, God & Goddess, mother & father.

Ashera's sacred symbol was the tree. There are many connections between her and the tree of life. A sacred grove stood outside the Temple in her honor. In the 7th century BCE, King Manasseh of Judah even placed a symbol of Ashera inside the Holy Temple, signifying how central she was to worship.

My first year at HDS, when the Dead Sea Scrolls came to Boston, I was excited to go to the Museum of Science to see the exhibit. There, I saw about a hundred goddess figurines made out of red clay. I learned that archeologists have uncovered 2,000 goddess figurines which were commonly used in household worship, in ancient Israel.

Imagery and inscriptions on pottery from that time period invoke Yahweh and Ashera. A few traces of her remain in the Hebrew Bible, in references to “Yahweh and his Asherah” and the “Queen of Heaven.” But hardly anyone has heard of her today. So what happened to her?

When King Manasseh's grandson, Josiah, took the throne, he destroyed the statues of Asherah at the temple and cut down her sacred groves. Judaism became monotheistic, passing this on to Christianity and Islam, worshipping the divine only in male form.

Ashera was then removed and obscured by a long line of men who compiled and translated the scriptures. For example, “Ashera” has often been translated as simply “a tree” or “an idol”—with no mention of there ever having been a Goddess at all.

Imagine: 2,000 Goddess figurines, shattered.

Feminist scholar Lucinda Peach observes: “In Protestantism, which banned representations of the saints, women have been left with no female representations of the divine to balance against the male trinity of God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit” (Women & World Religions, “Women & Christianity,” 203).

Today, we live in a world in which masculine values—such as the pursuit of wealth, individualism, and achievement—are worshipped, admired, and celebrated. Whereas, feminine values—such as teaching, collectivism, and compassion—are all too often devalued, disdained, and degraded.

On top of that, what it means to be a man is often defined in opposition to what it means to be a woman. Misogyny bleeds into homophobia, leading to fear and disgust for feminine qualities in women or men. Hatred of women fuels the fear of men acting like women and women acting like men, both in terms of gender expression and sexual activity. These cultural forms of disgust and discrimination are the gendered penalties for not being “men,” which all too often define the boundaries of what it means to be a man: women are not men, transmen and transwomen are not men, gay men are not men, and lesbians are not men. Men suffer, too, when they are taught to devalue women and children and things that make them seem feminine.

Patriarchy has had a devastating effect on human relationships and the Earth. Society glorifies war over peace and wealth over the environment. Women and men alike have suffered the horrors of male-driven wars, in Iraq, Afghanistan, and many other parts of the



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world. Gaia, Mother Earth, has been devalued, exploited, and abused, the way women have been devalued, exploited, and abused. In the pursuit of profit, sacred mountains and sacred groves have been destroyed. The ozone and the ocean have been polluted, to the peril of us all.

The world is so out of balance from patriarchy. How might we help bring it back from the brink by turning to the feminine face of God? Let us take some time to reflect on the role of the sacred feminine in our lives and in the world.

What would it look like to reconstitute 2,000 shattered Goddess figurines?

I imagine us invoking the power of the feminine divine to love and honor all aspects of ourselves—and to love each other into greater wholeness. Such power has the potential to change human relationships and our relationship with the Earth.

The world was once alive with Goddesses and worship of the feminine divine.

From Greece: Artemis, the hunter. Athena, the Goddess of wisdom.

From Egypt: Hathor, Goddess of love & laughter. Noot, Goddess of the sky and the stars.

From Hawai'i: Pele, the Goddess of volcanoes. From Central America: Chicomecoatl, the Aztec Goddess of nourishment.

From China: Ma-Ku: the feminine spirit of goodness in all people.

These Goddesses were worshipped by both men and women.

Some of these Goddesses are associated with our concepts of femininity, like love and beauty. But then there's the Egyptian Goddess of Scorpions. How does that fit into our gender binary? Oh, right, it doesn't!

God is fundamentally transgender—beyond gender. And feminine language & imagery for the divine helps us see this. When we call God both our father in heaven and our mother, we see God in a different way.

Ancient female deities are diverse and multidimensional. They take us beyond the gender binary. They blow open our ideas of masculinity and femininity. They show us how gentleness can coexist with power, and tenderness and mercy can coexist with anger and justice. Female images of the divine show us a new way of relating to each other and to the universe.

Many Goddesses have a strength that does not sit well with the Victorian notion of "the weaker sex." They are not confined to the private sphere or the 1950's notion of women's work. In Greece, Hestia was the Goddess of the political realm, who oversaw town hall meetings and state affairs. Kali is the Hindu Goddess of death and destruction. Goddesses who are associated with motherhood are often portrayed as extremely powerful, even ferocious, like a mother bear or a lioness.

In fact, there has long been a connection between the feline and feminine divine. Stretch your mind back, before people were watching cat videos on YouTube, 8,000 years ago, to the beginning of cat worship. One of the earliest representations of the Mother Goddess Cybele, depicts her giving birth on her throne, with her hands on two lionesses at her side.

Reverence and awe for birth and creation seems to be where the initial impulse to worship came from. A Mother Goddess figurine, the



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Venus of Willendorf, has been called the oldest religious object in the world, dating back 30,000 years.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman asks: What would a birth-centered religion look like? She says it is more in line with social progress and the common good. "To the birth-based religion," she writes, "the main question is, 'What must be done for the child who is born?' [This gives itself to] an immediate altruism. thought leads inevitably to love and service, to defense and care and teaching, to all the labors that maintain and improve life." This "love and labor [extends outward in] the widening range of family, state, & world (Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *His Religion & Hers*, 45-47).

What I'm getting at is: understanding the world, the universe, as infused with a divine essence—which is not only masculine. I've always been told God is a man, when sometimes it feels like God is a woman. I prefer masculine pronouns for myself and feminine pronouns for God, because that helps balance things out.

When I pray, I pray to the Divine Mother of the Universe.

Contemplating the feminine divine, a gentler, life-giving spirit that moves through the universe and through our hearts allows me to experience infinite, unconditional love and channel this love in human relations.

At the level of our own lives, I'm talking about honoring the feminine in all of us. Femininity and masculinity are alive in all of us—and we embody so many qualities beyond the binary.

The world is in need of rebalancing the masculine and feminine. The world is in need of a healing feminine touch.

Last summer, the Harvard Business Review featured an article on how "Feminine Values Can Give Tomorrow's Leaders an Edge." John Gerzema conducted a huge, huge, study, polling 64,000 people from Europe to Asia to the Americas. The overwhelming majority said: "The world would be a better place if men thought more like women." People associated male leadership "with income disparity, high levels of unemployment and political gridlock."

Then they were asked to classify over 100 human characteristics as "masculine" or "feminine." It turns out, folks see "feminine" qualities as the ones that are "essential to leading in an increasingly social, interdependent and transparent world." In fact, 8 of the Top 10 qualities for modern leaders are viewed as feminine—including patience, flexibility, intuition, and collaboration (John Gerzema, "Feminine Values Can Give Tomorrow's Leaders an Edge").

The good news, of course, is that these are simply human characteristics and we can all cultivate them, whatever our gender, for the good of the world and for the good of ourselves.

What might it mean to invite more of the feminine divine into our spiritual lives? Let us give ourselves permission to experiment with different ways of being, and reconnect with parts of ourselves we may have been told were less than sacred. Let us celebrate the feminine—and masculine—in ourselves and the world. By appreciating all parts of ourselves and each other, we honor the feminine divine and contribute to a more peaceful and loving world.

May the power of the sacred feminine in us direct and sustain us, and lead us to a brighter future.

Amen. Blessed be.

THE LEFT SHARK IN ALL OF US

CYDNEY VAN DYKE
MDiv '16



Cydney Van Dyke is a second-year MDiv Candidate at Harvard Divinity School.

