

HYMN (from the New Century Hymnal)

20

God of Abraham and Sarah

James Gertmenian, 1986; alt.

1 God of A - bra - ham and Sar - ah, God of Mo - ses, Mir - iam's Guide;
 2 God who danc - es in cre - a - tion, spin - ning stars a - bove our heads;
 3 God who loves the poor in spir - it, God who com - forts those who mourn;
 4 In our lives from birth to dy - ing, depth of sor - row, height of joy;

God of Da - vid and the proph - ets, God in Je - sus glo - ri - fied:
 God whose face is scrib - ed in mu - sic, by whose hand the earth is fed:
 Balm for wounds, the friend of sin - ners, tak - ing the side of earth's for - lorn:
 Prais - ing God in ev - ery sea - son, let ev - ery key our hearts em - ploy.

Up from the dust you raise a peo - ple, breathe in the breath of life, of soul;
 Up from the ground you raise the moun - tains, raise our spir - its, lift our eyes;
 Up from the depths you raise your peo - ple, giv - ing them cour - age for the day;
 Praise is the heal - ing, praise, the glo - ry, praise is the fin - al mys - ter - y;

Down through the years the peo - ple praise you till al - le - lu - ias make them whole!
 Down through the years your peo - ple praise you till al - le - lu - ias flood the skies!
 Down through the years the peo - ple praise you till al - le - lu - ias light their way!
 Down through the years let peo - ple praise you till al - le - lu - ias set them free!

The healing power of praise and the history of God's dealings with humankind are the themes of this hymn, written by a United Church of Christ minister who is the grandson of Armenian immigrants. The tune is named for his father.

Tune: CONSTANTINE 8.7.8.7.D.
 Melody by James Gertmenian, 1986
 Harm. Ronald Huntington, 1986; alt.

READING: BARUCH 3 11-21; 24-26; 30-37

Why is it, O Israel,
why is it that you are in the land of your enemies,
that you are growing old in a foreign country,
that you are defiled with the dead,
that you are counted among those in Hades?

You have forsaken the fountain of wisdom.
If you had walked in the way of God,
you would be living in peace forever.

Learn where there is wisdom,
where there is strength,
where there is understanding,
so that you may at the same time discern
where there is length of days, and life,
where there is light for the eyes, and peace.

Who has found her place?
And who has entered her storehouses?

Where are the rulers of the nations,
and those who lorded it over the animals on earth;
those who made sport of the birds of the air,
and who hoarded up silver and gold in which people trust,
and there is no end to their getting;
those who schemed to get silver, and were anxious,
but there is no trace of their works?
They have vanished and gone down to Hades,
and others have arisen in their place.
Later generations have seen the light of day,
and have lived upon the earth;
but they have not learned the way to knowledge,
nor understood her paths,
nor laid hold of her.

O Israel,
how great is the house of God,
how vast the territory that God possesses!
It is great and has no bounds;
it is high and immeasurable.

Who has gone up into heaven,
and taken wisdom,
and brought her down from the clouds?
Who has gone over the sea,
and found her,
and will buy her for pure gold?
No one knows the way to her,
or is concerned about the path to her.

But the One who knows all things knows her;
God found her by divine understanding.
God—the One who prepared the earth for all time,
and filled it with four-footed creatures;
the One who sends forth the light, and it goes;
the One who called it, and it obeyed, trembling;
the stars shone in their watches, and were glad;
God called them, and they said, "Here we are!"
They shone with gladness for the one who made them.
This is our God, to whom no other can be compared.

God found the whole way to knowledge
and gave her to Jacob and to Rachel, Leah, Bilhah and Zilpah—
people deeply loved by God and in love with God.

Afterward she appeared on earth and lived with humankind.

WELCOME

Welcome students, faculty, staff, members of the board, alumni, families, friends, benefactors; welcome to Heinrich Christensen, our wonderful organist whose name did not make it into the program correctly; welcome to any of you who have just wandered in off the street. Be you full welcome, one and all. A special welcome to incoming students: those of you who, here today in this place, will, in very short order, formally declare your presence and your commitment to academic study, personal prayer, communal, public worship, and formation for leadership in the church and the world here at Episcopal Divinity School.

As we pause together on this threshold, let us welcome the world in as well. The world with its overwhelming needs. We are here because it is our personal passion and joy; but as the reading from Baruch so powerfully proclaims, we are not here seeking wisdom in a vacuum for our personal ego gratification. The stakes are high. Life on earth as we know it hangs in the balance—in this day and age more than ever before. And yet, even as we twist and swing in that balance, I wonder whether can we trust the wisdom of Howard Thurman, who wrote, “Don’t ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.”.

How will we come alive, how we will find and walk in the way of wisdom? If we want to come alive in our consciousness and our freedom, we would do well to pay some serious and honest attention to the fullness of who we really are. So let us welcome into this moment all of who we are. Our gifts and accomplishments, our pride and our hope, certainly. And also our open wounds, our scars, our fears, regrets, confusion, doubts, stubbornness, grief, and rage. Welcome it all! Welcome what makes each of us unique and fantastic; what makes us ridiculous; what makes us a perfect fit for EDS; and what doesn’t jive at all with our stereotype, or even our own dream ideal, of what an EDS student or faculty member or staff member “should” be. Welcome all that we know about ourselves—and all we don’t yet know, and all we’ll never know. Welcome the idiosyncrasies of how we learn; and our small-mindedness; and our sudden fits of outrageous generosity, imagination and courage.

Bring it all. Bring it on!

