

## Noticing the Newts

Andover Newton Seminary at Yale Divinity School Graduation, Marquand Chapel  
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Good morning everyone!

Deans Greg Sterling and Sarah Drummond, Chairwoman Hannah Kane, our Commencement Speaker Rev. Dr. Gregory Groover, the esteemed participants of this ceremony, my dearest colleagues and last but certainly not least – to the Andover Newton Seminary at Yale Divinity School c/o 2022! Greetings, greetings, greetings!

As I promised one of your classmates I would say – “You all are looking quite pretty this morning! You are beautiful – do not let anyone tell you otherwise – God told me so AND I can tell through the masks!” Please hold onto that as you continue celebrating all you have accomplished.

Community, do you remember the 21<sup>st</sup> night of September? After today you will remember the 21<sup>st</sup> day of May! Now, a reading from the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter of Revelation, adapted from Rev. Dr. Wil Gafney’s “A Women’s Lectionary for the Whole Church”.

*I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.' And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, descending heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her beloved. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,*

*"Look! The home of God is among the woman-born.*

*God will dwell with them as their God;*

*they will be God's peoples,*

*and this selfsame God will be with them.*

*God will wipe every tear from their eyes.*

*Death will be no more;*

*grief and weeping and pain will be no more,*

*for the first things have passed away.*

*And the One who was seated upon the throne said, "Look! I am making all things new."*

*The One also said, "Write, for these words are trustworthy and true."  
Then the One said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end.*

*I will give to the thirsty from the spring of the water of life freely. Those who overcome will inherit these things, and I will be their God and they will be my daughters and sons.*

Will you pray with me?

As you know from your New Testament Interpretation II courses, Revelation is an apocalyptic text. Some of you gathered here this morning may have thought to yourself recently that we are living in the end times, an apocalypse, for sure – hands down! Perhaps there is one among you graduates that was not sure you would be sitting where you are at this moment at some point along the road. To this I say BUT GOD! Amen. The One from where our help comes has said IT IS DONE. It is done, graduates!

SO, now --

What does one say to a class graduating into a world that is turning? What does one say to graduates going into a world where a poly-pandemic of racial violence, a climate crisis, economic injustice leaving many without housing and/or healthcare continues to plague us... where legislators question the humanity of those who hold a particular identity or mode of expression, where the agency of making decisions for one's body are being called into questioned, where wars continue to rage across our globe and for some grocery stores and/or houses of worship are a battlefield? What does one say to a class that has been tossed to and fro, where anticipation has become anguish and grief, and awaiting a return or a change has left many sore from whiplash? What is one to say?

I say: be trustworthy and true as you transform! As our scripture lesson today tells us – be trustworthy and true, graduates, as you leave this place. Truly, this world needs you to move in your truths; needs you to speak truth to power; I need you to become experts in yourselves – not in a navel gazing, indulgent way, but in a mindful manner. You must become experts in yourselves with God to allow you to serve faithfully, lead collaboratively and to act gracious.

Peace to all who have gathered here to celebrate each of our graduates this morning! I am honored for the opportunity to bring forth the preached word this morning. I will reference the grads quite a bit but there is a message here for each of us!

I would like to speak to you from a message titled: **Noticing the Newts.**

Gospel writer John the Apostle reminds us that God, the Alpha and Omega dwell with us. The Creator will dry our eyes and embrace us. The Divine One comes down to meet us in our times of transition, our times of hardship, and our times of celebration! John the Elder also points to a New Jerusalem. Can you say that to your neighbor?

A new Jerusalem is emerging, indeed! A new Jerusalem is emerging -- let's gather round as we attempt to see where we belong in the narrative! God is making all things new in the assembling of this holy city. As this holy city rises, the eschatological distinctions between heaven and earth fall away. Therefore, we ought not preach or practice a gospel that disembodies the material to make way for the immaterial. We are called to hold both, perhaps in a hybrid, asynchronous fashion. There exists a fluidity in the roles that we play in this earthly realm within the heavenly ecosystem.

These blurred lines may remind you of that moment when you look back during your tenure as a student, here to learn, and realize that you were leading; YOU were providing the tools to construct new ways of thinking and being; You were contributing to the discourse, adding to the narrative. Each of you have left a mark on this place; the ecosystem of this Quadrangle. In doing life with each of you inside and out of these hallowed halls as well as in the Hollywood Squares of Upper Zoom and such, I can say that I have been changed, transformed even. AND I KNOW I am not the only one.

I realize that you did not all begin your journeys here at the same time; however, you are finishing together. Take a moment to look around, to look at your neighbor on either side... Do any memories come to mind?

Maybe you were there when your neighbor moved in OR you were in my BTFO small group? Did you and your neighbor share a dance together at the 2019 Advent

celebration? Perhaps that time when you thought you were messaging them privately; however, somehow it ended up in the chat for the entire class, all gathered, to see? Maybe you rehearsed and performed live an entire musical on Zoom, from where you were sheltering in place? Or did you drop off a care package via a meal train? Yes, class 2022, it is not lost on me that this tenure has been a trudge.

We have been through some challenging times, too, particularly as the first things passed away! We have needed to hold space for one another -- in moments of mourning and loss, misunderstanding and fatigue. Times when we could not quite find the words... where community or sibling may not have been the first thought that came to mind when describing our classmate neighbor. That's alright -- we are all human. That said, let's take a look at an animal sibling of ours.