The passage I'll be preaching on today is taken from Judges 4: 17-19, and 20-22. Before I read the passage, I want to give a little background. This story is set in a time of war, violence, and many deaths. The Israelite army has just destroyed the Canaanite army who had come to conquer Israel. Thus their commander, Sisera, has fled to his known ally, Heber, who is a Kenite. Heber's wife, Jael, is an Israelite. Let us hear these words anew:

Now Sisera had fled away on foot to the tent of Jael wife of Heber the Kenite; Jael came out to meet Sisera, and said to him, "Turn aside, my lord, turn aside to me; have no fear." So he turned aside to her into the tent, and she covered him with a rug. He said to her, "Stand at the entrance of the tent, and if anybody comes and asks you, 'Is anyone here?' say, 'No.'" But Jael wife of Heber took a tent peg, and took a hammer in her hand, and went softly to him and drove the peg into his temple, until it went down into the ground—he was lying fast asleep from weariness—and he died. Then, as Barak came in pursuit of Sisera, Jael went out to meet him, and said to him, "Come, and I will show you the man whom you are seeking." So he went into her tent; and there was Sisera lying dead, with the tent peg in his temple.

Would you please pray with me? Dear God, we ask that your presence be known to us today as we try to make sense of a passage that leaves us questioning and concerned. We pray that we may be able to open our ears and our hearts to a message coming through these words. And we pray that we may be able to find them useful. Amen.

Now fully recognizing the troubling place in which the scripture reading ends, I want to set that aside for a bit. Instead, let's talk about the Superbowl. By this point in time you're likely to know about the most glorious creation that came out of Katy Perry's Halftime Show: Left Shark. See, Katy's beach themed set included 2 giant dancing plush sharks. One of the sharks, the Left Shark, seemingly forgot its choreography and the internet was set on fire. Whether intentional or not Left Shark was regarded as a hero for its individuality. And it was so great to have people responding positively to someone being different; not making fun or belittling, but actually praising them for their uniqueness.

Too frequently we tend to push away that which we are unfamiliar with, that which we don't understand, or that which doesn't fit in to what we think "ought" to be. So often this results in people getting boiled down into stereotypes or being told that the ways in which they express themselves are wrong, because it veers from what is traditional or expected. This happens to women all the time; when they are put into the narrow purview of being only care givers, nurturers, soft motherly figures. We can forget that women are humans who react and also interact with states of fear, hate, violence, aggression, protectiveness.

Women have a need and right to be fierce; to be allowed the flexibility to show the full range of their emotion and capabilities. Men and all others on the gender spectrum deserve this exact same thing.

I think we can get a little help with embracing complexity from Jael. There doesn't seem to be any hesitation presented in the story on Jael's behalf and I tried imagining what that moment was like for her. I found myself wondering if she waffled at all in her decision. If she paced around her tent, watching the most feared man in the Canaanite army, taking shelter and aid in her presence. I wonder if she questioned whether it was her place to be thinking about making a decision of this nature at all. On the other hand, I can imagine her thinking about how this is a time of war; how she could be saving so many lives by taking this one. Or perhaps she feared what kind of death would be in store for him when he was inevitably caught so she chose the quickest and least painful option available. We don't know.

It is no wonder that Jael's story is hardly ever heard. It's scary territory. But I see an important message permeating through. Jael has options. She can continue her role as provider of shelter, deliverer from war, giver of hospitality. She has already proven to be quite accommodating in those roles. Yet, she chooses to inhabit another quality that is infrequently seen in women: she becomes a warrior. Occupying the space of being fierce and allowing herself to do something that exists outside of her typical being.

I can't help but wonder if we would have less issue with this story if Jael was a man.

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Murdering someone in their sleep would still cause us great concern but, beyond that? Because I think we are desensitized to men killing or men expressing themselves in more violently driven ways. I think we tend to accept men to fulfill this role and women to fulfill the more docile counterpart without question. In doing so, we strip away the room for women and men to express themselves in ways that go against those traditional boundaries.

To this point, there is an incredible story that has been circling around the internet about Paul Nicklen, a contributing photographer for National Geographic. On a particular assignment in Antarctica, Nicklen was to photograph Leopard Seals in their natural environment. Now, if you know anything about Leopard Seals you know just how truly vicious predators they can be. While on this assignment, Nicklen found himself face to face with a giant Leopard Seal that was at least twice his size in body. Immediately the seal dropped the penguin it had caught and approached Nicklen, mouth spread wider than that of a Grizzly Bear's. The seal encompassed the entire camera and head of Nicklen and executed some threat warnings. Nicklen says he thought he was going to die in the mouth of that seal, but then something incredible happened. The seal, sensing that Nicklen posed no threat, dropped her—yes her—defensive behavior and instead, perceived the diver as a lost animal. She brought him a penguin to eat. Being of the non-penguin eating variety, Nicklen casually declined the gesture by allowing the penguin to swim away once out of the clutches of the seal, which seemed to trouble her. She began bringing him lame penguins so they would be easier to catch and then dead

penguins. She even began offering the penguin in pieces as to make sure he could eat.

Reportedly, she tried to feed, nurture, and take care of Nicklen for multiple days.

Biology aside, this seal gets it. She clearly doesn't think twice about being an aggressor towards a perceived threat but she also exhibits great care for another creature that has nothing to offer her in return. And because she is not a human living in a societal construct, she has no contention between those two elements of her expression. She is a Leopard Seal: she is a predator, a skilled killer, an aggressor, a care-giver, nurturer, provider, and is most hospitable, all at the same time. I think I should write to Nicklen and suggest he start referring to her as Jael.

Now, just to be perfectly clear, I'm not advocating for violence as a form of self-expression. And obviously, we are not Leopard Seals. But we can still learn from Jael the Leopard Seal and Jael, wife of the Kenite. They both show us that part of being authentic to one's personhood is to embrace all of the complexities one has. Sometimes the difficult parts of ourselves - the annoyances, quirks, idiosyncrasies, shortcomings, good intentions that fall flat - are just as important as all of our "best" qualities. Because being a Christian isn't just for the "best" self, it's for the full self. And sometimes being Christian requires us to be different; to be Left Sharks. But most of the time I think being a Christian's about loving the Left Shark in ourselves and others. Because God loves all of us. And God loves all of us. Amen.

ETHICS IN THE SHADOW OF GETHSEMANE

DOROTHY GOEHRING
MDiv '16



Dorothy Goehring is a second-year MDiv candidate at Harvard Divinity School. She is active as a member of the HDS Catholics group, a leader of Thursday Morning Eucharist, and a leader in several other capacities.

A reading from the Gospel of Matthew:

Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane; and he said to his disciples, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." He took with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and agitated. Then he said to them, "I am deeply grieved, even to death; remain here, and stay awake with me." And going a little farther, he threw himself on the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want." Again he went away for the second time and prayed, "My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done." (Matthew 26:36-39, 42.)

The Gospel of the Lord.

The character of Jesus has enthralled the world for over two thousand years, inspiring a major world religion, contributing to others, and providing a subject for debate and scrutiny for centuries. Scholars and theologians have offered interpretation after interpretation of who, exactly, this figure was—God, human, both, neither, and to what degree of each. The Gospels, being one of our most readily accessible texts regarding the Life and Times of Jesus, offers precious little in terms of figuring out in any definite terms who Jesus was. This is, very broadly speaking, what Christianity attempts to answer: who is this Jesus guy? What does it mean to say that he is the Son of God, the Messiah, the Savior? And what makes him such an influential figure in our lives today, religiously or otherwise?

The scene at the Garden of Gethsemane serves as a focal point for many of these Christological debates, as the narrator of the Gospel offers us a rare glimpse into Jesus's mind. The text is opaque, at best, on the whole divinity question as it applies to Jesus. What we are able to see, however, is a powerful moment of all-too-human anguish for him.

Jesus has arrived at a crossroads in his story, and he seems to be aware of it: he knows that he is being betrayed, he knows that he is considered an enemy of the state and a dangerous heretic, and he knows that, very soon, he will be put to death. In his anguish, he cries out for God to take this cup away from him—to make it so that he does not have to make an impossible decision.

He could go one of two ways: he could continue on his trajectory and be completely decimated by the forces of this world, or he could turn away from his ideas and messages to save his life—possibly the only life he has.

