

## 2023 12 24 – *Only Love*

**Scripture:** **Luke 1:26-38** (*The Inclusive Bible*)

***Love's Exquisite Freedom*** by Maya Angelou

<https://www.ayearofbeinghere.com/2015/02/maya-angelou-loves-exquisite-freedom.html>

“Yet it is only love which sets us free.” Only love.

Poetry, good poetry, is a gift to us because every person who reads it will come away with a different interpretation. This particular poem can be read in several ways by just asking one question: What type of love is Maya Angelou talking about? Is it romantic love between two adults? Is it the love that we feel for our family—our parents, our siblings, our children? Is it the love that we feel for our neighbour, our church community, the stranger on the sidewalk? Or is it Divine Love, our connection with the Universe, the love that we experience as sacred, as holy? Is it all of these and more? Only you, the reader, can really answer that question for yourself. What does this poem mean for you at this time and place in your life?

We, unaccustomed to courage  
exiles from delight  
live coiled in shells of loneliness  
until love leaves its high holy temple  
and comes into our sight  
to liberate us into life.

How many of us know or have known the pain of living “coiled in shells of loneliness.” In May of 2023 the United States Surgeon General put out [an advisory](#) calling attention to the current public health crisis of loneliness, isolation, and lack of connection in the U.S. Even before the onset of the COVID-19

pandemic, approximately half of American adults reported experiencing measurable levels of loneliness. This is truly a modern epidemic.

I remember how lonely I felt as a young adult, living in the City of Toronto. Despite having a full-time job where I interacted with customers and colleagues on a daily basis, I felt isolated. My family lived over an hour away and I realized that I was missing deep connection, true community. I had grown up in the United Church and I decided that it was time to try out a local congregation. So I walked through the doors of Bellefair United Church. It was there that I found the love of good friends. It was there that I found a deeper connection with the Divine. It was there that I fell in love with a beautiful young woman and knew the joy and the pain of romantic love. Eventually, it was there that I experienced a call to ministry and started a new path in my life. It was love, in all its forms, that set me free to be who I was meant to be.

Love arrives  
and in its train come ecstasies  
old memories of pleasure  
ancient histories of pain.  
Yet if we are bold,  
love strikes away the chains of fear  
from our souls.

I read a [blog](#) this week that talked about freedom. It said that there are three types of freedom. The first kind of freedom is “freedom from,” a freedom from the constraints of society, from fear, from want, from oppression. Second, is “freedom to,” a freedom to speak, to act, in accordance with our own values, our own mind. Thirdly, there is “freedom to be,” a freedom, not just to do what we want, but a freedom to be who we were meant to be.

That first freedom, freedom from, is usually the first step on a path to wholeness. And it often happens because we experience the power of the love of others. It may be that we have been set free of poverty or oppression due to the justice-seeking love of our neighbours. It may be that we have been set free of mental or physical illness due to the compassion and love of health professionals. It may be that we have been set free from addiction because of the loving support of an AA group. Once we have been set free of the chains that bind us, then we can move forward on our path to true wholeness, true freedom.

Like nearly all of us, Maya Angelou had the experience of being set free. She shared the story of her childhood in her book, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. In it she explains that when she was 7.5 years old she was raped. The man who raped her was arrested and then let out of jail. Two days later, he was found dead. He had been beaten to death. When Maya heard what had happened she thought her voice had killed him. That she had killed that man because she told his name. That little girl believed her voice was evil, that it had the power to kill and so she stopped speaking. For five years Maya Angelou remained mute, enslaved in the chains of her trauma, her fear.

It was Bertha Flowers, a local teacher who finally helped Maya to regain her voice. She did that by caring for her, by gaining her trust and by encouraging Maya's interest of poetry. Bertha Flowers convinced that young girl that in order to truly love and appreciate poetry she had to speak it aloud. And eventually she did. It was the love and compassion shown to her by her teacher that allowed Maya Angelou to break the chains of fear in her soul so that she could be free, so

that she could become the wise and well-spoken person she was meant to be.

<https://learningliftoff.com/k-12-education/teaching/how-a-teacher-inspired-maya-angelou-to-speak>.

We are weaned from our timidity.  
In the flush of love's light  
we dare to be brave.  
And suddenly we see  
that love costs all we are  
and will ever be.  
Yet it is only love  
which sets us free.

Today's scripture reading is also a story of love and courage. Mary, a teenager, the fiancée of a man named Joseph, is visited by the angel, Gabriel. This angel has astounding news for her. She is to conceive and bear a son, a son who will be the Son of God, who will reign over the house of Jacob. Of course, Mary is confused, "How can this be, since I have never been with a man?" The angel assures her that "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." The angel tells her that her barren cousin, Elizabeth is already pregnant and that "nothing is impossible with God."

In the story we hear that Mary was "deeply troubled" when the angel first arrived, but what I find amazing is that this young girl knew that she had a choice, that she could say, "No." This was Mary making her own courageous and love-filled decision knowing that her life would never be the same. She had no way of knowing how Joseph was going to react or what her family or her community might do. In that time women could be stoned for adultery if they became pregnant out of wedlock. But Mary obviously already had a deep connection with the Divine. She already had faith and trust in her God, in Yahweh, and she

chose the path of love. She dared to be brave. She chose to answer the call of the Essence of Love and to become the mother of Jesus.

Whether we believe that this particular story is historically true doesn't really matter at this point. It is still a wonderful illustration of the power of love—Divine Love, a mother's love—to set someone free to be who they were called to be. Of course, we also know the end of this story and how Mary's experience as a mother would bring her both the pleasure of watching her son grow to be a leader among men and the excruciating pain of seeing her child die on a cross.

As Maya Angelou points out, each time we dare to be brave, each time we are bold enough to allow love in, we are also opening ourselves to the possibility of change and the feelings of loss that come with it. But still we are called to be vulnerable, to let love into our lives because, it is only love which sets us free. Only love.

May it be so. Amen.