SHOW UP

Woody Allen said that 90% of life is showing up. I see you here as I am here talking to you, so I know that you have already shown up in a most magnificent way. I congratulate you on all you have already accomplished in getting here and getting settled, and I charge you this day: Keep showing up. Show up day by day, and night by night, when it's easy, and when it's awful; show up to yourself; to God; to this community; to the world. It will more than likely feel lonely and pointless at times, but I assure you, you are in the best of company, from the cosmic scale to the very personal.

We see the stars showing up in the Baruch reading. They twinkle, trembling with joy, singing in the heavens, "Here we are!" A few decades ago, astrophysicists managed to calculate the age of the universe by carefully investigating the omnipresent radiation reading they first attributed to instrument error in their far-gazing telescopes. They eventually realized the telescopes was accurately capturing light from the very beginning of time, shortly after the Big Bang; because the universe has expanded so immensely, that primal light now appears to be coming from nowhere and everywhere at once. That primal light, which kisses our skin moment by moment, is star shine traveling clear across the universe from the dawn of creation singing all the while: Here we are!!

At the other end of the scale, my guess is that most of us have experienced showing up as very young children, before we could even walk or talk. One of the first games my mother played with me was peek-a-boo: slipping behind a pillow or blanket, she says, "Where's Mommy?", and when I cannot see her I think she no longer exists and is gone forever; such relief and joy then, when she returns a moment later with a bright smile and laughing voice: Here I am! And then I hold my hands over my eyes and think that because I can't see, I can't be seen. And my mother indulges me, asking, "Where's Ellen?" I feel so powerful when I take my hands away and she exclaims, "There you are!" But, of course, all my imagined power flows solely from the matrix of her abiding love, for it is she who has held me in sight, in being, the whole time.

Here I am. This "showing up" is also, not surprisingly, one of the grand refrains of Biblical narrative. Let me give you a few glimpses:

- * Abraham, in soul-splitting agony, with a knife to his son's throat, offers his own heart as he chooses to remain fully present both to his son and to God: Here I am. Salvation, release, ensue. [Genesis 22]
- * Moses, terrified at the burning bush, fully encounters the divine because he was willing to hang in there and stand his ground—with bare feet, no less: Here I am. [Exodus 3]
- * David, that complex and flawed lover of God sang: Here I am, O Lord, I come to do your will. [Psalm 40]

- * Samuel, Isaiah, Jeremiah, in spite of often feeling mystified, frustrated and totally inadequate, even when their careers and their very lives are threatened, staked their claim to the fullness of life: Here I am. [1 Samuel 3; Isaiah 6; Jeremiah 26]
- * And perhaps the most profound, tender, and brave of all: Mary's response to the angel's message that will disrupt her life and the life of the whole world forever: Here I am, God. [Luke 1]

AD SUM

Christian ritual is steeped in this fundamental affirmation. In many of the rites of the ancient and renewed Christian initiation of adults, candidates for baptism are called by name, and they respond, "Present" or "Here I am." The same is true for many ordination rituals. The medieval Latin for this phrase is "ad sum." While the English may seem somewhat static and legalistic, the Latin has overtones of dynamism and growth. Ad sum. "Ad" is a preposition of course, and means "at" or "towards" or "in the direction of." So we can think of "ad sum" as meaning "I am towards." I am leaning toward; I am turning toward; I am becoming; I am evolving; I am being formed and transformed with a direction, a purpose, a goal.

ALLELUIA

We are here at EDS to participate in that purposeful becoming. We are here to study hard, and we are in one of the very best and most privileged places in the world to do just that. And here at EDS we are blessed with superabundance, with overflowing grace, because here we have both superb academics and so much more; and because we know we are not going to get where we want to go just by studying the map.

We get where we want to go by showing up together, with all that we are, blessing it, and offering it in sacrificial love, singing Alleluia with every step we take. This is our echo-location system as we navigate our journey on the Gospel road. We sing Alleluia in the Big Voice, the Deep Voice of the gathered Body of Christ, and this song-line keeps us tracking toward heaven.

My desire for you, as you begin your time at EDS, and for all of us, is that together we will sing for God the song of our whole lives, every part of our lives, to give God joy, who is joy to us. [Psalm 104, ICEL translation]

Let the people sing to you, O God
till Alleluia's make them whole
till Alleluia's flood the skies
till Alleluia's light their way
till Alleluia's set them free

Augustine of Hippo said that in the end, he was he was converted to Christianity not primarily by sophisticated theological arguments, or any emotional reaction to his sense of his own brokenness, but rather by the sound of the Alleluia's rolling like thunder through the cathedral in Milan. That sound is the sound of God, calling us by name; vibrating and amplified in human flesh and blood and breath, in human community, consciousness and freedom; impossible, in fact, without them. That sounds joins in the chorus of all the angels and saints throughout time and space. That sound echoes the shining song of the universe singing for joy from the dawn of time: Here we are! That sound answers our earliest and deepest longing to see and be seen, to know and be known: Here I am. Ad sum.

Well, talking about Alleluia's without singing them would be like talking about water without drinking any, and life is way too short for that—so in closing, let's all put ourselves on the line and risk together; let's add our voices right here, right now. Let's join in the Song.

[And we sang Alleluia together eight times—seven for the number of perfection in the judeo-christian mystical tradition, plus one for the eighth day of creation, the day of re-creation, of the new creation; the number of superabundance, the number beyond perfection. We sang beginning on one pitch and one vowel, and traveled together, far and wide, to the very gates of heaven.]