It's very easy to say that Jesus, through his divinity, was able to make the decision that he did—to stay, and allow himself to be destroyed. By characterizing Jesus as something beyond human in this moment, we are able to distance ourselves from the practical implications of this moment. We're able to continue wandering from the true path of righteousness because we were led astray through human weakness; no matter our own shortcomings, we cling to our human frailty and mourn the original sin with protests against personal responsibility on our lips until the end: "It's not my fault." Whatever 'it' is.

The sun, over the next millions of years, will eventually burn itself out, and take the earth with it, as a result. Anything created here will be dust scattered about the universe, and no one will be around to remember Aristotle, Shakespeare, or even Jesus. We are all doomed to oblivion, and it is this doom that absolves us. When we inherit an irreparably broken world, we are absolved of any real responsibility to it. What does it matter if such atrocities as genocide, forced migration, endemic disease, starvation, and human trafficking exist if we choose to view them as evidence of our fallen nature? What meaning at all could these horrors garner if they

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are cheapened by our perceived helplessness to stop them?

In the face of such overwhelming systemic suffering, we cannot intelligently and, more importantly, ethically, rest in our blamelessness through human weakness. We are not called to disown this world, irreparable though it may be, for our own emotional security. As broken as it is, this is our only world, and as fleeting as it is, this is our only life. As weak as we are, we are our only selves. As desperate and hopeless as it may seem, this is where we must make our stand.

How then to make this stand? Is it possible to be truly just as mere mortals in a society that traps us in such systemic evil, especially where it seems that in order to provide for the many, we must deprive the few? It is natural to compartmentalize and turn our concerns inward when facing this, and default to caring for our own. But how is this anything more than shallow altruism, and is this even desirable? Is there anything we can actually do in response to ethical problems? What can we give that is so transformative that could enact real change?

One answer is beautifully simple. Like Jesus, we can give ourselves. Active engagement with injustice offers us a transcendent moment beyond the self—to be open to all possibilities, including real change, and compel us to do so. When reactionary emotional politics, uncritical intellectualism, and entrenched biases impede our ability to relate to one another as humans, we are called to act. When war, hunger, and disease claim the lives of billions and expose inadequacies in humanitarian action, we must act. When ideologies of fear and misconception are utilized by those who would hate and murder innocents, we must act. We must act, like Jesus, with steadfastness and conviction, even at the cost of our lives. In the end, we must act, because not to act would give our consent to injustice, and to add our own complicity to the burden of original sin.

If we are truly to follow Jesus—Christ or otherwise—we cannot afford to languish in our own self-pity and doubt in the face of evil. We must be willing to reckon with our own moral responsibility in our personal Gardens of Gethsemane, and act in accordance with our values regardless of the cost to our very selves. Only then can we truly live up to the phrase “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.”



The Francis Avenue side of Andover Hall in winter
Photo: J. Beasley

GOD GROWS UP

EDWARD DUNAR
MDiv '15



Edward Dunar is a third year MDiv focusing on Christian theology. After graduating this spring, he is beginning a PhD program in Systematic Theology at Fordham University, where he hopes to explore the connections between art and theology.

A reading from Luke 2:43-52:

When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day's journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety." He said to them, "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" But they did not understand what he said to them. Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart.

And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.

When I was a child, I thought of this story as an adventure: Jesus sneaks away from his parents, goes to the Temple alone, and manages to impress even the wisest teachers. Unfortunately, my instinct as a grown-up is a bit more cynical. A part of me wants to tell my Sunday School students that the lesson of the story is that we should pay attention during class and do our chores when we get home. This story is so familiar to us that we're accustomed to fitting it into our own agendas. But in doing so, we restrict the richness of this glimpse into Jesus's childhood—the only look the gospels give us into this part of his life.

Because this story is so familiar to us, it's easy to forget about its tension. Mary and Joseph realize that Jesus is still in Jerusalem after a full day of travel. It takes them three days of frantic searching to find him in the temple. When they find him, the young Jesus greets them not with an apology or a sheepish explanation, but by talking back. He boldly says something like: Don't you know me well enough to know that I would be here? This isn't a story about a mild-mannered, perfectly behaved child who never gives his parents any reason to worry. It's about a disagreement between a child entering adolescence and beginning to ask questions about his identity and his faith, and his parents, who want to protect him. Jesus, Mary, and Joseph aren't immune to the same sorts of conflicts and reconciliations that so many of us experience in our own childhoods, families, or ministries with children.

I think the reason it's easy to lose sight of the tension in this story is that we've become accustomed to thinking of any sort of conflict as sinful. We do this for good reasons. We yearn for inner serenity, we seek a world where discord gives way to harmony, we imagine a future in which we rest in the comforting light of God's love—so we have a hard time imagining Jesus, the Prince of Peace, as a child who might have frustrated his parents now and then.

However, this story doesn't have to call these yearnings and convictions into question. Instead, it can give us hope. When God became human, God didn't skip the difficult parts of our existence. Jesus didn't avoid the human condition, in which even the best relationships are complicated, in which tension coexists with love, in which our communities seem to disagree constantly. Jesus lived our reality. He brought God's love, redemption, forgiveness, and presence into our reality. When we hear this account of an argument within what our tradition calls "the Holy Family," we can realize that God is present with us even in the mundane disagreements we have with loved ones.

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Luke ends this account by remarking that “Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.” Just like us, Jesus had to struggle, learn, and grow. When God became human through Jesus, God embraced all parts of our existence. Throughout our complicated lives, we can find inspiration in God’s solidarity with our human limitations and frustrations so that we too might increase in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.

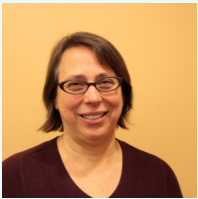


Edward Dunar, MDiv '15 and the winner of the scripture reading contest for the Massachusetts Bible Society, reads a passage from the Gospel of Luke, at the Billings Preaching Prize finals.

Photo: Jonathan Beasley

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTS OF SHAME

JENNIFER STUART
MDiv '15



Jennifer Stuart is an adjunct clinician at the Danielsen Institute at BU and is a member of the per diem Chaplaincy staff at Brigham and Women's Hospital. She currently is in the ordination process with the United Church of Christ, and she will graduate with her MDiv this May.

A reading from the Gospel of John 13:12-15, and from the Gospel of Mark 1:40-42:

John 13:12. After he had washed their feet, had put on his robe, and had returned to the table, he said to them, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord--and you are right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.

Mark 1: 40-42. A leper came to him, begging him, and kneeling he said to Jesus, "if you choose you can make me clean." Moved with compassion, Jesus stretched out his hand and touched him, and said to him, "I do choose. Be made clean." Immediately the leprosy left him, and he was clean.

Have any of you ever had a skunk take up residence in your home? (So, I confess, that sadly, in my urban Cambridge home of all places, I have.) One January night, in my first year of divinity school, my husband, Guy, and I sat bolt-right up in bed. A horrible smell was weaving its way through our house. In fact, it was seemingly coming through our heating system. Our eyes watered, we ran from room to room. Was this the apocalyptic event we all feared? My daughter thought the heater in her room had exploded. We were all totally disoriented, except for my son. He slept through it. And then we heard a noise. The sounds of screeching animals trapped under our dining room extension. They were near our back basement wall; a cellar door separated us from them. And they were right near a major heating vent pipe: two male skunks who had gotten into a fight over a potential female mate, had sprayed each other in anger, sending skunk fumes throughout our ventilation system.

No one wanted to come deal with this. We called different individuals, different companies, until we reached a man who lived on the Cape. Twenty-four/ seven, this man made it his

business to free animals and people from one another's homes. This man entered our house, long white hair, no tools, nothing but his bare hands. He was calm, caring, confident and centered. He walked downstairs, and fearlessly opened the cellar door. Using a laundry basket to shield himself, he somehow separated the animals into different corners. He grabbed one by the tail (did you know that a skunk can't spray if his hind legs are not on the ground?) and walked back through our house skunk in hand (the kids were awed by this), freeing the skunk and us, with a talent I will never forget. He did the same with the second skunk, and returned the next day to help us shore up our back room, clean up, and evict the female skunk - she was irate.

Friends, not only did our house smell to high heaven, the smell followed us wherever we went: our backpacks smelled, our coats had a definite odor; this was not a story we wanted to share on the cocktail party circuit.

