

**REFLECTION**  
**The Reverend Dr. Phebe L. McPherson**  
**January 24, 2021**

**Mark 1:14-20**

It was a very long week. On Wednesday I sat glued to the television, nervous but entertained by a slew of text messages from many of you. By the end of the day there was a common sense of relief!

I don't know how many of you are aware of it, but Donald Deen works for a company that designs and orchestrates the entire set-up for events such as this week's inauguration. Everything you saw. The staging. The platforms. The Audio. The big screens. Everything but security. He was at the top of my prayers this week. It was a very long week for all of us.

Then, on Thursday, I received a phone call from an old friend who I talk with frequently, but— over the past four years our conversations have not been about anything deeply personal. We have maintained a relationship with “polite company talk” only. You know what I mean. We have all experienced divisions in our families and with longtime friends and neighbors over politics. Do you remember the avalanche of advise columns about how to gather families peacefully for events such as Thanksgiving? It has been a contentious time for many. Then I got that unexpected phone call. My friend said, “Did you hear the poet at the inauguration? Wasn't she amazing?!” First I wondered if this estranged friend had listened to what Amanda Gorman said. Then I began to realize that Amanda Gorman mysteriously, powerfully, touched something inside all of us, all of us. She broke through the walls of silence that have separated us. It's worth asking, “What happened? What was it that Amanda Gorman did?” Amanda Gorman didn't just get lucky. She is a brilliant, skilled, and inspired poet. Her craft is well-tuned and has been long in the making. She's received awards and won competitions for years. But still, there is more. Perhaps more than she even realizes. Just as there is so much more to the story of Jesus—more than is usually discussed in “polite company.”

We tend to gloss-over words such as the first words of today's Gospel lesson: "After John was arrested..." Yes, *arrested*. And we know that John was brutally murdered in prison. And we know that it was John's murder that jump-started the organizing of Jesus's mission and ministry. "The time is now," he preached. "The kingdom of God is breaking in," he said. And Jesus began to gather disciples. We don't often discuss the politics or understand the contentions of Jesus' own day.

I have a poster that hangs in my office of Archbishop Desmond Tutu holding a Bible. The caption reads,

***I don't know what Bible people are reading  
when they say that religion and politics don't mix.***

Politics from the Greek, meaning "*affairs of the cities*," are the activities associated with making decisions in groups and other forms of power relations between individuals such as the distribution of resources or status. And the Bible is a collection of sacred texts, an anthology, a compilation of texts of a variety of forms focused on *revelations of God* that are relevant to the history and times of humankind. Religion and politics. One without the other is only half of the story.

Back to poetry. Back to what happened when Amanda Gorman spoke. Poetry and the prophetic tradition. The prophetic tradition, *the oracles of the prophets*, come to us through poetry. Poetry can be the instrument through which we can imagine what could be. It can be the instrument of revelation. What we heard and saw was a young woman bring to public expression the very *hopes and yearnings that have been denied so long and suppressed so deeply that we forgot they were there* (Brueggemann). Prophets may speak of indictment and judgment but they also lead us to restoration and hope.

***And yet the dawn is ours before we knew it.***

***A nation that isn't broken but simply unfinished.***

***We are striving to forge a union with purpose.***

*And so we lift our gaze not to what stands between us,  
but what stands before us.*

*We lay down our arms so we can reach out our arms to one another.*

In case you missed the moment, Gorman quotes the prophet Micah from a section referred to as the “Mountain of the Lord” in her poem she titled, “The Hill We Climb.”

*Everyone will sit under their own vine  
And under their own fig trees  
And no one will be afraid,  
For the Lord has spoken. (Micah 4:4)*

Prophecy—*Hope flies in the face of all those claims we have been told are facts. Hope is the refusal to accept the reading of reality which is the majority opinion. Hope is subversive because it limits the demands of the present and announces that there is more.* Hope speaks to a people who are God’s people. (Brueggemann) Prophecy uses words to bring about community. Everything Jesus said and did pointed to a new reality. He came not with a political platform but with a new concept of kingdom. He came with a renewed vision. *The Sermon on the Mount* only makes sense if we see it as a poetic text—as the prophetic introduction of an alternative world. For the Kingdom of God must take place within before can be realized outward. Poetry speaks to an inner reality before it can shape the outer reality.

*Hills of the West.... Windswept Northeast.... Lakeland cities  
of the Midwest.... Sunbaked South....*

All rise, together.

*Diverse and beautiful.... Battered and beautiful.*

Imagine the courage it takes for prophets to speak against the powerful. Micah, Moses—all the prophets—the poets of hope. Jesus and Paul—poets of hope. Disciples of Christ.—poets of hope. Amanda Gorman—poet of hope. Their courage comes from their

vocation as participants in God's passion. God's passion for a different kind of world here and now. For the transformation of this world into a world where everyone has enough and no one shall make them afraid. Where to be righteous means to love and to do what is just.

*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.*

Thank you Amanda Gorman—poet of hope. Thank you for your vocation. Thank you for your passion. Your courage. Thank you for offering inspired, prophetic words of hope. Just when we needed it.

Amen.