

The Wired Word

Student Handout

Sunday, January 31, 2021 --- from 9:00-9:45am

Zoom ONLY

Meeting ID: 860 8980 7220 --- Passcode: 195152

Dear Class Member,

Our next lesson reflects on the poem, "The Hill We Climb," recited at the inauguration of Joe Biden as President of the United States, and Kamala Harris as Vice President, by the nation's first Youth Poet Laureate, Amanda Gorman. We touch on themes of new beginnings, the role of poets, and responding to the call of God, whatever one's age or limitations.

How To Participate:

We are offering *The Wired Word* class live via Zoom. *The Wired Word* Zoom discussion will be from 9:00am-9:45am on Sunday mornings. You can also use these resources to reflect or study on your own, with your family/friends, and/or with your Abide Group.

Until further notice, there is NO in-person Sunday school due to the COVID-19 Pandemic.

You can participate in the Wired Word virtually by Zoom on your computer or smart device at:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/86089807220?pwd=eStWa0ZZK0hOTVdwU0pjZlMrdk5ydz09>

or by telephone (land line or cell phone) by calling: 1-301-715-8592

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For more info about *The Wired Word* go to: <http://www.sprucc.org/classes/sunday-classes-for-adults.html#WiredWord>

For other learning opportunities through St. Paul's UCC go to: <http://www.sprucc.org/classes.html>

To subscribe or unsubscribe for the **free** weekly mailing of *The Wired Word* student handout, please contact the church office at Office@sprucc.org.



Inaugural Poet Offers Hopeful Challenge to America

The Wired Word for the Week of January 31, 2021

In the News

The 59th Presidential Inauguration in Washington, D.C., on January 20, 2021, was unusual for many reasons: Joe Biden was the oldest person ever to take the oath as the leader of our country; Kamala Harris became the first woman, the first black person, and the first person of South Asian descent to become a vice president.

After taking the oath, Biden addressed the multiple challenges our country is facing: assaults on truth and democracy that culminated in the January 6 violent attack on the Capitol, a raging pandemic that has already taken over 400,000 lives, polarization and extreme partisanship, threats to the environment, economic distress, inequity and race relations, among other issues.

"Are we going to step up, all of us?" the President asked. "Will we master this rare and difficult hour?"

Amanda Gorman, America's first-ever National Youth Poet Laureate, spoke to the issue as she recited "[The Hill We Climb](#)," the poem she wrote for the occasion:

"We've seen a force that would shatter our nation rather than share it, ... And this effort very nearly succeeded."

"We have to confront these realities if we're going to move forward," the 22-year-old said in an interview. "America is messy. It's still in its early development of all that we can become. ... I can't ignore that or erase it. And so I crafted an inaugural poem that recognizes these scars and these wounds. Hopefully, it will move us toward healing them."

"Quiet isn't always peace ... what just is, isn't always justice," the poet intoned on the podium. The poem speaks of "the divide" and "what stands between us," of the grief, hurt, weariness and fear that have taken their toll on our people. Yet Gorman lifted up hope that we are "a nation that isn't broken, but simply unfinished ... far from polished, far from pristine ... [but] striving to forge our union with purpose, to compose a country committed to all cultures, colors, characters and conditions of man."

As children, Gorman and Biden both worked to overcome fear of public speaking, Gorman because of an auditory processing disorder and speech impediment, and Biden, who stuttered. One of Gorman's heroes, Maya Angelou, another inaugural poet, also overcame years of not speaking up for herself, to become an iconic voice in American literature.

Gorman urged Americans to overcome our current crises by envisioning a time when, as "Scripture tells us ... everyone shall sit under their own vine and fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid," a time when "we lay down our arms so we can reach out our arms to one another," a time when we find victory not "in the blade, but in all the bridges we've made ... [for] that is ... the hill we climb, If only we dare it."

To make this American Dream a reality, the young poet said, will require that we "repair" the past we have inherited and find within "such a terrifying hour ... the power to author a new chapter, to offer hope and laughter to ourselves" in which "we merge mercy with might, and might with rights, [so that] ... love becomes our legacy and change our children's birthright."