In the depths of my family's frustration, dismay and horror, this man, from Cape Cod, entered into our day without judgment. This will be okay. This is what you need to do to take care of the smell. This is how you make sure it does not happen again. He took care of those healthy skunks by transporting them to a state park where he set them free. Throughout all this, his phone rang. You could hear the anxiety ridden voices on the other end. They sounded like me when I had called, frantic in the night time hours.

My family likened this man to Jesus; we were seriously grateful. I will never forget him. I have his card; he is a gem, a servant, a gift, a disciple. "I do choose," he seemed to say. "Be made clean." Jesus said to his disciples after washing their feet, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you." An unlikely situation, an unlikely man, who came out of nowhere to offer us help and hope.

Though intellectually, we got that this situation was not our fault, uncertainty lingers in the depths of the heart. What had we done to deserve this one? I mean, how were we going to explain this to our friends and family? We certainly did not host dinner parties chez Stuart for a good while. Jesus, please wash more than my feet! (and preferably with something heavily scented). Simon Peter had a point – wash all of me, Lord. Yet, we could also ask the question another way – how on earth did fate give us the gift of this wonderful man? With every inch of his being, he truly

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washed our feet. And with that act, he pulled us back into the fold.

Alexander Schmemmann describes sacramental space as an entrance into new life; it is a space where we come alive (For the Life of the World, 1973). Thus, to be with Jesus through Sacrament, means a conversion into a reality where we are all seen and accepted just as we are. In these times of exclusion, war, and damaging discrimination, presence and absence are held in tension. On the Intensive Care Unit, where I served as a chaplain, a young, single, working mother of two, told me that she thought God's gaze had shifted from her. She had just been diagnosed with cancer. God was present somewhere, she said, but God was elsewhere; not with her, she explained. The isolation of our pain pulls us into a felt sense of invisibility, and dare I say, even shame. When belief systems are shattered, faith lost, and a future tentative at best, how does the Christian faith hold the realities of the profane, and move us towards restoration?

At the start of Divinity School, I circled the communion table from afar. Probably more than anything, I felt a distrust of my own self. A minister? Not me, God, not me. I mean, who ends up with skunks (plural) in their basement? And I am not even going to bring up the time this fall my car ended up in the Charles River. One of the many significant things that I have learned here at HDS and that I hold dear is how to step into the tension of paradox. I have learned to hold complexity and accept it – the sacred and the profane, death and life, our own selves.

One afternoon, I was in the hospital chapel preparing for the noon-day interfaith prayer service when a 31-year-old man (I will call him Mark) entered. It was clear he was upset. He explained that over a period of 4 months he had lost 100 pounds and he noted that the medical team could not yet figure out why. His childhood had been hard, he said. He talked of needing Jesus, and he began to cry. I assured him that Jesus was right there with him. Mark proceeded to disclose a history of childhood sexual abuse, rape and poverty, experiences he had kept to himself. He needed to find God in his intense feeling of separation and pain. For me, it is profoundly reassuring that Jesus makes the descent to hell, to a place of death, before rising again into a new dawn. It is this movement of Holy Saturday to the morning resurrection light that moves me to unspeakable renewal and hope. The power of connection in the low moments of our lives is a blessing beyond

measure.

The distinct hope present in our rituals of acceptance and renewal manifest in our coming together again. Maybe it has something to do with the strength of just showing up as we are. The communion table holds the messiness of our human journeys. Jesus tenderly washes our tired feet, meeting us in the darkness of our souls.

This is the gift that I am giving you, said Jesus on the night he was betrayed. The night will grow longer. The isolation will feel like hell, and the violence, like death. But, I am right there in it with you, even in the smelly and ridiculous moments of your lives.

I now pull my chair right up to the communion table holding the paradox of who I am, acknowledging shame's hold in the shadows of my being. But here it is: Jesus looks us in the eye, knowing fully who we are. Love one another, says Jesus, just as I love you. This could be what saves us. Indeed, it could change the world. Amen.



Divinity Hall in winter
Photo: J. Beasley

YASHODA AND DAN

JOHANNAH MURPHY
MDiv '15



Johannah Murphy is a third year MDiv, pursuing Unitarian Universalist ministry. Upon graduation from HDS in May, she will dive with heart into the unknown.

One day, as a child, Krishna, one of the main Hindu gods, was outside playing. He decided, as many children do for whatever reason, to eat mud. His mother Yashoda, frustrated to hear from other children that her child had eaten mud, beckoned him towards her and told him to open his mouth. Krishna, I would imagine just like most other children, did so begrudgingly. Unlike other children, however, what Yashoda saw was not chewed up mud and tiny baby Krishna teeth, but the entirety of the cosmos.

Yashoda looked into Krishna's mouth and saw swirls of stars, roots of great trees winding through mud, breaking through into their round trunks and spiral of branches. She saw the slow bloom of lotus, the small fires of homes, and the large fires of forests. She saw the rapid movements of fish and their wave flirtations, she saw the fields near their home, and fields she had never seen, she saw the past, the future, and all the intricately placed webs and galactic strings that keep it all together. As any mother would do after seeing the cosmos contained in the small mouth of their child, Yashoda passed out.

In the stories of Krishna when Yashoda sees the greatness of the world and universe in Krishna's mouth, it is in this moment that she realizes Krishna is lord, that Krishna not only carries a piece of the divine, but is in fact divine. The tales of Krishna show us Krishna as a human child who steals butter

and eats mud, compelling us to love him and opening us up to the love he and Yashoda share, that not only is shown as a great love, but a divine way of loving, a loving that opens up our eyes to the cosmos that exist in little pieces in us.

I wanted to tell him this story, this story that I love. I wanted to tell the story of Krishna and his mouth full of cosmos while we were sitting amongst the snack machines, the worn out board games, all the guards and their walky talkies, and that giant clock that in the context of a visiting hour in a prison dictates oh so much more than time.

This clock commands when I can come and go when visiting Dan. I mentor Dan through the program Partakers, a program that provides mentors for men and women in prison enrolled in the Boston University Prison Education Program. Dan is a committed student who most often talks to me about his schoolwork, papers, and will on occasion dip into his past. A month or so ago, in our talks of papers, time management, and the ever-so enthralling topic of business law, Dan spun off into the spiritual. He has told me on many occasions that he does not believe in God, that he grew up in a somewhat Christian household, and that he doesn't necessarily think of himself as non-religious, he's just not sure.

All of this has been conveyed to me previously in a somewhat off-hand and in passing manner until a month ago.

A month ago Dan re-iterated his beliefs about God and religion, and then he paused. He sat with his hands cupped between his knees, settled into the odd plastic chairs that mold into each other creating the long row of forward facing

seats. Looking straight ahead and leaning forward he said, "I don't believe in God, but there is something. I feel something when my brother brings in my baby nephew and he laughs. It just makes me smile, to see and hear that baby laugh, I can't describe it, something about it." I nod, shifting in the blue seat. He lifts his head again, continuing. "Something about the feeling that comes over me, hearing a baby laugh, makes me not want to describe it, makes me believe in something greater." "Yes," I say, "something greater."

The clock approaches 3:00 and the guards say, "five minutes left of visiting hours." Not a lot shifts in the room as everyone clings to their final minutes pretending that they are not final at all. We say goodbye and in two weeks after this visit I see Dan again. This time we are talking with another mentor about suffering. Dan asks me, "Is what I see on the news correct? Is the world outside really that bad?" I shrug offering up a hesitant, "I mean it's not great, but you know they only ever show the bad news." His hands come together as he leans forward in that familiar position and says "right."

Dan starts to talk about suffering and God. He wonders how people can believe in an all-powerful being who creates so much suffering. He spins and spins in those classic questions of how could there be a divine being, a God when there is so much horror and frustration in this world. The other mentor sitting besides me starts talking about how these questions are not useful ones to task. With careful sincerity and delicate grace she works to ground Dan, to bring us all out of the spinning that questions of suffering sometime cause.



YASHODA AND DAN

JOHANNAH MURPHY
MDiv '15

I frantically try to interject the colors, whims, and cosmos of the Yashoda story. I talk about the divine spark in all people, the space created when people see the humanity in each other. I feverishly throw out words like “hope,” “trust,” “humanity,” “interconnectedness” “people need people,” “more hope,” “space between,” and watch as they bounce off snack machines and water fountains, falling in a small heap before us.

