

Convocation Worship Service
Marquand Chapel
Yale Divinity School
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Hosea 14: 1-9; Luke 6: 39-49.

The new look of Marquand chapel is just amazing to behold—with the pews gone and a new setup that fosters community spirit. It is as if a strong wind blew, and the old structure as we knew it was completely flattened, and then a new structure with stronger foundations put in its place. It is amazing what modern means of demolishing and reconstruction can do. When Jesus was speaking to His disciples, he did not quite have in mind the possibility that bulldozers and heavy-duty construction instruments could do what winds cannot do.

So we get into that passage today, especially sitting in this sanctuary with our metaphors challenged. Nevertheless, what we experience in many spheres of life today bears witness that this metaphor still points to truth today. A house on a strong foundation—the rock cannot be so easily moved even by strong winds while one on shallow sandy grounds is easily destroyed by storms. Whether or not the “houses” we are building today will withstand or fall in the face of the strong winds that blow in life today correlate with the kind of foundation on which we are building. Those strong winds continue to challenge situations and communities today more than ever before.

To see this clearly, I invite you to take a journey with me, as we begin this year’s convocation. Fasten your seat belts, because in this very brief time we will travel over a long distance in time.

Our first stop is the 8th century BCE. A people who were described as beloved by God—whose strength was found in God—had lost that ground. Now they were trusting in what they thought would give them security. Military alliances, a life of comfort in ignoring the demands of a relationship with God. The result was devastating; as the storms were blowing, they had absolutely no recourse. By this time in the account in the book of Hosea, they had already suffered defeat and were in a state of despair. Hosea the prophet seems to be saying this plight was a result of their sinfulness and disloyalty to God. Among other things, they followed the ways of neighbouring nations around them uncritically and trusted in military might, horses, etc., rather than in God for their security. Even then in the 8th Century, at this stop, looking at the Northern Kingdom of Israel, God is presented as loving, pleading with the Israelites to return, promising restoration. Theirs was a life of despair, but God was promising hope on the basis of restored relationship. God took the initiative of offering love and reconciliation. The prophet pointed out that those who are wise will be

the ones benefiting from this grace and love of God that will restore them once again to unshakeable grounds where they will feel secure.

The time has come all too soon to move to the next stop over 700 years later. And we arrive at the 1st century in the Common Era. Here we encounter Jesus of Nazareth in an intense discussion with his disciples. What we read earlier in Luke's Gospel is part of what is labelled the Sermon on the Plain—a collection of teachings. Here the message is very clear—one can be a leader, use the right kind of language, “Lord, Lord”, and even be great at pointing out how wrong other people are, but be nothing more than hypocrites or the blind leading the blind. Jesus seemed to be saying effective leaders who led in the right direction were not the ones who quickly pointed out wrongs in others. It begins with those who realise their own woundedness and need for restoration. Having received forgiveness by removing the log in their own eyes, they were more likely to follow Jesus more faithfully than those who may even have the right language of saying “Lord, Lord,” but only follow what is convenient to them. Then he drives the point home with the building on the rock versus the building in the sand. Here again, it is those who are wise who will benefit from security built on the rock and not shakeable by the strong winds of the day. They are the beacons of hope.

The next stop moves us speedily through about 2,000 years. It brings us back right here to this sanctuary, to the world of this 21st century. The winds are so strong. We look around, and see that in a similar fashion to the 8th century Israelites our era too finds it easy to live like the vast majority of people—ignoring the will of God and living mainly for ourselves. We too can ignore God's love and be fascinated only by uncritically following the trends of our days. We live in a world filled with injustice in our economies, and among people who ignore the two thirds of the world who live under the poverty line. Oppression and prejudice on the basis of gender, race or something else is far too often the norm rather than the exception. Many of us received very good educations in halls of this kind but often find it difficult to focus on our prophetic tasks in making a difference in the world. Far too often in the midst of the current storms, we fail to stand firm on the foundation of the rock, and find ourselves trusting in military might and other forces to ensure our security. I am aware that many of us in this sanctuary may not be exactly like that—that many are indeed passionate about justice. But we have to put ourselves there—where a good part of our society is. Because often the church fails to speak out when the powers around are taking us down that road of injustice and insecurity. As a result, our world is sliding towards increased insecurity. Instead of confronting the evil, we, too, can be stuck in moralising away as we see the petty sins of others—and as we seek on the basis of that to exclude those who are unlike us.

Today, you and I (representing the Church of Jesus Christ) are called upon to take a good look at ourselves in the mirror and to remove the log in our eyes before we can be useful instruments of transformation in God's hands. If we are truly built on the foundation of Jesus Christ, we will not be as shaken by the winds. We will allow God to remove the logs in our eyes so that we can see clearly what this world has become, even with our complicity, and we will follow the Lord in seeing the pain of the suffering at the hands of evil in every form. We will be ready to be faithful prophets of our days. This does not come easily. It entails a radical understanding that God can make a difference. Calling Jesus “Lord” is not something that comes merely from our lips. Our commitment to Christ's Lordship ought to show in our lives and our prayers. It constantly comes back to the point of knowing that we, too, have things in our eyes that need to be removed, so that we can see clearly.

We, too, need healing and forgiveness from God so that we can become instruments of transformation in our communities.

The awareness of our own woundedness is an important instrument in the work of healing and bringing hope that we have been called to engage in. To paraphrase the words of our beloved former professor Henri Nouwen, it is indeed those who know their woundedness and therefore benefit from God's constant restoration and healing who can be said to be built on the right foundation, and who can offer hope in this broken world. Those who rely on military or economic power and who may even feel solutions to complex situations can come from shocking an "awing" may find that their houses are built on a shallow foundation.

We are called to be God's instruments of hope in our nations today. We, too, may be tempted to take the easier route of following the trends of our days as the Israelites did, or to simply pay lip service to our faith, while in reality trusting in the superiority of what we have and our might. Or we can benefit from God's restoring love and commit ourselves to the prophetic mission to which we have been invited. That is a sign of what our foundation is. That is a source of hope to us as well as to the many who are suffering all over the world today. A church or community that is self-searching and willing to admit to its complicity in its reliance on military might and economic power and not God's standards can receive God's restoration. Even in that awareness of our woundedness, we can become truly described as the building with a solid foundation. Not even modern day heavy-duty equipment that would be able to pull down this sanctuary and redo it again can pull down a church that is this committed to walking with God and being part of God's transforming of our broken world into a more just place.

Yes, in a world in which our brokenness and insecurity is more visible than ever before, the churches in which you and I serve can be God's instruments pointing to hope and life in fullness. You and I are called to be those beacons of hope.

Amen
