

2023 12 10 – *Peace, My Soul*

Scripture: **Mark 1:1-8** (*The Inclusive Bible*)

Amazing Peace: A Christmas Poem by Maya Angelou

<https://godspacelight.com/2018/12/29/amazing-peace-a-christmas-poem-by-dr-maya-angelou/>

In her poem, *Amazing Peace*, Maya Angelou sets a scene of thunder and lightning, flood and avalanche. Dr. Angelou wrote this poem for the December 2005 Christmas Tree Lighting at the White House. Many of us will remember some of the events of that year:

- there was a war in Iraq;
- Hurricane Katrina devastated much of the U.S. Gulf Coast including the City of New Orleans;
- an avalanche killed over 300 people in the Himalayas;
- the death of two Muslim teenagers resulted in riots in Paris, France;
- 4 RCMP officers were killed in Mayerthorpe, Alberta; and
- multiple terrorist bombs exploded in London England.

This is what happened in the year that Maya Angelou wrote, “Into this climate of fear and apprehension, Christmas enters.” Dr. Angelou had a very optimistic view of the power of the Advent or Christmas season. She writes:

Streaming lights of joy, ringing bells of hope

And singing carols of forgiveness high up in the bright air.

The world is encouraged to come away from rancor,

Come the way of friendship.

I do agree that Christmas lights, bells and carols have the power to change a person's outlook on life, to encourage the gladness of season, at least for a short while. But Maya Angelou is suggesting that in this Christmas season, this Glad Season, we can travel from hope to joy and even to peace. And not just any peace:

Not just the absence of war. But true Peace.

A harmony of spirit, a comfort of courtesies.

Security for our beloveds and their beloveds.

But how does that happen? How is it possible for us to experience true Peace? The reality is that our world is not much different than it was in 2005. Wars are still happening, avalanches, floods and now fires have become an even larger threat. It's as if there is even more fear and apprehension in December 2023 than there was eighteen years ago when Maya Angelou attended the Christmas Tree Lighting at the White House. So where and how can we hear the sweetness of Peace?

In order to answer that question, I'm going to invite us to consider our scripture reading for today. Harold read for us the first eight verses of the Gospel of Mark. This is how the author of this gospel chose to begin his book of good news. He starts with a quote from the Hebrew prophet, Isaiah,

I send my messenger before you to prepare your way,

A herald's voice in the desert, crying,

"Make ready the way of our God.

Clear a straight path.”

And then the author introduces us to John the Baptizer suggesting that he was that messenger, that herald in the desert that Isaiah foretold. Whether the ancient prophet Isaiah was talking about John or some other messenger doesn't really matter. What matters is that John the Baptizer was a prophet, a herald. He did have a message for the people of Judea.

He was there to let them know that Jesus was coming. He was there to tell them “One more powerful than I is to come after me. I am not fit to stoop and untie his sandal straps.” John was there to let them know that Jesus wasn't going to baptize with water, but rather with the Holy Spirit.

But, even more important than announcing Jesus' coming, John was there to get the people of Judea ready. He was there to help them “clear a straight path.” But John had his own language for this particular task. This first century prophet was living in the desert, “proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.” John realized that preparing for Jesus, preparing the people of Judea for this revolutionary prophet was going to require that every one of them do their own deep personal work.

You see, repentance means “turning towards God” or, to put it another way, “making space in our lives for the Sacred, for Love.” In order to make space for the Sacred, in order to make space for Jesus, in order to make space for the Holy Mystery, the Essence of Love, we have to let go of all the pain, suffering, guilt or

shame that is crowding that Love out of our lives. Those negative feelings could be the result of things that we have done, or things that have happened to us. They could be the result of mistakes that we have made or tragedies or traumas that have happened through no fault of our own. Either way, they can keep us from truly connecting with the Sacred that resides within each one of us.

This is what repentance is all about. It's about letting go of that pain, that suffering, that guilt, that shame. We can do that letting go in many different ways such as: prayer, meditation, confession, writing, counselling, art, music, walking, running and even screaming into a pillow. Some of us can do it on our own, but most of us need the help of, family, friends, professionals, support group and even our church community.

During our Bible Study this week, we had probably spent nearly half an hour talking about this bible passage, discussing its connection to Isaiah, John's strange attire and diet and the meaning of repentance, when someone asked, "So what does this scripture passage have to do with Peace?"

Well, as it turns out, Peace begins with us. It begins inside each one of us. Finding peace, true peace, is about first finding peace in our own hearts, in our own bodies, in our own souls. The act of repentance, the act of turning towards the Essence of Love is a key part of finding that peace.

And that is what Christmas is all about. Jesus came to this world to give us the Good News of God's love, to tell us about God's promise of peace and justice.

When we celebrate the birth of Jesus, we are also celebrating that message of hope and peace and love. We are celebrating the healing power of God's love as Jesus lived and proclaimed it. Dr. Maya Angelou wrote:

At this Holy Instant, we celebrate the Birth of Jesus Christ
Into the great religions of the world.
We jubilate the precious advent of trust.
We shout with glorious tongues at the coming of hope.
All the earth's tribes loosen their voices
To celebrate the promise of Peace.

I believe that Maya Angelou could write these hopeful, even joyful words because she had found peace in her own soul. She had done the hard work of repentance, of letting go of the pain, the suffering, the guilt, the shame that had held her prisoner. We have her autobiographical books as proof of her own personal journey to peace.

Dr Angelou also knew that 2005 was the year the Provisional Irish Republican Army called an end to 30 years of conflict in Northern Ireland. She knew it was the year that a successful democratic election was held in Afghanistan. That it was the year when same-sex marriage became legal in Canada. That it was a year in which Palestine and Israel declared a truce. She knew that there are signs of hope and peace and justice even in times of devastation and war. And so she wrote a Christmas poem called *Amazing Peace*.

I am going to invite us now into a time of passing the peace. I'm not inviting us to hug or touch anyone. But I am inviting us as Maya Angelou did, to

Look heavenward and speak the word aloud.

Peace. We look at our world and speak the word aloud.

Peace. We look at each other, then into ourselves

And we say without shyness or apology or hesitation.

Peace, My Brother.

Peace, My Sister.

Peace, My Soul.