“Sure,” Dan says halfheartedly, “I see that.”

He looks out past all the words I have thrown in a heap at our feet, past the visitors, past the barbed wire and the fences, past fence after more fence, fence, fence. I did not know what to say to Dan to get him to look as he did when talking about giggling babies. I knew what I said did very little for him, but here is what I should have said, what I meant to say, what I'll say next time:

People are connected to each other. They are bound together in webs of frustration, complexities, neediness, but more often than not, in webs of love. These are the webs we feel and the webs we understand even when we cannot articulate them with words. We are connected and sometimes this seems like a loss when there are so many forces trying to keep us apart.

So often I think of how much I want a home, and what it means to cultivate home, to build a heart home when it is just me. Though this home, this building of heart, is something that I can carry and preserve when I am alone, it is not something I build alone, I am too interconnected with a wider home to build home by myself.

My spark of universe is only made into home when I connect with all the others who contain sparks of cosmos and universe that tie us into loving.

The universe comes together in the tiny dust particles of cosmos that exist in all of us and it hurts so much to be apart, to be apart from all of those particles that make us whole.

Though it hurts, it is consistently showing us that there is something greater, there is a divine and it moves in and about through these tiny particles, cultivating grace in hopes that we will join particles in a reclaiming of home, that we will fight the distances between us and settle into our connections more fully. I do not know why bad things happen. I do not know why bad things happened to you. I do know that in the universe there are forces moving towards good.

I know that we are all suffering because we are trying to connect, to connect to the particles that are behind bars, the ones that are trapped in messes of injustice, in corrupt systems, the ones that are just lost.

I shift in my seat so I am facing him. Perhaps these pieces of cosmos are buried, but looking for them, searching for heart when there appears to be none is one of my favorite searches. I smile and as the clock strikes three he says goodbye with a hug then he begins to smile too, smiling as if he is hearing a baby laugh.

ARGUING FOR UNDERSTANDING

JONATHAN BETTS FIELDS MDiv '15



Jonathan Betts Fields is a third year MDiv with a passion for poetry, interfaith counseling and youth ministry. After graduation, he will compile his poems and #TwitterChurch sermons into book form.

Job 35:10b. "...where is God my maker...?"

Please join me in prayer, as we consider the topic, "Arguing for Understanding." Lord God, I pray that the words of my mouth, of our mouths, and the meditation of our hearts be pleasing and acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

This sermon is inspired by the tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut. It is also inspired by the Boston Marathon Bombing and the memory of watching dark clouds of smoke rise from the Pentagon on September 11th.

It is almost impossible to reconcile the existence of evil and the presence of the Almighty God we serve. Yet it must be done.

Let the record reflect two questions, packaged as one: Asking, "where is God?" in the midst of tragedy and evil immediately infers a second question, "how could God let this happen?" I believe these questions are easily obscured primarily because we've concluded that God's presence precludes evil.

Dr. Diana Butler Bass considers a number of answers to the question of the hour in her article, "Where was God in Newtown?" (Huffington Post). Dr. Bass writes, "God must not have been there because an all-powerful God would have done something. Therefore, God was not at Sandy Hook. God was absent." Toward the end of her article, Bass unfurls the weight of her degree in the history of Christianity. She explains that throughout history, from the ancient church up through walk of fame names like Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, theologians have wrestled with the idea of a "hidden" or "inaccessible" God. The inaccessible God is based on several biblical stories of temptation and darkness, and a verse in the book of Isaiah. Isaiah 45 & 15 reads: "Truly, you are a God who hides himself, O God of Israel, the Savior."

For a brief moment, her argument struck a chord with me. The

words I read felt true. She concludes: "The hidden God...is the only God that makes any sense of Newtown: One neither and both present and absent; One in the hands of rescuers but not in the hands that wielded the guns; One in the midst of the murdered but not the act of murder."

But it wasn't long before my Spirit-man spoke up. I was riding the bus, reflecting on what the presence of God feels like, when I heard: "Just because we don't perceive His presence doesn't mean He's hiding or untrue. He promises multiple times in His word, in both the old and the new, I will never leave nor will I forsake you.

Job lost all ten of his kids suddenly to a deadly natural disaster. And as if this catastrophe wasn't enough, he also received news moments before that his sheep, camels, oxen, donkeys and his servants were no more – lost to raiders and to the sword.

In this midst of this calamity, God was present – and uncomfortably so. In the first chapter of Job, we find it was God who allowed Satan to test Job. Our heavenly Father actually brought Job's blamelessness to Satan's attention in verse 8. Then, in verse 16 we find God deemed personally responsible for the destruction of Job's sheep.

Dr. Bass admits that God's being present raises profound difficulties, and makes God "uncaring at best" and "a monster at worst."

The question we now have to ask ourselves is "Does our being uncomfortable with His presence and His activity or lack thereof in the midst of tragedy automatically mean that He was absent - or hiding?"

If I may, I'd like to present for your hearing the ways in which God was definitely present not after, not before, but during the shooting at Sandy Hook:

God was embodied by Victoria Soto, a twenty-seven year old teacher who jumped in front of her first grade students to shield them from gunfire.

God was the voice of the first-grade teacher who, fearing that it would be the last thing they heard, said to her students, "I need you to know that I love you all very much and that it's going to be

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okay.”

God was and is the courage of one first grader who told his teacher & his classmates “I know Karate, so it’s okay. I’ll lead the way out.”

God was and is the crucified bodies of six and seven year olds – twenty in total – and six adults.

“God was and is present” is the answer proposed by many members of the clergy. We clergy - better yet, we believers - are charged with separating the where from the how and are constantly reminded and reminding one another and others that we will never know how.

What happened at Sandy Hook was terrible and tragic and terrifying - and Holy.

It’s difficult to hold both of these extremes, but for God’s sake, and the sake of the slain, we must try.

For the sakes of the survivors and our Savior, we must try to hold Jesus’ bruised, broken, and bloody skin - and the veil of the temple that was torn in two from top to bottom.

For the sake of our friends and family members, our neighbors and our fellow humans, we must affirm God’s everlasting presence, the where, and recognize that the how is unanswerable.

In closing, a preacher friend asked me how I might feel if my six year old was slain at Sandy Hook on that December day.

My whole being convulsed. My eyes began to well up with unending grief.

I thought of Michael Brown Sr. and placed myself in the picture that has been seared into our collective consciousness: dress shirt damp from my tears and the tears of those I love, sweaty from exhausting emotions and the effort of attempting to hold back, head back and mouth wide with screams so deep my soul shudders as my daughter or son’s casket is lowered into the ground.

I thought of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and the fact that God had to be with her as she heard her son’s last words and watched him expire.

I thought of the day I wore dark glasses to Morning Prayer as I mourned my younger cousin, lost to suicide in early September, and the oil of joy that the Holy Spirit began to pour over me on the day after his funeral.

It was the word of God that made a smile reappear on my face.

In the midst of that pain, the word of God did not sound like Good news one bit, yet my soul thirsted for it.

This sermon may not sound like Good news to you. And that’s okay.

In closing, all I ask is that you remember the following three things...and that you do them as best and as often as you can: (1) Trust that God will not hide. (2) Keep a bible (paper or digital) nearby. (3) Know that God’s love is long, high, deep, and wide.

Let the church say: Amen.



The lectern in Emerson Chapel at Divinity Hall, where the annual Billings Preaching Prize competition takes place.

Photo: J. Beasley

BRANDED

KATHERINE BLAISDELL MDiv '15 & MPA '15



Katherine Blaisdell is a third year student pursuing dual master's degrees in Divinity and Public Administration. She works on issues of race and gender justice at both her home schools and is a candidate for ordination in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

Psalm 118:8-9, 21-26: It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to put confidence in mortals. It is better to take refuge in the Lord than to put confidence in princes... I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation. The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it. Save us, we beseech you, O Lord! O Lord, we beseech you, give us success! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.

