

Preachers have sometimes been told, a good sermon is "3 points and a poem" (and often it's hard to limit oneself to 3 main points!). Preachers who like to sing sometimes try "3 points and a song" (know anyone like that?) But this morning I really want to start with parts of a poem (one guess what poem!), then make a "few" points, and then end with a song!

You guessed it! There was a poet at this year's inaugural ceremonies who lit up the stage, radiating light and hope to all with eyes to see and ears to hear. Twenty-two year old Amanda Gorman chose her words carefully:

*We've learned... the norms and notions of what just is  
Isn't always just-ice.  
We are striving to forge a union with purpose,  
To compose a country committed to all cultures, colors, characters  
and conditions...  
We lay down our arms, so we can reach out our arms...  
We seek harm to none, and harmony for all...  
Even as we grieved we grew; even as we hurt, we hoped...  
Victory won't lie in the blade, but in all the bridges we've made.  
If we merge mercy with might and might with right,  
Then Love becomes our legacy.  
We will rebuild, reconcile, and recover...  
Our people diverse and beautiful will emerge...  
There is always light,  
If only we're brave enough to see it,  
If only we're brave enough to be it.*

Well, Amanda surely was brave to accept the call to give the inaugural poem for 2021, and she surely did radiate light! Like Maya Angelou before her, she will surely be on some other stages in the future! I did not repeat all of her references to the Bible, but perhaps

the most striking one is "victory won't lie in the 'blade,' but in the bridges we've made." This could refer to Jesus saying "put away your swords," or to Isaiah saying "turn your swords into plowshares." And As the prophet Zechariah said "not by power nor by might but by my Spirit, says the Lord," Amanda echoed: "If we merge mercy with might and might with right, then love becomes our legacy."

When the disciples first said yes and followed Jesus, they probably did not know how difficult it would be at times. Did Peter know that Jesus in the final hours, in the garden of Gethsemane, would chastise him and say "put away your sword?" Did the early disciples know that he would say: those who really want to follow me need to take up their cross to face the tough things of life? Did the early disciples not hear that among Jesus' first words was the call to "Repent," to change direction... to do the hard work of "justice" rather than passively accept what "just is," the status quo.

When Jonah was called to go preach to the Ninevites, he did not want to muster up courage to warn them, to speak boldly and bravely about ways that displease God. Preachers nowadays are not eager to preach sermons on sin and repentance either. Like Jonah, we sometimes run away and head to somewhere like Joppa, get on a boat and go to the great blue sea. We could read the Jonah story as history or allegory. Most bible scholars I read think the early listeners were very comfortable with divine stories full of metaphors symbols, and the power of poetry. So surviving three days in the belly of a whale aside, the story of Jonah is so true: there is no escape from the hard work of repentance, or speaking about the need for repentance. It's still a favorite hymn: "Dear Lord and Father of mankind, forgive our foolish ways!" Whether it is personal or societal, sin is real, evil is real, so we are called to speak up and speak out when we hear threats of harm and see violence or destructive actions.

So I say with the prophet Isaiah, and the young prophetess Amanda Gorman, and with Jesus, "Put away swords, stop

weaponizing and demonizing." Sure, we need to "fight" against things with our words and reasoning, but perhaps the strongest force for change will always be love and mercy. Jonah had it wrong at first; he thought God wanted him to go to Nineveh only to be a scolder-in-chief, a doomsayer, to tell them only about divine punishment coming. I think Jonah forgot the part about God's incredible MERCY which could follow a deserved scolding. Jonah thought, if I tell them of God's displeasure, God better follow through with getting rid of those people. He forgot that God could have a change of mind and be glad to forgive them if they saw the error of their ways, repented, and committed to new life. And sure enough, they got on their knees, fasted, and God was sure to forgive and heal them. Jonah was learning about divine Mercy and Grace very slowly. He even sulked under a tree at the end of the story, and showed more compassion for the dying tree than for the people of Nineveh. God taught Jonah to trust in the process of Repentance and Forgiveness.

Jesus was teaching the same lesson over and over, yet like Jonah, we are all slow to learn it. Where there is sin and evil, too often we are more comfortable with the ways of scapegoating and punishment. God's ways and the ways of our Lord Jesus Christ are often more forgiving than our own human tendencies. God's ways are more merciful than ours. Sure, there is the place for hard truth and consequences in this world. But the scriptures in our Holy Bible are always moving us toward life that is healing, restoring, and reconciling, with more lasting peace and love among all.

Jesus called brothers to follow him, Simon Peter and Andrew, James and John. Do you hear your name being called? Many of us still decide who to "follow" or who to "friend," even online ... and I'll bet a lot of people will be "following" Amanda Gorman, who is obviously a follower of great spiritual teachers. Jesus surely knows that there are many interpretations of Scriptures, as he was often debating with other rabbis of his time. He must know that Christians

have continued to debate the meanings of Jewish stories and the stories about himself... But he also gave us a key summary of our call: To Love God and Love Neighbor As Oneself. He said "Blessed are the peacemakers," and he never advocated violence. Or as the poet Amanda Gorman put it: Let's "lay down our arms so we can reach out our arms!"

That may be a good place to segue to a closing song, because a song is also a poem, and a prayer, that can sink in deeply, if we let the music move not only our minds, but our bones and our being. These words and tune came to me after a beautiful mission retreat at Lake Winnepesaukee. I was so impressed and moved by experiencing what Amanda would call a community "committed to all cultures and colors," a people "diverse and beautiful." The theme of the ecumenical conference was Building Bridges, and it was clear that those gathered by the lakeshore had built many bridges, and come to new understandings of people who were different. There was a peaceful and joyful communion with one another, led by the love and grace of Jesus Christ. As the beloved disciple John once said, "God is Love and those who love are born of God and know God." (1John 4:7). Please pray or sing with me:

### Building Bridges

**Chorus:** Building bridges moving forward always on the road to peace. Loving spirit is uniting, bridge of peace from you to me.

1. *Love will be our teacher, Love will lead the way. Both in joy and sorrow, Love is here today. **Chorus***
2. *First you were a stranger, now you are a friend. Any fear is cast out, Love wins in the end! **Chorus***
3. *Though there may be danger, a river deep below, with your hand and with God's help, we can cross I know! **Chorus***