In another of her poems, "[In This Place \(An American Lyric\)](#)," Gorman writes that America is full of "stories to rewrite ... a history written that need not be repeated, a nation composed but not yet completed." Every American, she says, is a poet who may rewrite the nation, to tell "a story worthy of being told ... to breathe hope into a palimpsest [a manuscript on which the original writing has been effaced, but not completely erased, so that a new message might be inscribed] of time ... that our poem penned doesn't mean our poem's end."

"We will rebuild, reconcile and recover in every known nook of our nation," Gorman affirmed, as she wrapped up her poetry reading at the inauguration. "Our people, diverse and beautiful, will emerge, battered and beautiful. When day comes we step out of the shade, ... for there is always light, if only we're brave enough to see it, if only we're brave enough to be it."

More on this story can be found at these links:

[How a 22-year-old L.A. Native Became Biden's Inauguration Poet. *Los Angeles Times*](#)

[Amanda Gorman Captures the Moment, in Verse. *The New York Times*](#)

[Amanda Gorman Becomes the Youngest Inaugural Poet With Reading of 'The Hill We Climb' at Biden's Swearing-in. *Fox News*](#)

['Wow, You're Awesome': Cooper Left Speechless by Youth Poet Laureate \(Video 8:32\). *CNN*](#)

['Where Can We Find Light in This Never-ending Shade?' *Billmoyers.com*](#)

The Big Questions

1. When, if ever, have you faced a challenge you felt ill equipped to handle? Who or what gave you the resources you needed to rise to the occasion?
2. If you had been on the inaugural planning committee and had the opportunity to ask Jesus to speak, would you have invited him? Why or why not? If he had been asked to speak, what do you think he would have said to us?

3. Whatever candidates you supported in the election, how might the inauguration offer our nation an opportunity for some kind of reset and a new beginning? Is a political transition enough to change the direction of a nation? Why or why not?

4. What does the gospel of Jesus Christ offer us that political leaders or parties cannot?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Mark 1:14-15

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news." (For context, read 1:1-15.)

Matthew 3:8

[John the Baptist said,] "Bear fruit worthy of repentance." (For context, read 3:1-12.)

Luke 17:20-21

Once Jesus was asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God was coming, and he answered, "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among [or within] you." (For context, read 17:20-37.)

The Mark text highlights Jesus' laser focus on the coming of the kingdom of God as his core message. The Luke 17 passage helps us see how Jesus defined the kingdom of God, not as something superficial, on the surface, that can easily be detected by appearances, but as something we can see in the character, integrity and relationships of people.

That kingdom is coming, Jesus said, has come near, and is, in fact, already here. The season of God's rule is upon us. "It's near in the sense that it is in the midst, as was spoken so powerfully at the inauguration," said TWW team member Frank Ramirez. "But it's also near in the sense that it's on the way, it's not fully realized."

To be clear, we are not equating America or our form of government with the kingdom of God. Our point is simply that democracy is always a work in progress, and in that sense is something like the "now and not yet" nature of the kingdom of God.

One journalist pointed out that each time Gorman uses the word "democracy" in her poem, she pairs it with the word "delay," which implies that democracy is not a possession we have already attained, an achievement or accomplishment, but an aspiration, a dream, an ideal we anticipate and a work in progress. "This ... suggests that democracy is something we inhabit but continue to work on, an endless fixer-upper with good bones," the columnist wrote.

"The hardheaded call for unity at the inauguration refers to both a country that exists and a country that is not fully realized yet," Ramirez added. "That whole 'to form a more perfect union' thing" that is enshrined in the U.S. Constitution. In a similar way, "Jesus calls on us to be the kingdom even though we don't fully live it," Ramirez explained.

"There is always light, if only we're brave enough to see it, if only we're brave enough to be it," Gorman told us.

Seeing the light is not enough. Being the light requires added courage. Observing the advent of the kingdom of God is just the first step of discipleship. Living as a subject in the kingdom of God, in right relationship with God and other residents in that kingdom, is another level of discipleship entirely.

Questions: Give an example of something observable people might point to as evidence that the kingdom of God is present. Why might such appearances be deceiving? Why are repentance, belief in the good news, and fruit worthy of repentance better evidence of the presence of God's kingdom? What is the good news of God that Jesus proclaimed?