Acts 4:7-11: When they had made the prisoners stand in their midst, they inquired, "By what power or by what name did you do this?" Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers of the people and elders, if we are questioned today because of a good deed done to someone who was sick and are asked how this man has been healed, let it be known to all of you, and to the people of Israel, that this man is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead. This Jesus is 'the stone that was rejected by you, the builders; it has become the cornerstone.' There is salvation in no one

else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved."

Isaiah 43:1b-2, 6-7: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you... I will say to the north, "Give them up," and to the south, "Do not withhold; bring my sons from far away and my daughters from the end of the earth—everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made."

My grandmother, Hazel Carr Blaisdell, is one of the saints in my life. She was raised a rural Yankee in Maine and then lived sixty years in Texas, and she had all the best sayings of both places. These folksy sayings were always odd, sometimes profound, and authentically my grandma. Every time we got in the car, usually running late to church, she would declaim, "We're off! Like a herd of turtles in a jar of peanut butter!" An outrageous situation "would just 'bout harelip the governor!" A mildly surprising one might incur, "Well Lord, love a duck." What mattered when she swore was that it was not in the Lord's name. The name by which she called things had power for her.

We in the Harvard community know the power of names. We have joined ourselves with the prestige and power of the most illustrious, the best endowed, the most highly-reputed university in the country, if

not the world. That name on our business cards and our CVs carries the power of association with that brand, that mark upon us like a tattoo that says "Smart and dedicated!" By bearing that name, we have hold of some of that power, whether we hope to make an imprint on the scholarly landscape, or craft better public policy, or breathe new life into communities of seekers. People are just a little bit more likely to listen to us because of the name that we bear.

Harvard is high-class, a name brand. But that one who bears a brand is marked as owned, in part or in whole, in body or in soul. Like the coins of Caesar, marks carry authority, but they also carry signs of power that require some moral skepticism. The Harvard name carries the legacy of great thinkers, but also responsibility for the decisions made in that name about slave labor and class hierarchies and fiscal investments. It is difficult to reconcile the two sides of the name we bear into the world.

If you are skeptical of the responsibility we bear along with a name, think of those you know who seek to mark themselves with a bit of authority day to day. How often do you encounter a colleague who, in response to "How are you?" answers, "Busy!" Daily I hear this reminder from those who seek to indicate that they are purposeful, important, their time full of great works that forbid doing whatever mundane thing you ask of them. But friends who tell me they are busy are also telling me they are tired, with too little time for prayer or sleep or communion with treasured friends. As they mark themselves as busy, they brand themselves as owned by busy-ness. Some of you are nodding along with me, and some

BRANDED

KATHERINE BLAISDELL MDiv '15

are doubting. Either way, I would ask you to consider: Have you told someone you were too busy this week?

I must confess that I have been a member of this cult. I love to bear a name with pride: a university, a school, an advisor, a position, a fellowship, a certain well known preaching prize. I have an email signature six lines long listing my names. I crave these recognitions, these signs that I have earned what I have – a reputation built on a firm foundation of desert. But I know, in my heart of hearts, that any such foundation is flimsy, and these names will not build me a tower to salvation.

Instead, my hope for a decent life is built on the cornerstone the builders refused. My hope is in the one who preached not power, but love. My hope is in he who would not beat down the power of empire with might, but who lived and died and lived again a gospel that showed gracious, capacious love to every child born to God's earth.

We seek earthly names, hoping to demonstrate our worth, to others and to God. But as one of my favorite preachers notes, "We expect a God, a Savior, who treats us as we deserve to be treated – and so we oscillate between being proud of our achievements and having the bejeebers scared out of us because we know how very undeserving we can be sometimes of grace" (Chuck Blaisdell, Senior Pastor, First Christian Church, Colorado Springs, Colorado, April 13, 2014, Palm Sunday). And yet, we are told, time and time again in scripture, that grace cannot be earned. It is given to us, overwhelming beyond our imagination, let alone our power to deserve it.

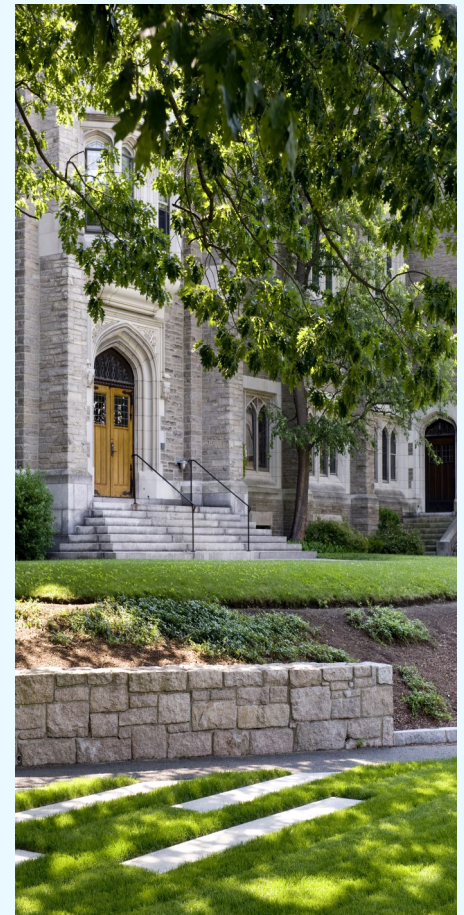
In the words of the prophet Isaiah, God tells us, "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine." This decree is a reminder of whose we are and who we are to be. Named and beloved, redeemed and called, we are to shine with that love that burns in our bones.

We can honor that call in the mundane. My personal mission is to stop telling people I am busy, but instead offer a simple "No, but thank you for asking." When I name myself Busy, what I mean, too often, is to pretend that the demands on my time are external, outside my control. Instead, I am trying to own that I am saying no because of the priorities I have named for my life lately. And if I cannot say that no with integrity, then I need to upset my priorities.

We can also bear wholly the name of God on a grander scale. We can name evil for what it is. The forces that interlock oppressions, one to another to another, are Legion, but by naming them for what they are, we can begin to drive them out. We can seek to be owners of knowledge and bearers of truth in systems of government and ecclesia and academe. And we can also show humility and quiet love in relationships, even the most difficult.

My grandma had a saying about that, too, that I will close with. She showed me, by the way they she lived her life, that God's name was marked upon her, and upon me. But she had a saying about the names and bearings we carry into personal relationships. She would tell me, "I just know, when I get to heaven, Jesus is going to wear the face of the person on this earth I find most irritating." She was telling me something about the name of

God: one who loves everyone, even the people whose busyboddiness and bullshyness and busyness drive me crazy. But she was also telling me something about the name upon me: one marked by that love, branded by that love as its agent. God has put a seal upon my heart and upon my arm that, come hell or high water, I am to bear the good news of God's love to those I meet. God has named us and redeemed us. And for that gospel, thanks be to God.



The steps of Andover Hall in the summer.

Credit: Justin Knight

A SERMON AT MORNING PRAYERS

LAURA MARTIN
MDiv '15



Laura Martin is a third year Master of Divinity candidate at Harvard Divinity School where she studies Latin American liberation theology, ecological theology, and Western Buddhism. She is also the president of Harvard Divinity School's Catholic RENEWAL, an organization that explores lay and women's leadership in the Catholic Church.

As a multi-generational Northern New Mexican, Laura is passionate about environmental and social issues in her home state. In the summer of 2014 she worked with undocumented minors from Central America and hopes to continue to work on social justice issues once she graduates from the Divinity School.

A Reading from the First Book of Kings (Kings 19:11-13):

The Angel of the Lord said to Elijah, "Go out and stand on the mountain before the LORD, for the LORD is about to pass by." Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the LORD, but the LORD was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the LORD was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave.

The Word of the Lord.

It smelled like rain. I looked towards the south and sure enough, a thunderhead was peaking above the walls of Gallina Canyon. I started walking more quickly. I was about a mile from the monastery and I wanted to make sure I got to shelter before the storm broke. A distant boom made the canyon echo, making the red sandstone walls reverberate. Three-quarters of a mile later I hurried by a sign that said, "Peace. Monastery of Christ in the Desert." I was close, but already large raindrops were falling, making polka dots on my dusty shoes and shirt. It was a full downpour by the time I reached the patio of the guesthouse. Others had come out of their rooms to sit on the portal, dragging plastic chairs to get a better view of the rain. A bright flash illuminated the darkened patio, making a woman jump with the loud thunder. I pulled up my own chair, not even bothering to grab a dry shirt or a towel. For the next twenty minutes, no one moved. We just sat and watched the rain.

