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Baccalaureate Message to the Class of 2018

“But now thus says the Lord,  
he who created you, O Jacob,  
he who formed you, O Israel:  
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. For I am the Lord your God,  
Do not remember the former things,  
or consider the things of old.  
I am about to do a new thing;  
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” Isaiah 43:1-3,18-19

There’s a Carl Sandburg poem entitled Prayers of Steel:

Lay me on an anvil, O God.  
Beat me and hammer me into a crowbar.  
Let me pry loose old walls.  
Let me lift and loosen old foundations.  
Lay me on an anvil, O God.  
Beat me and hammer me into a steel spike.  
Drive me into the girders that hold a skyscraper together.  
Take red-hot rivets and fasten me into the central girders.  
Let me be the great nail holding a skyscraper through blue nights into white stars.

This poem was written when the first skyscrapers were being built in America. Having grown up in Wisconsin, I have not had much experience with skyscrapers. I don’t think I fully appreciated what Carl Sandburg had written about until I visited New York, a city filled with skyscrapers.

Skyscrapers are these towering monuments to American industrialism and progress. The image they project is one that is old and yet looking to the future. They capture sentimental feelings for the past and hope for the future.

I think something that really captures what I’m talking about is the sculpture “Wisdom”

that looms over the Rockefeller tower entryway. It depicts an ancient God of Wisdom reaching down from the clouds shooting beams of light from his hand. Below him, the biblical quote “Wisdom and Knowledge Shall Be the Stability of Thy Times”. A building of the future hailing this ancient powerful image, the old and the new, looking to the future together.

Now high school was a stressful experience. I think most of my classmates would agree with me when I say balancing extracurriculars, academics, and jobs in addition to trying to figure out how to be an adult and trying to figure out who you are as a person can be a lot. The stress and the anxiety of it all can be isolating. Sometimes it seems like everyone else is managing just fine in stressful times, and that you are the only one falling apart. Sometimes it feels like it’s just you in a struggle that doesn’t feel like it is going to end anytime soon, but that’s not the truth. The truth is God is with you in those times. God is there in the little things. On the nice day when you can go outside and eat your lunch, in the enthusiastic greeting of your friend that brightens your day, when your schedule lines up just right, he’s with you. God is there in the big things. In the teacher who supports when you struggle, in the coach who helps you when you are having an off couple weeks, most importantly in those who love you, God is always there.

At the end of a long four-year journey, the waters have not overwhelmed us. The fires have not consumed us. They made us stronger. The stress was an anvil. Though it was difficult, God helped us to emerge from the forge, better than we were before. We are prepared for wherever life was taking us because we have torn down the old walls that were in our way. We’ve left behind the fears and mistakes we have made. God and us, we are going to do a new thing, together. We may still be under construction, but God is with us, as we carry what we need from the old and walk into the new.