

3 Epiphany January 24, 2021.
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A New Poem
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, OH

Biblical scholar, author, and former Bishop of Durham, N.T. Wright wrote about a poet in his Biblical Commentary on the section from Mark's Gospel we read today. He didn't cite any of his poems. Instead, he talked about how this poet's father was not supportive of him pursuing his calling or dream to write poetry and wanted him to take his place as the next generation in the family business. Such a decision would not only give him financial stability, the father said, it would allow the proud family tradition to continue. Even though the poet loved his father, he was caught up in something larger than himself, something his poetry connected him to. So he became a poet; over time his poems inspired and moved people and he became a poet laureate. In relating the poet's story to the section in Mark's Gospel where fishermen leave their nets and their father, and the family fishing businesses to follow Jesus, he says, "God wants new poetry written, and is calling new people to write it."

For many of those who watched the presidential inauguration on Wednesday, they were introduced to one of my favorite poets Amanda Gorman and her new poem. At 22, Amanda is the youngest poet to recite her work at a presidential inauguration, but that didn't hinder so many people from being caught up in her beautiful and powerful message of hope. Amanda did not shy away from mentioning difficult or painful truths in her poem titled "The Hill We Climb", and she reminded us who were listening that we are called to rise up from our sorrows, our pain, our challenges, our defeats, our past, our injustices, to turn from them, learn from them, and turn toward building bridges to a better day, a better country for all people. To me, she was a living embodiment of N.T. Wright's commentary. Amanda Gorman is making God's dream of new people writing new poetry come true.

When I heard the words of her poem, I heard more than hope. I heard the Kingdom of God described in a new and inviting way. Even though Amanda Gorman is a young Black woman, her words have always spoken to me, a now middle-aged white woman, invited me in, and showed me truth, helped me through pain, and inspired hope to rise up in me. Amanda's poems create a space where I can see myself and so many people different from me all together, and this helps me see today's Gospel in a new light. Too often I have been guilty of looking at this section of Mark and focusing on Jesus calling his disciples to be "fishers of men" and comparing that to ministry, ignoring that drawing parallels between fishing and

ministry might not be the healthiest practice. For example, things don't usually go well for the fish unless you practice catch and release. As much as I enjoy fishing, it is a sport with a vast inequality of power between the fish and the fisherman.

Sometimes it helps to remember the word in Greek translated as "fishers" can also be translated as catchers. Jesus' invitation to the men who left their nets, father, and family business was probably not to engage in the same business only ensnaring people as they would fish. Instead, Jesus' calling was probably an invitation to leave that way of seeing the world behind and walk with him while composing and learning new poetry.

That new poetry is the Kingdom of God Jesus proclaimed had come near. The new poem Jesus proclaimed called people to repent and to believe the good news. This is the hopeful invitation those fishermen in today's Gospel got caught up in. The good news the people of Israel had been waiting for so very long was finally fulfilled or realized in Jesus: God was present and, on the move, ready to bring God's healing love and freedom to God's people; to restore the sacred to humanity. That meant it was also time to repent.

The word repent can be misinterpreted and people often imagine it means something quite dramatic like falling to your lowest, wailing and suffering at realizing you have sinned or failed or done something wrong. But the word repent simply means to turn. It's an invitation to turn from all those things we come to rely on and turn toward God and trust God.

N.T. Wright states in his commentary on Mark's Gospel, "Jesus' contemporaries trusted their ancestors, their land, their temple, their laws, their expectations that God would do what they expected God to do. But God was calling them to cut those ties because God was up to something new." Something liberating, that freed them from the power of sin and death: The Kingdom of God that makes room for new resurrection life. This means following a new way of life. One that turns away from political and social agendas that too often lead to infighting, division, and turn to God who is Love, whose justice is God's mercy, and who shows us we are more than the worst thing we have ever done, because we are God's beloved.

This is the first step in writing that new poetry with Jesus, to examine what we need to turn from: things like fear, anxiety, injustice, prejudice, greed, anger, jealousy, and turn toward God. To turn from the shade or shadows of conflict,

superiority, arrogance, violence, and hate and step into the light of hope of the good news that God's Kingdom is near, and in God's Kingdom, there is room for us all.

Sometimes it can be easy to forget that Jesus' ministry began with proclaiming good news. That even though the world in Jesus' time was filled with inequality, poverty, suffering, injustice, greed, violence, and all the same things we rail against today, Jesus did not call or invite followers to join with him complaining about the way things were, or protesting the Roman government, or introducing legislation to change the law, or making snarky memes criticizing people who thought differently than he did. Instead, Jesus invited people to follow him by announcing good news and telling them to turn from the bad to the good news.

To the ears of some of the people at the time, at least Simon/Peter and his brother Andrew and the brothers James and John, such words must have sounded like Amanda Gorman's new poem; they got caught up in the hope and followed Jesus' invitation to spread the same Kingdom of God hope so that others will be caught up in it.

As followers of Jesus today, I hope we never forget that following Jesus was not intended to be something like a fishing expedition where we stalk helpless victims, waiting to snare people on hooks baited with compliments or kindness only to guilt them into pledging or volunteering so that our ministries or liturgy can look like they always have or filling up the pews so we feel comfortable and secure. Instead, following Jesus means turning toward God, to look for, notice, and live into the Kingdom of God and invite everyone regardless of age, color, race, gender, identity, orientation, political affiliation, economic status into God's Kingdom by sharing the good news that God is present, and exude hope, no matter the times we live in.

Even during a pandemic, when we have had to pivot and make changes to our worship services and ministries, we are still doing what we can to show God is here, to write a new poem. As I've been talking to people outside the parish about the adaptations we've made here at Church of the Good Shepherd, a few were inspired to give us money, others took our ideas and adapted them to their churches. They were caught up in the hope of God's Kingdom present through our Tree of Giving, our Sharing Cabinet, the outdoor interactive nativity and Christmas tree we had up during Christmas, our Votive Prayer Hill, and our outdoor services when it was safe to have them and our wisdom to know when to return to only offering our prerecorded emails. They heard hope in the new poem we were reciting and wanted to be part of it.

This isn't just work for your rector, we all can share the Good News with everyone. It's amazing how inviting hope can be, and how hope has the power to catch people up and give them courage to see things like a new poem. Or, as Amanda Gorman wrote in my favorite part of her new poem:

"When day comes we step out of the shade
afame and unafraid
The new dawn blooms as we free it
For there is always light,
if only we're brave enough to see it
if only we're brave enough to be it."