I try to visit the Monastery of Christ in the Desert once year. Although it's only 40 miles from my home in Nambé, New Mexico, the rough twelve-mile dirt road from the highway to the Benedictine monastery makes it an adventure. I usually spend about a week there with a handful of other guests who come to the remote canyon. People from all over the world seek out Christ in the Desert for likely the same reason I do, to find respite from the usual hustle and bustle of their lives. No one is supposed to speak at the monastery. Silence is only broken by the chanting of the monks during the Divine Office or by the small talk exchanged between guests after Mass on Sunday.

But this week I wasn't looking for silence. I was hoping that God would speak to me after I removed all of the distractions that people and technology bring. I had spent the previous part of the summer working with unaccompanied minors from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. As an intern at Greater Boston Legal Services, I conducted over seventy interviews in Spanish with kids and their families who seeking protection from the U.S. government. The young adults I spoke to were escaping gang violence and poverty that had left them with little choice but to immigrate to U.S. As I was sitting in my room in the monastery, the face of a particular young boy rose out of the darkness.

He was twelve years old but short for his age. He did not say much to me as his aunt, who had come with him, began to explain why they were there. "Él sufrió mucho," she said. "He suffered a lot." I tried to ease into the conversation with the boy, asking him who he had lived with in El Salvador, and where he had gone to school. He answered hesitantly, staring at his hands or stealing a quick glance at his aunt as he talked. After a while, he relaxed, telling me about playing soccer with his friends after school and home cooked meals prepared by his grandmother. Finally I asked him, "Porqué llegaste aquí? Porque no vivas con tus abuelos ahora? Porfavor, dime que paso." "Why did you come here? Why aren't you living with your grandparents now? Please, tell me what happened." His face fell again, but he continued to talk. One day he and his grandfather were walking to the school in the village. His grandfather escorted him so that the local gang wouldn't harass or steal from him. But that day, a group of about four young men surrounded the boy and his grandfather. They grabbed the grandfather and held his hands behind his back. The young men then proceeded to beat the boy, until he was

A SERMON AT MORNING PRAYERS

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unconscious, saying as they did it they would kill both of them if they saw them again. The boy was in bed for weeks, healing his broken body. Eventually, his grandparents decided he should leave for the U.S. to join his aunt, hoping he would be safer. His words echoed in my ears, "Porfavor Señora, ayudame." "Please miss, help me."

Sitting in the dark of my room in Christ of the Desert, my voice masked by the rain on the roof, I asked God, "Why are you silent? Young people are afraid. They are leaving their loved ones and homes. Their friends and families are fractured by war and terror. So many people are dying and suffering, but my God I hear nothing... Where are you my God?!"

I tried to hear God's voice in the thunder of the canyon, see God in the light that danced across the room, but I knew God was not there.

Before I left for Christ in the Desert, I had complained to Sister Kathleen, my spiritual director back in Boston, about God being silent. "Why won't God answer me?" I asked her. She told me that my frustration was understandable, but she encouraged me to sit with God's silence. "You might be surprised by what you can learn from it," she said.

So there I was, sitting in the dark with tears streaming down my face. But then an amazing thing happened. I remembered the story of Elijah. The prophet had been told to wait for God in the cave where he was escaping the wrath of Jezebel. Elijah had been patient. Elijah knew that God does not always speak to those who need him.

The Reverend Barbara Brown Taylor wrote in her book *When God is Silent* that, "Only an idol always answers. The true God possesses more freedom than that..." The longer I sat in the dark I realized that while God was not speaking to me, it did not mean God was absent from my life. I had seen God in the loving smile of the boy's aunt, as she told me how she was taking care of him despite already caring for two toddlers. I found God in the hug I gave the boy and in our shared tears. I found God in the hands of the lawyer who typed up the tragic details of the boy's case for court. God had been a source of strength, although God had not spoken.

Looking at your faces, I know that suffering has touched you deeply in ways I will never understand. I also know when we need God, we expect God to speak to us with the force of the wind or of an earthquake. We want God to be louder than the fears that plague our souls. And when God isn't, we believe we are abandoned. But we are not.

There are no sounds or words that can be a balm for the all pains and sufferings of our world. I believe God is with us, sitting in the darkness of our lives. But we need to find somewhere where we can actually feel the weight of God's presence in the silence.

I encourage you to find somewhere you can cry out to God and hear no response.

When you are able to acknowledge God's silence, I pray it gives you strength. Then you'll be able to wrap your face in your mantle and confront the life that greets you at the entrance of the cave.

Amen.

WORDS ARE NOT ENOUGH

MELISSA W. BARTHOLOMEW
MDiv '15



Melissa W. Bartholomew is a third year MDiv whose ministry focus is racial reconciliation and healing through forgiveness. Upon graduation from HDS in May 2015, Melissa will begin a dual MSW/PhD degree in Social Work at Boston College School of Social Work to pursue the work of generational trauma healing in African Americans.

Genesis 11:1-9 (NIV):

Now the whole world had one language and a common speech. As people moved eastward, they found a plain in Shinar and settled there. They said to each other, "Come, let's make bricks and bake them thoroughly." They used brick instead of stone, and tar for mortar. Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves; otherwise we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth." But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower the people were building. The Lord said, "If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other." So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city. That is why it was called Babel—because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world. From there the Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth.

Imagine living in a city where thousands of brown children from Mexico who speak a different language than the dominant language in your city, have crossed the border into your town, seeking refuge from devastating poverty and violence in their city, but are sent back. Or, imagine living in a city where Asian-Americans who have lived in the city their entire lives are often complimented for speaking "good English" because they are perceived as not being Americans. Or, imagine living in a city where Black people, whose ancestors were brought to this country from Africa in chains, speaking different languages they were forced to forget, now speak the same language of the former slave masters, and continue to experience various forms of racial oppression.

I wish I could say that these were hard images to conjure up. I wish I could even say that there was only one remote example I could point to, but the reality is, our world is replete with diversity of all kinds, and, while there are many examples in our country where our diversity works, there are unfortunately many examples where it has failed to flourish. But wait a minute, according to the text from Genesis, isn't God responsible for this diversity? Isn't God the one who gave us different languages? What is God doing here? Our text today is about the state of humanity after the flood. The people settled in one place, and spoke one common language. The text tells of their effort to build a city and a tall tower that reaches as far as the heavens, with the goal of making a name for themselves, and, of remaining in one place. This is in defiance of God's call to "fill the earth." So we see God's judgment here. It's harsh. There's no grace. God's move seems counterintuitive. Isn't unity a

good thing? So if God is responsible for our diversity, and for our different ways of communicating with each other, why haven't things worked out better? Why aren't our cities, which are replete with people of all racial, ethnic, and religious backgrounds, speaking different languages, and even the same language, more unified and peaceful?

Our Words are not Enough

What is the message that God is trying to convey here? I contend that the message is that our words are not enough. The people were speaking one language and were able to build a city and a tall tower, but they weren't connected to each other. They spoke the same language, but did we have intimacy? The people said: "Let's build a city and a tower and make a name for ourselves." Here their focus is on building their great name and acquiring material success. There is no mention of God, or of a desire to build community.

God is Sounding the Alarm

I believe that is why God's judgment in this story is so harsh. God is sounding the alarm. God is warning us of what happens when we build cities, and nations, in our own strength without God's love, power, and spirit, and without being intimately connected to each other. God knew what was in store for humanity. God knew what would happen to a people who could speak the same language and build things together, but who had lost their way and lost sight of their intimacy and interconnectedness. God knew we could build nations on stolen land and kill its inhabitants. God knew we could build cities on the backs of enslaved people stolen

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from foreign lands. God knew we could shut people out who don't fit into the dominant culture, and whose words do not match the words of those within the dominant culture. Yes, the people in this story spoke the same language, but their words were not enough. I believe God's move to disrupt the common verbal language, was to alert us to the need to return to the non-verbal language that unites us all. The language that can unite us in a deeper way. The language of God's spirit of love that we spoke before we were born, when we were in the womb, when God knit us together. Before we made our own plans, when we were in sync with our creator and with our creator's creation. I believe that's the common language God wants us to master first. The language of God's own heart. Our words are not enough.

