“Amazing Peace: A Christmas Poem

By Dr. Maya Angelou

Thunder rumbles in the mountain passes

And lightning rattles the eaves of our houses.

Flood waters await us in our avenues.

Snow falls upon snow, falls upon snow to avalanche

Over unprotected villages.

The sky slips low and grey and threatening.

We question ourselves.

What have we done to so affront nature?

We worry God.

Are you there? Are you there really?

Does the covenant you made with us still hold?

Into this climate of fear and apprehension, Christmas enters,

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.

It is the Glad Season.

Thunder ebbs to silence and lightning sleeps quietly in the corner.

Flood waters recede into memory.

Snow becomes a yielding cushion to aid us

As we make our way to higher ground.

Hope is born again in the faces of children

It rides on the shoulders of our aged as they walk into their sunsets.

Hope spreads around the earth. Brightening all things,

Even hate which crouches breeding in dark corridors.

In our joy, we think we hear a whisper.

At first it is too soft. Then only half heard.

We listen carefully as it gathers strength.

We hear a sweetness.

The word is Peace.

It is loud now. It is louder.

Louder than the explosion of bombs.

We tremble at the sound. We are thrilled by its presence.

It is what we have hungered for.

Not just the absence of war. But, true Peace.

A harmony of spirit, a comfort of courtesies.

Security for our beloveds and their beloveds.

We clap hands and welcome the Peace of Christmas.

We beckon this good season to wait a while with us.

We, Baptist and Buddhist, Methodist and Muslim, say come.

Peace.

Come and fill us and our world with your majesty.

We, the Jew and the Jainist, the Catholic and the Confucian,

Implore you, to stay a while with us.

So we may learn by your shimmering light

How to look beyond complexion and see community.

It is Christmas time, a halting of hate time.

On this platform of peace, we can create a language

To translate ourselves to ourselves and to each other.

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.

We, Angels and Mortal's, Believers and Non-Believers,

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.”

The Chosen One

Today, I want to reflect upon Advent and the promise of peace. I begin with a story about an Advent season I experienced thirty years ago.

In 1986 I was a graduate student living in an undergraduate dormitory as a residential advisor.  I was also an unexpectedly expectant mother, in a tenuous marriage.  Given my circumstances, the timing of my pregnancy was less than ideal, but not impossible. I planned around my unplanned pregnancy as best as possible. Nevertheless, I had to accept that I wasn’t in control.  Admittedly, I was quite worried about what might happen if I went past my due date.  In the best case scenario, I would have no more than four weeks of maternity leave.

As much as I dreaded the thought of leaving my newborn in daycare, there was a darker truth I had to face. You see, during my third trimester, my then husband chose to have an affair with another woman, a fellow RA who lived in the dorm, just one flight down no less. By the first week of Advent, I was full with child, uncertainty and sorrow. My heart was broken, my dreams enveloped by darkness. It was a time of anxious expectation.

By the second week of Advent, I was running out of time. I completed my final exams a week before my cohort, and scrabbled to prepare for the baby’s arrival. Could I really manage it all?  What had I gotten myself into? I bought second hand clothes from Goodwill, lined a dresser drawer with blankets to serve as a cradle, steeled my heart against my husband’s betrayal, prayed for strength, and awaited the imminent onset of labor.

The third week of Advent, I met my baby face to face.  The moment I first held my daughter, I was utterly transfixed. The breath of life turned her skin from a pale Krishna-like blue to a soft amber glow.  Laura’s eyes locked in on my eyes. Nothing had prepared me for the tsunami of maternal bliss that flooded my being.

I didn’t know until that moment that all newborn humans, and interestingly enough, only humans, are covered with this weird and wonderful moisturizing substance called vernix. Newborns carry it on their bodies from inside the womb to protect them in this world.  (This detail will be important later, so bookmark that fact in your mind.) When Laura lay upon me, that miraculous healing balm melted into our commingled skin and softened my heart.

The fourth and last week of Advent, Laura and I came home from the hospital. It was the Winter Solstice, the darkest day of the year. Since the university was on holiday, the dorm was entirely empty save for the person working the front desk, my unfaithful husband, my newborn baby, and me. No family came to visit and help.  All my friends were out of town. I was afraid and overwhelmed. I felt so very alone.

Kneeling beside Laura’s makeshift cradle that morning, I marveled at her tiny and fragile frame. Soft cascades of morning light created a literal halo around her head.  A nearly crushing sense of awe and wonder came over me. How could it be that this little creature been entrusted to me? Who was I to care for and protect this vulnerable and precious human being?