2 Chronicles 7:12-14

Then the LORD appeared to Solomon in the night and said to him: "I have heard your prayer, and have chosen this place for myself as a house of sacrifice. When I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or command the locust to devour the land, or send pestilence among my people, if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land." (For context, read 7:12-22.)

In 2 Chronicles 6, as King Solomon prepared to consecrate the new temple he had built for the worship of God, he prayed that God would keep his covenant with his father David, that as long as his children walked in God's law, there would always be a successor from his family sitting on the throne of Israel (vv. 12-17). He also asked God to judge between people, holding the guilty accountable, "repaying the guilty by bringing their conduct on their own head, and vindicating those who are in the right by rewarding them in accordance with their righteousness (vv. 22-23).

Then Solomon spoke of occasions of defeat in war, drought, famine, plague, exile or other disasters, thought to be punishment for the sin of the people, and asked God to hear their prayer, forgive their sin, and restore them when they repent, confess and turn from their sin and back to God, pray and plead with God (vv. 18-21, 24-31, 36-40). The king also prayed that God would hear the prayers of foreigners who would come to the temple to pray (vv. 32-33). Then the people worshiped, offered sacrifices and made music to God as they dedicated the house of God (7:1-6).

In his Inaugural Day prayer for President Biden, Fr. Leo O'Donovan confessed the nation's "past failures to live according to our vision of equality, inclusion, and freedom for all." On behalf of the American people, he committed to "caring for one another in word and deed, especially the least fortunate among us."

In the tradition of Archbishop John Carroll, who prayed at the inauguration of George Washington 232 years ago that God's Spirit would assist our first president to conduct his administration "in righteousness and be eminently useful" to God's people, O'Donovan prayed that God would grant President Biden "the wisdom Solomon sought" in order to govern God's people "and know the difference between right and wrong."

Questions: Do you think God's pledge to forgive sin and heal the land in response to the Israelites' humbling themselves applies more broadly to any people or nation that repents and seeks the Lord? What specific failures (O'Donovan's words) or "wicked ways" or "sin" (v. 14) do you think we as God's people need to confess to God?

Jeremiah 1:5-9

"Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations." Then I said, "Ah, Lord GOD! Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy." But the LORD said to me, "Do not say, 'I am only a boy'; for you shall go to all to whom I send you, and you shall speak whatever I command you. Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you, says the LORD." Then the LORD put out his hand and touched my mouth; and the LORD said to me, "Now I have put my words in your mouth. (For context, read 1:4-10.)

This passage describes how God called young Jeremiah to prophesy to the nations. Jeremiah hesitated, because he felt inadequate and inexperienced. God encouraged him not to see his youth as a negative, nor to be afraid of public speaking, for he promised to give him his words to speak.

When God called Moses to join his rescue mission of the Hebrew slaves in Egypt (Exodus 3:10), Moses presented several reasons why he should be excused from this mission. His doubts can be summed up this way: "Who am I? I'm a nobody." (3:11) "Who are you, God?" (3:13). "What if people won't listen to me or believe that God has appeared to me?" (4:1)

Finally, Moses objected, "O my Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor even now that you have spoken to your servant; but I am slow of speech and slow of tongue." But God responded, "Who gives speech to mortals? Who makes them mute or deaf, seeing or blind? Is it not I, the LORD? Now go, and I will be with your mouth and teach you what you are to speak." (4:10-12.)

Poet Amanda Gorman also struggled with auditory limitations and a speech impediment, but she said, "I don't look at my disability as a weakness. It's made me the performer that I am and the storyteller that I strive to be."

Bakht Singh, a wealthy Sikh born in northern India, was drawn to Jesus Christ after reading in John 1:29 and John 3:16-17, that Jesus takes away the sin of the world, not only the sin of the West, and that God sent his Son into the world, that through him the world, not just westerners, might be saved.

Then he felt God calling him to ministry, but he balked. "Lord, I can't speak," he protested. (He also had a speech impediment.)

"If I made your mouth, can I not make you speak?" God answered.

So Singh began to tell people he met on the street about Jesus. Over the years, God used him to plant more than 600 churches in India, Pakistan, Nepal and Sri Lanka.

Questions: What limitations or challenges, if any, do you think might disqualify you from serving God in a particular way? What do the experiences of Jeremiah, Moses, Amanda, and Bakht teach us about the way God views the problems we see as hindrances?

