

2023 12 03 – *Arrogant Hope*

Scripture: Mark 13:24-37 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

“A Plagued Journey” by Maya Angelou

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48992/a-plagued-journey>

I'm not sure how many of you realize this, but we are at the beginning of a new year. You see, our Christian calendar begins with the season of Advent. A season that is all about waiting for and anticipating the birth of Jesus, the coming of the Christ Child. But, despite all the bright decorations and cheery music that is already appearing in our homes and malls and even in our churches, Advent actually begins in the shadows of despair, war, sorrow and hate.

Here in the northern hemisphere we are experiencing the shortening of days and with it the lengthening of the shadowy night. And the news of our world seems to be echoing nature itself. The ceasefire in Gaza has ended, Islamophobia and antisemitism, transphobia and homophobia are rising all over the world, the Taliban are still terrorizing the people of Afghanistan, Cairo is being overwhelmed with refugees, earthquakes and tsunamis are threatening Japan and the Philippines and, here in Canada, rising food costs are leading to foodbanks being overwhelmed with need.

It is in this place of shadows that Maya Angelou begins her poem, “A Plagued Journey.”

There is no warning rattle at the door
Nor heavy feet to stomp the foyer boards.
Safe in the dark prison, I know that
light slides over
the fingered work of a toothless
woman in Pakistan.

This person, in Angelou's poem, lives in a dark prison, in a place full of shadows. At this point, we can only guess what that prison looks or feels like. Is it an actual physical space, or is it a prison of hunger, poverty, fear, grief, loneliness or depression? Does the image of the toothless woman in Pakistan connect her and us to the pain and shadows of the wider world? The fact that she refers to her prison as a "safe" place would lead us to believe that she has been here for awhile and has started to get used to this particular place of shadows.

But then she tells us that an invader is near and she holds her breath, unable to scream, fear itself clogs her throat. And the invader is upon her. The beginning of this poem reminds me of the script for a horror film! But then we read: "It is sunrise, with Hope, its arrogant rider." What... since when are light and hope scary things, things that cause us to hold our breath, that frighten us so much that we are unable to scream?

I was struggling to come up with an answer and then I remembered today's scripture reading and its apocalyptic beginning. It describes a darkening of the sky and then "they will see the Promised One coming in the clouds with great power and glory; then the angels will be sent to gather the chosen from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven." If this is the light or hope that you are expecting, if this is the invader that is entering your prison, then you might have reason to be fearful. This hope, this light is coming in the form of a "Promised One" that is only interested in a chosen few. This hope is coming in the form of judgement and wrath. Is this really what we are hoping for?

Many scholars are convinced these are not the words of Jesus, but rather the theological leanings of the author of this particular gospel. This description of the Second Coming, or the coming of the “Promised One,” is actually an understanding of the Sacred that comes from the imagery of some of the ancient prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures. It certainly has no connection to my understanding of Jesus or the Holy Mystery. My hope is connected to a Spirit of unconditional love and mercy, not a deity who is going to choose a select few.

But, even with this understanding, hope can still, sometimes, be arrogant and even scary. Maya Angelou describes her encounter with the morning light and its arrogant rider this way:

My mind, formerly quiescent
in its snug encasement, is strained
to look upon their rapturous visages
to let them enter even into me.
I am forced
outside myself to
mount the light and ride joined with Hope.

Those of us who have dealt with periods of depression can, no doubt, understand this description of being forced outside of ourselves. I know during a particular period in my life when I was healing from a broken relationship, I was quite content to stay inside—inside my house, inside my own mind—and to avoid connections with others outside my small, safe handful of friends. It was terrifying to even consider leaving the little prison I had created for myself. At that point, any kind of hope, hope of a new relationship, hope of happiness, even the hope of a Loving Spirit would have seemed arrogant, boastful and full of itself. It would have caused the kind of reaction that Angelou described.

Hope can be scary. One of reasons we fear hope is because it can lead to change. And, as we all know, change is hard. Even change for the better can be difficult to embrace. Mainline churches, for example, are living through a very challenging time. We are all facing the reality of declining membership and aging buildings. We know that things will change but we not really sure what the future will look like. If new people start to appear in our congregations, imagine the changes they would bring! If we had to let go our building, what on earth would that be like? What would we have to reimagine in order to share our space with another organization? These are all hopeful possibilities, rooted in the God's promise of new life, but they are also all quite scary.

Hope, of course is not only scary, but it can also be fleeting. Maya Angelou describes how hope fades with the light and

Gloom crawls around
lapping lasciviously
between my toes, at my ankles,
and it sucks the strands of my
hair.

It is true that everything in life is cyclical and that we all go through times of hope and times of despair or gloom. But, as Ray Friesen pointed out last week, it can be possible to live with hope even when the shadows are all around us, even when times are difficult. And living with hope, even arrogant hope, is not a passive idea, it is in fact an action and it takes faith, courage, and compassion.

Hope is something that lives within us. One of my favourite descriptions of hope comes from Emily Dickinson who wrote:

“Hope” is the thing with feathers -
That perches in the soul -
And sings the tune without the words -
And never stops - at all -

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/42889/hope-is-the-thing-with-feathers-314>

Hope comes from that sacred place within each one of us. That place where we come to know the Holy Mystery that is Unconditional Love. A Love that connects us to ourselves and to all of creation. Arrogant Hope, a hope so unlikely that it seems boastful, is possible only because it comes from that place of Sacred Love.

There are so many ways that we cultivate hope and keep that “thing with feathers” singing. For me it all boils down to relationship: Our relationship with God, with ourselves, with our community and with creation. When these relationships are strong then hope will be strong within us. When we are connected to the world around us, then it is possible to follow Jesus’ instructions in today’s scripture to “stay alert.” When we are connected to the Sacred within us, then we will know when we meet the Sacred in others. We will be able to recognize the face of Christ in our world today.

Maya Angelou struggled with depression, went through incredible challenges in her life and yet she also had the ability to inspire hope in others through the life that she lived and the words that she wrote. May we all keep our relationships strong and allow the light “with Hope its arrogant rider” to be our companion in our living. May it be so. Amen.