

Do We Dare?

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First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
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Readings

Matthew 25:35-40

'I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'

"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?'

'He will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'

from "*The Hill We Climb*" by Amanda Gorman

Let the globe, if nothing else, say this is true:
That even as we grieved, we grew
That even as we hurt, we hoped
That even as we tired, we tried
That we'll forever be tied together, victorious
Not because we will never again know defeat
but because we will never again sow division
Scripture tells us to envision
that everyone shall sit under their own vine and fig tree
And no one shall make them afraid
If we're to live up to our own time
Then victory won't lie in the blade
But in all the bridges we've made
That is the promise to glade
The hill we climb
If only we dare

Sermon

I believe in months and even years to come I will remember more about Amanda Gorman's inaugural poem, "The Hill We Climb" than I will about the president's inaugural speech or much of anything else about the ceremony – other, perhaps, than the spectacular image of the flag waving against the blue sky above the Capitol dome during the national anthem.

As for the poem: I – along with millions of others – was blown away, utterly surprised by the power and beauty of this poem by a young woman only 22-years-old. Surprised not because of her age or the color of her skin, but because we had no warning, no reason to expect a poem so utterly suited to the moment – not just the moment of an inauguration, but the moment

of *this* inauguration on the Capitol steps that had been the scene of violent riot and insurrection a mere two weeks earlier.

And this poet had us from her opening lines, with rhyme and rhythm naming exactly where and when we were:

*When day comes we ask ourselves,
where can we find light in this never-ending shade?
The loss we carry,
a sea we must wade
We've braved the belly of the beast...*

It has occurred to me as I've reflected on these lines that, whether intentionally or not, it seems to me that the poem is subtly suggesting that what we experienced on January 6 could be termed a near-death experience for our democracy. And as many who have experienced personal brushes with death attest, afterwards you take less for granted and maybe are motivated to use your renewed lease on life to better purpose.

This is just what Amanda Gorman's poem encourages all of us to do. First, by clearly asserting that January 6 did not by any means have the last word for our democracy, our nation, our people:

*And yet the dawn is ours
before we knew it
Somehow we do it
Somehow we've weathered and witnessed
a nation that isn't broken
but simply unfinished...*

She went on:

*We are striving to forge a union with purpose
To compose a country committed to all cultures, colors, characters and
conditions of man...*

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

I love that line! What are arms for after all? They can be used for fighting, we know that, but they can also be used for reaching out, for embracing, for holding and helping one another – which is what we must do. For a promising future, Amanda Gorman goes on to affirm, will not come of its own accord:

*If we're to live up to our own time
Then victory won't lie in the blade
But in all the bridges we've made
That is the promised glade
The hill we climb
If only we dare...*

For... as then she says...

*For while we have our eyes on the future
history has its eyes on us*

And this...

*So while once we asked,
how could we possibly prevail over catastrophe?
Now we assert
How could catastrophe possibly prevail over us?
We will not march back to what was
but move to what shall be
A country that is bruised but whole,
benevolent but bold,
fierce and free*

And this:

*But one thing is certain:
If we merge mercy with might,
and might with right,
then love becomes our legacy
and change our children's birthright*

She continued, affirming that “we will rise...” and finally summarized with a challenge to each and every one of us and to all of us together:

*When day comes we step out of the shade,
aflame 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*

Now... will her poem find a place with the great poems of American literary history, from Walt Whitman to Langston Hughes and a legion of others? That would be for another generation to discern.

We do know this, though, and it is much to know: With extraordinary power of language, Amanda Gorman married Whitman's breadth of vision with the rhythms of rap, indebted as well to a long legacy of Black American poets, and then added to all this the grace and beauty of gesture... in every way meeting the moment.

Not a feel-good moment only. Because though it did feel wonderful and inspiring to listen to her and to watch her, the context for the afternoon of January 20, as we and the poet knew only too well, was the afternoon of January 6 on those same Capitol steps and the weeks that preceded that day, indeed the months, the years... indeed the generations of slavery, Jim Crow, racism and white supremacy in their many forms and formulations. So... not a feel-good moment only. A sobering moment at the same time. Coupled with a call to action... with a question more than implicit:

Do we, following this near death experience of our democracy, dare to climb the hill, to step out of the shade, to free the dawn and to be the light we need?

It is a daunting question. The tasks seem overwhelming, the odds high, history seeming to suggest always a step back after a step forward. But just as our own brushes with death can motivate to renewed life and purpose, perhaps our nation's brush with the death of our democracy can do the same.

But what are we *each* to do? The tasks are so many and so large.

Well, I chose the passage from Matthew for our first reading this morning to serve as a reminder that the question of "what can we do to right wrongs and to serve the highest of our aspirations?" is an ancient one. And it has an answer.

The point in these lines from Matthew is that if you want to serve the highest, to serve God, well then, serve "the least of these" – feed the hungry, welcome the stranger. In other words, the tasks are right in front of us, and they are tasks we can do, if we would open our eyes to see and offer our hands and our voices to work.

So... no one of us is going to end racism and save democracy all by ourselves. But each one of us can do something, each time we speak out and speak up for equality, human rights, civil rights, voting rights, each time we support candidates and legislators who support voting rights and equality; each time we help a neighbor or a stranger with a hand up or generous gift.

And along the way we can continue to educate ourselves about the history and challenges of our American democracy, including of course the history and realities of racism and white supremacy – education and knowledge informing the next step we take or word we speak... and then the next.

This is, after all, a generational hill to climb, and when we get to what looks to be the top, we may discover that it was a false peak and that there is more climbing ahead. And this is more than okay – for, as I often say, how else would we choose to live, but in service as best we can, in whatever modest ways, of our highest aspirations and ideals and most deeply held values? Then passing the baton to the next generation in the continuing evolution of the long now, as I put it a couple of weeks ago, of our shared lives.

I remember watching on our black and white TV the first inaugural poet sixty years ago, Robert Frost, his shock of white hair shining in the sun and blowing in the cold wind. It was of course the inauguration of John Fitzgerald Kennedy, our first Catholic president – at the time seen as a great advance... as it was.

The poem Frost said was a poem he had written a long while before and knew by heart: "The Gift Outright". He had intended for "The Gift Outright" to be just a brief coda to the longer poem titled "Dedication" that he had written for the occasion – but he couldn't read "Dedication" because of the bright sun reflecting off the page.

We were all the better for it, since "The Gift Outright" is much the better poem. Yet... they are both poems of their time, including outdated echoes of "Manifest Destiny" which we are still struggling to transcend.

Even so... we have come a long way. The difference between the white octogenarian Robert Frost and the 22-year old Black Amanda Gorman hardly needs to be pointed out. Less immediately obvious, but also just as notable, is the difference between the traditional metrical rhythms of Frost and the spoken word rap rhythms of Amanda Gorman.

Another difference? An important one: Frost mostly assumed democracy achieved. Gorman named democracy, real democracy, yet to be – still in our hands and dependent upon our commitment to climb the hill in order to more fully realize.

Which means that we best honor the poem and the poet not only with words of praise, but by continuing to climb... together... one people... rising with renewed spirit from January 6 to reach out our arms to one another... to help each other as we dare to climb the next hill... as our faith and our love demands that we do.

So may it be.

Benediction

We are climbing...

Yet not climbing alone.

With every step or turn of the wheel

Climbing together...

Towards a world of more justice and love.

May we support one another as we climb...

Rest when we need to...

Continue when we must... as we dare to climb.

So may it be.