1 Corinthians 1:10, 27-29

Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. ... But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. (For context, read 1:10-31.)

The Corinthian church was troubled by a lot of interpersonal conflict. Various factions favored different leaders, so the believers quarrelled among themselves.

Elsewhere we read, "Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you?" (James 4:1)

Paul sought to turn the attention of the Corinthians from their own selfish cravings to the centrality of the cross of Christ, "foolishness to those who are perishing, but to [those] who are being saved ... the power of God and the wisdom of God" (vv. 17-24).

And what did the cross represent? Shame, weakness, lowliness. Anyone who was crucified was despised as the worst criminal and greatest loser. And yet through his ignominious death on the cross, Jesus accomplished God's purposes to reconcile us to God and unite us in love with one another.

Questions: Is Paul's call for unity among believers (or, for that matter, Jesus' prayer that his followers all be one in John 17) realistic or achievable? If not, what is the point of calling or praying for agreement and no divisions among Christ-followers? If so, what kind of unity was Paul talking about, and how can such unity be achieved?

For Further Discussion

1. Review and discuss Amanda Gorman's poem, "[The Hill We Climb](#)."

2. This description of a child's imaginative, inquisitive nature, in the book, *Dangerous Wonder: The Adventure of Childlike Faith*, by Michael Yaconelli, cofounder of Youth Specialties, might apply to poets like Amanda Gorman as well. What do you think?

Yaconelli wrote that a child is full of questions, but "The question of a child is a million questions: Do you love me? Do I matter? ... Is what I notice worth noticing? Is Grandmother okay? Do you have a disease? Am I going to look like you? Is my hair going to fall out like yours?"

Beneath each question a child vocalizes you can find lots of other questions, if you pay attention, Yaconelli suggests. The role of the parent, teacher or caregiver, he continues, is not to answer every question the child asks, but to "help children discern the *important* questions, the life-giving questions."

Gorman and other poets like her may not answer every question we have, but they can help us discern which questions are important, life-giving, and worthy of our attention.

"Christian[s] must do the same," Yaconelli wrote. "Alan Jones says that priests 'are not so much people with answers as ones who guard the important questions and keep them alive.' The church exists to guard the important questions! Keep them alive! When the questions are kept alive, our souls have a chance of staying alive. The church should be full of Christians who seek questions rather than answers, mystery instead of solutions, wonder instead of explanations."

What questions should be important to us as Christians? How can we help keep important questions alive, for ourselves and for others?

3. Respond to this, from a TWW team member: "Neither discipleship nor democracy are microwavable. Don't expect to get strong disciples or a healthy democracy using fast, instant or on-demand techniques. Discipleship, like democracy, requires intentionality, hard work and time for lasting transformation."

4. Consider this, from filmmaker Valarie Kaur: "We are a nation waiting to be born. This is our great transition. ... Revolutions do not happen only in grand moments in public view, but also in small pockets of people coming together to inhabit a new way of being."

5. Amanda Gorman said, "The best part of overcoming challenges is the ability to use that experience to help inspire and support others." How can you use challenges you have worked to overcome as a means to inspire and support others?

6. In his prayer at the inauguration, Fr. Leo O'Donovan referenced Pope Francis' statement, "By ourselves, we risk seeing mirages, things that are not there. Dreams, on the other hand, are built together." How can we learn to build dreams, rather than mirages, together? What might a dream look like that is built on what God envisions for humanity?

Responding to the News

1. Consider hosting a creative writing, poetry or art contest for youth in your community or local school to encourage students to use their voices and develop their talent. Offer an award and a platform for the winning poet to perform the created piece of literature or share the work of art.

2. Write a poem or prayer together or individually that expresses what you think God wants for our nation right now. Then submit it to your local newspaper or radio station for publication, post it on your church website, or use it in a worship service liturgy.

Prayer

We thank you, Creator, for the gift of poets who craft words so that we can reimagine the world as you envision it, and find hope to turn from sin and error to begin again with you and with one another. Prosper the work of our hearts and hands, we pray, O God. Amen.

Alternate Prayer

You may wish to use [this link](#) to join with Father Leo O'Donovan in prayer for our new president and for our nation.