Architects of a New City

God is sounding the alarm and calling us to become architects of a new city—a city, a nation, a world, built on a stronger foundation, where we are connected to God and to each other. It is the kind of place where we can flourish in our diversity, while we remember our common humanity. Not to forget our differences, but to cultivate our interconnectedness and our interbeingness. Through that story, I believe God is saying – you're building together, but are you loving each other? You're speaking the same verbal language, but you forgot the nonverbal language of your heart that binds you together. The common spoken word made it too easy to communicate on the surface, and not to dig deep. I contend God's infusion of diverse languages was a call for us to move out of our comfort zones, to peel back the layers,

and to learn to communicate through our being. God wants us to engage in a different kind of building activity together—to build a community where we recognize our interconnectedness. Building a city is not the same as building the Beloved Community.

The City is on Fire

Fifty years ago, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., one who strived towards a vision for the Beloved Community in our nation, came to the realization that all of the work of the civil rights movement towards equality and integration meant that Black people were actually “integrating into a burning house.” He was talking about the condition of the hearts and minds of many of the American people who still believed that Black people were not human beings and that they were still enslaved. He said that the workers in the civil rights movement would have to become like firemen and keep working to put the fire out and not let the house burn down. Well my friends, the house, the city, the nation is still on fire. When a Black man in South Carolina, running away from a White police officer after a traffic stop, can be shot in the back eight times and killed, while running away – like an enslaved person running for his life from his master on the plantation---we know that our house is still on fire. That White man did not see himself connected to that Black man.

I know personally that our house is still on fire. Last fall, when my six-year-old daughter Ella and I were walking down the street in Central Square, as we passed a Senior Center, an ambulance approached. I told Ella that we should quickly run past the center because the ambulance was

probably coming to get one of the seniors who lived there. Ella said, “No Mommy, we can't run. If we run, they'll think we're suspicious.” My heart stopped when she said this. It was devastating to think that at six years old, my child already knew that her moving black body might be a cause for suspicion, especially if it moved at the sound of sirens. But at the same time, I was grateful that she knew this because I knew that it would be a strategy that could keep her alive. My dear friends, our house is still on fire, and like Dr. King said, we cannot stand by. We must be the firepersons equipped to extinguish the fire for good.

That's why God was sounding the alarm back then. God knew what would happen when we built our cities on a weak foundation of unity, and not on the strength of our common humanity and our interconnectedness. If you do not believe in God, please hear this as a call to return to love. Love is calling humanity back to love-- back to the way of engaging with one another through the language of the heart. It is the ethic of the South African philosophy of Ubuntu. Ubuntu means that our humanity is completely intertwined. It is an acknowledgement that you are not fully human unless you acknowledge the humanity of others.

How do we become Architects of a New City?

To become architects of a new city, we must remain rooted in an awareness of our common humanity. This requires intentional, internal work. We must commit to taking time each day, before we engage in any outside action, to be still and reflect. We can reflect on scripture, poetry, or simply sit in silence. We can create a gratitude

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journal and reflect on our blessings each day. We must do whatever we can that will help us to take time to be still and listen to the language of our heart. This will ground us in love.

We must be intentional and mindful about our daily interactions with each other. We should smile when we pass by each other and communicate through our being: "I see you." Remaining grounded in love impacts our presence in the world and spreads the love our world needs.

Finally, we must commit to direct action, like the work our community here at HDS is engaged in to further the cause of racial justice and healing. We must do this work at home, in our faith communities, and in our broader communities. But we must prioritize the work that begins within ourselves. We have to address our own internal biases and our own internalized oppression and woundedness. That is how we will clear the pathway for communicating in the language God wants us to master first---the language of our own hearts. This is the work that will help to put the fire out. It will enable us to become architects of a city where we remember our interconnectedness and where we communicate through the language of love.

Amen.



Jo Murphy places the finishing touches on an installation of her senior MDiv thesis art project, Wearable Worship, in Andover Chapel.

Photo: Michael Naughton

I CAN LIVE ALONE

VANESSA ZOLTAN
MDiv '15



Vanessa Zoltan is a third year MDiv at HDS and is the Assistant Humanist Chaplain at Harvard University and a Proctor to freshmen in Harvard Yard. Upon graduation from HDS she will move into her role as Assistant Humanist Chaplain full time, keep proctoring and work on turning her thesis, Jane Eyre as a Sacred Text, into a book.

"I can live alone, if self-respect and circumstances require me to do so. I need not sell my soul to buy bliss. I have an inward treasure, born with me; which can keep me alive if all extraneous delights should be withheld."

I started praying that piece of scripture, when my fiancé and I broke up last year. And it's a prayer I say before every date I go on, reminding myself that even though I'm 32, single, and want a family, "I have an inward treasure, born with me, which can keep me alive if all extraneous delights should be withheld," so I need not sell my soul to buy bliss and can wear flats instead of heels like I want to.

I am of course aware that my inward treasure is not enough to keep me alive. I am the grandchild of 4 holocaust survivors. I carry ghosts with me wherever I go, aware that each of the family members I lost also had inward treasures born with them and that those treasures did not keep them alive. In fact, the reason I pray my scripture from Jane Eyre is in honor of their commitment to ritualistic prayer and in honor of the fact that their scripture is still tainted for me, for it did not save them. I pray to Jane Eyre that my children will be able to pray Torah again... that it will no longer be tainted for them.

But this piece of scripture is about more than making sure I don't feel desperate before a date.

"I can live alone," it starts. "I can live alone." This phrase admits both strength and vulnerability. It is a clear statement of strength, stating that I am strong enough to live alone in this vast, endless world. But it is vulnerable in that it admits that one deeply prefers not to live alone. It is a reminder that I am, we are all, one catastrophe or another away from living alone, and that while that loneliness would be survivable, it would almost be unendurable, for it is not the way that we are meant to live. "I can live alone" is a reminder that we are meant to live in communion.

But "I can live alone" is also a reminder that solitude is in fact endurable and it must be, for it is inevitable. I will lose friends

and loved ones. I will retreat into death, which is a lonely path. We should remind ourselves of our strength in the face of this loneliness by praying, "I can live alone."

"If self-respect and circumstance require me to do so." This phrase is a reminder that I live in a reciprocal relationship with the world. Our characters come together with the outside world to make up our fate. This line is a humble admission that we are not in control of our lives, of whether we will be alone or healthy or poor. We are born into circumstances that can give more breathing room to the possibility of self-respect or create a very limited opportunity for it that we have to fight for. Our characters determine our fate. World forces determine our fate. "Self-respect and circumstances" prayed as two interconnected concepts remind us of our agency and our helplessness.

"I need not sell my soul to buy bliss." When I pray this line I remember that there will be opportunities to sell my soul-- to get quick fixes of something that will feel like bliss. To buy the new shoes I don't need instead of donating the money or saving it up to go visit a faraway friend. And when I pray this line I also remember that good things happen without my intervention. Bliss comes all the time without compromising myself. Praying this line reminds me of hope.

And finally, "I have an inward treasure, born with me; which can keep me alive if all extraneous delights should be withheld." This line, prayed, conjures an image of something divine within me. "I have an inward treasure, born with me." And it reminds me of that same sacredness in all others, the sacredness of everyone in this room, everyone I can see, and everyone who I cannot even imagine.

"I have an inward treasure... which can keep me alive". This line moves me in its innocence, and frustrates me in its lie: As if one's soul or sacredness is enough to keep them alive. It inspires me to help create a world in which it could be true... a world of plenty where one's sacredness would be all one needed. .

And the fact that I have not gotten through all of the blessings of praying this four line prayer in five minutes reminds me of the endless depths of beauty available to us, if we stare at something worthy for long enough.

I pray that we let these worthy things move us to living more charitable, humbler, fulfilled and liberated lives.

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