

Service of Remembrance, Alumni Day, February 23, 2019

Memorial Address

Reverend Scott Ramsey, Class of 1994

Loss, Presence, Promise

Lamentations 3, Psalm 139, Revelation 21

Good afternoon. I want to thank President Eisgruber, Dean Boden, Dean Thames, the University Alumni Association, Dorothy Werner, and the officers of the class of 1994 for their gracious invitation to speak this afternoon, as we pay tribute to alumni, students, and members of the faculty and staff whose deaths were recorded by the University during the past year. A university community, in its largest sense, is shaped by all of the people who affiliate with it. The community of those who have called Princeton “home,” for at least a part of their lives, is a community that stretches across space and time.

Today, we who are the living members of the Princeton community have gathered together to give thanks for, to remember, pay tribute to, and to grieve the loss of those who have died. We are here from a variety of different religious traditions, including those who are not part of any religious tradition. We have gathered to sing hymns and anthems, hear ancient texts, and offer prayers from our different traditions. We are here as part of the human family, drawn together by our shared connection to this particular community and by our loving remembrance of those who have died.

We are here to participate consciously in the rhythms of death and life, loss and renewal, things that are coming to an end and new doors that are beginning to open. Some of the lives that we are remembering this afternoon were taken from us too soon. Others died at the end of a long life. Among those whom we remember today is James Billington, class of 1950, who served as the Librarian of Congress and who died this past November. We also remember his brother, David Billington, also class of 1950, longtime professor of engineering here, who died in April. We remember André Maman, longtime professor of Romance Languages and Literature, who died in April, and who was an honorary member of two different classes here. We remember Eddie Mendez, from our class of 1994, who died last January, and whose career was devoted to treating Head and Neck Cancer. And hundreds more. In every case, they are people who were given to us and to the world for a season, to impact and change the world, to touch the lives of

those dear to them, and to shape the life of this University, in small ways and in large ways. May their memories be a blessing, *z'chronam l'vracha*.

Coming to terms with the realities of loss and death has always been one of the driving impulses behind the religions of the world. Because death comes to all of us, all of us engage in our own individual processes of facing, wrestling with, raging against, grieving, and accepting the reality of death in the lives of those we love, as well as in ourselves. It's never a pretty process, but it is the humanly necessary one.

Whether we use the language of God or the divine or simply the universe and that which is beyond and greater than ourselves, we are presented with two things that can seem contradictory, but which are both true. On the one hand, as we sit in this space, mindful of the sweep of history and the vast breadth of the universe, we are aware that each one of us is, in fact, quite small. No matter how powerful a person may be during their life, the reality of death comes to us all. In the divine frame of reference, as we sang about in the opening hymn, a thousand ages are like an evening gone, and we are but a small speck in the universe.

At the same time, however, we can sense that our lives and the lives of those we love are, somehow, of eternal worth and have an infinite value. Again, from Psalm 139, which we read responsively, the divine has searched and known each one of us. We are seen, we are known, we are beloved. The divine knows when we sit down and when we rise up. This is the language of attention and relationship. In some mysterious way, the divine presence at the heart of the universe is attentive to the in's and out's of our own most intimate lives.

This afternoon, we've shared three Scriptural texts – from Lamentations 3, Psalm 139, and from Revelation 21. In the context of this service of remembrance, this trio of texts speaks to us of loss, of presence, and of promise, each of which plays a part in our remembering this afternoon.

The little book of Lamentations is a 5-chapter poem that is an extended meditation on the destruction of the city of Jerusalem by the armies of the Babylonian empire in the 6th century BCE. The poem begins in chapter 1 by mournfully observing, "How lonely sits the city that once was full of people!" For 5 consecutive chapters, the poet lingers over the losses that have been suffered, giving witness to the suffering that has been generated.

Ours is a society that does not do grief very well. Even when the bottom falls out of our lives in some way, we tell each other to keep a stiff upper lip, to look on the bright side of life,

and to just keep swimming. Never let ‘em see you cry. It may be that those of us who are ‘heavily educated’ may even have a harder time of this than most. There are surely many reasons for why we keep grief at a distance, but I think much of it is related to our desire to remain in control of our lives, and our fear that grief will just overwhelm us if we let it in. So our society does all it can to keep grief out.

But right there in the middle of the Bible is this little book of Lamentations, devoted to processing the losses that come to us. And the promise of the book is that grief will not destroy you, especially when it is grief for one whom you have loved. The grief we experience is itself a testimony to the depth of our love. *Loss* is one zprimary part of our remembering.

In the midst of our losses, according to Psalm 139, we may be blessed by the *presence* of another. The psalm speaks of the presence of God, who knows everything that happens to us, who is with us in both light and in darkness, for dark is the same as light to the divine. Some funeral liturgies speak of entrusting those who have died over to the gracious mercy of God, which is to speak of God’s presence that is larger than the reality of death. Other traditions speak of dying in terms of reunion with the divine, of becoming one with the source of all that is.

“Presence” is also a good word for what we are doing today. By gathering here together, we are present with each other, and the company of others can lend strength, encouragement, and staying power in the midst of our varied losses.

When we come to Revelation 21, we approach the very edges of what humans can say in the face of death. This text makes the claim that death is not, in fact, the biggest reality there is, that love and healing and abiding peace are stronger and more decisive than anything that the forces of death can do to us. “God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” The *promise* of hope situates the difficult realities of death in a larger frame, in which life and newness have the last word.

Loss, presence, promise.

We gather together this afternoon on behalf of the wider Princeton community today, to bear witness to the lives of those who have gone before us. We acknowledge and face their losses, sustained by the presence of God and of each other. May we move forward together into the future and the promises that lie before us. *Amen.*