Now, if I am not mistaken, I believe that this may have been the class that coined the students of our ANS community as AndyNewts -- I mean, there is a group chat and everything now! So, let me share with you all, you, AndyNewts, you... a bit about our animal sibling, the Newt: our mascot or spirit animal, if you will, as we think about transformation!

Newts come in all combinations of colors and sizes. They can be a bit dangerous. They can be chatters, ridiculously cool and can be challenging to hold onto .. have I described any of the graduates in the room yet? They are New Hampshire's state amphibian; Newts have been said to ensure the ecology of their region.

I would say that it is safe to say that each of you have sustained the Andover Newton ecology with your transformative gifts of preaching, singing, instrumentation, movement, liturgy, pastoral care, drawing and painting skills, and even with your provocative theological inquiries around reckoning and restoration in a world that is turning.

Newts are highly adaptable. Newts are birthed in aquatic settings and mature to breathe on land. That said, once adapted to dry land, they can return to the water with webbed feet and paddled tails. Adaptability is not one of the colloquia competencies -- and yet -- your class may know a thing or two about it, no?

Did you know that newts have the ability of regeneration?! Newts can regenerate their tails, jaws, spinal cords, and even their heart ventricles. Further, guess how long this process typically takes?? Any guesses? Approximately 40 days. Now, I will not tell YOU scholars of the Hebrew Bible the significance of this. Hint: Moses. Hint: Jesus. I digress, but you cannot make this stuff up!

Before we get too niche, did you catch what I said about the newt's ability to return to the water, where life began for the species? We cannot forget where we come from as we transform. We must recall our lineage, our ancestry; this is what nourishes us! Our newt siblings, as John the Elder does, remind us of the Living Water, our sacred genealogy. Someone turn to your neighbor and say: do not forget to return to the water?

Now, back to resurrection! I mean, regeneration! Newts can regenerate their eyes, the lenses in which they see. Did someone's sharing of testimony and/or life's moments teach you something about yourself, allowing you to see the world in a new light? How have you regenerated or been reborn on this journey? How has YOUR lens, your way of seeing, of knowing this world been transformed? I will not tell you what to do with these "new eyes"; however, as I look out as you -- you preachers and pastors, you chaplains and educators, you artists and advocates -- be sure to continue attuning your lenses to the fringes, the margins of our world.

As you do this, remember who you are and *whose* you are — a child of the Divine! Go forth prayerfully. Break bread and fellowship frequently with God's people! Recall the words of the road to Emmaus; may your hearts burn, beloved. May you not become weary on the road. May you not become disengaged by the messiness of ministry. May you lead with love as you go -- as you share your stories, your testimonies of how you made it over! May you continue to bump shoulders, as we did here and there at Emmaus dinner; may you not be bruised by the contact sport that can be, well, ministry. Ministry, though, is not a sprint; take breaks and hydrate, refill the tank intentionally and routinely.

Can you recall the passion, ethical concern, and/or inspiration for coming to Divinity School? I will not ask you to share it aloud now, but hold onto it, tightly, as you begin to gather the people of our world as faith leaders. These inspirations will be your compass to the spring of water. It is this nexus that founds your covenant with God, neighbor, and creation. It is this covenant that informs the vision of your

ministry. It is this call that led you here, where you have been equipped to attune your hearts and minds to a compassionate God that desires to heal our world.

May the God that wipes away our tears grant you the endurance to remain steadfast as you process the grief, anticipatory or otherwise.

May you continue to acknowledge the land. May you encourage others to hold to the promise of the One who conquered death.

May your theological education invite others to participate in the discipline of hope; to remain in the liminal -- in the both/ands of discovering joy in times of sorrow.

May the ministerial vision of this self same God continue to guide and inspire you to lean into your authenticity.

May your perspicacity pierce archaic perspectives! May you continue to pay attention and see those who have been overcome, those who thirst and point them towards water, towards the well. I do not say this metaphorically or in a pie-in-the-sky manner. There are real people, right now that are going without clean water in our midst. There are forests and communities aflame, needing water.

The transformation that Revelation points to is not one of obliteration, but one of restoration. In the transformation you must remember to construct as you critique. It is a call to faithful action, not idle waiting. When the call feels too much, too heavy to bear, which it will in certain seasons. Remember the Almighty Living God dwells with and within you! Remember that you belong to the Creator of All, to the Divine One is gathered there with you -- no matter where you find yourself on this journey.

*[Remember] No matter what people say | Say or think about you | You are a child, you are a child of God.*

Oh the place you will go as you help to usher in this new Jerusalem. You are equipped to be good neighbors; to act and not simply observe; to foster community and healing in this world; you are called to be trustworthy and true -- with God's help!

As you prepare to receive your diploma today and pivot into new possibilities, may you contribute to the creation of harmony where harm has been done with God's help.

May your ministry be one of repair and recompense, not greed and clout.  
May you remember that as Revelation displays for us, endings are often new beginnings!

May you remember that you are a beloved child of the Alpha and the Omega.  
May you remember that this same God, the Divine, is making things news,

O You People of the New Jerusalem!

May it be so!