An image flashed in my mind’s eye. Perhaps you too have stood in a house of mirrors, seeing row upon row, hundreds, even thousands of your own image. I had a rare out of body experience. I saw myself by my daughter’s side, my own mother by me, and her mother alongside her, and so on, back and back and back to the dawn of human time, down to one single woman, our common mother, whom we call Eve.

And, I thought about Mary, the mother of Jesus.  Like me, Mary must have felt been awash with fear. Why else would the angel Gabriel have said,“You are a favored woman. God is with you. Do not be afraid.”

Before I tell you more about Mary, let me ask for a show of hands. How many of you have seen the new Disney film Moana?  If we set aside for now any controversies about Disney’s treatment of Samoan culture, and focus instead on the film’s storyline at face value, we find that Moana is a parallel story to that of the Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus, as told in the Gospel according to Luke.  In essence, both Mary and Moana are teenage girls who embark on a heroic adventure.  Both Moana and Mary are chosen to be vessels redemptive love who restore light and life to a fallen world. Moana and Mary are both free to accept or to refuse the call. Mary and Moana both choose to be the chosen one.

The challenge with Christmas  stories from the Bible, like the annunciation of Mary in the Gospel of Luke, is that are overly familiar to some and completely unfamiliar to others. Yet, I love these stories, and I find that I can enter into them year after year, always finding new insights and deeper layers of meaning. Since I am admittedly a total Bible geek, I get really energized by careful study of the scriptures.

In the Gospel according to Luke, there is a story known as the Annunciation. Basically,  God sent one of his most famous angels, a great warrior named Gabriel, to deliver a message to a virgin named Mary. Gabriel told Mary that she would become the mother of the Son of God through a supernatural event of conception. The English version of story is rather clunky. Much of the gospel author’s elegant and carefully constructed prose gets lost in translation. To appreciate the subtleties, you need to know something about the concept of God’s glory.

Christians believe, as do the faithful of many religions, that the Divine is omnipresent, yet invisible to mortals in this material world. The glory of God is the exception. God’s glory is the visible manifestation of the invisible God. In the Greek, God’s glory roughly translates to *splendor* and *brilliance*. Think of clouds parting, light descending like a heavenly spotlight, and angels singing.  (If you have ever seen Monty Python and the Holy Grail, you have a caricature image to help you understand.) In Hebrew, God’s glory is a feminine noun, best translated as *presence*. She is the Shekinah, the sacred feminine. In the Hebrew Bible, Shekinah is the presence of the Divine as She dwells among Her people. She was involved in the creation of the world. In the Hebrew Bible, the Divine is made manifest to the Israelites through fire, in shady clouds and light.  Shekinah is how various authors in the Hebrew Bible refer to God’s presence in the tabernacle of ancient Israel. Shekinah formed Jesus within Mary’s womb so that God could dwell in us, through us, and for us - That is why Jesus is our Emmanuel.

Mary willingly received God’s Shekinah glory. The Holy Sacred Mystery performed the her miracle. She shone upon Mary like sunlight in the bitter cold. She concealed Mary and protected Mary as if inside a the womb of the Divine. God’s Shekinah glory melted into Mary, just like the vernix on my newborn’s skin had melted into me.  Although a virgin, Mary conceived, brought forth a son, and called him Jesus. Mary, the first disciple, had faith that Jesus would be great, no matter Mary’s lowly circumstances, for with God, nothing is impossible.

That moment beside my daughter’s cradle was my annunciation. Light pierced through my darkness. I too had been commissioned to become part of something much greater than myself. Laura and I were pearls in a strand of all human existence. God’s favor and God’s presence rested upon me. As a disciple of Christ, I did not need to fear motherhood. Laura would be great, for with God, nothing is impossible.  The hero in me was being called to adventure.  In that precise moment, I chose to become God’s chosen one for Laura.

Advent and adventure share the same linguistic root.  Looking back over the past thirty years, I have come to believe that God’s love is always on the move, issuing out invitations, beckoning each and every one of us to embark on a sacred adventure of our own. Jesus spoke of the kingdom of heaven, but not as some celestial domain. Rather, Jesus taught that the kingdom of heaven is within you. That means that inside of each of us, there is an embryo of light and love just waiting to be born. When we willingly open ourselves up to the vast and wild terrain of mutuality, God’s love goes deep and wide, granting peace on earth, in us, through us, and for us.

So how does any of this relate to you? If you think about it, every single one of us sitting in this chapel today is a chosen one. We have all been chosen to be known and to be loved as a part of our Priory community. Our collective mission is to create a slice of heaven spacious enough to hold every single person on this our hallowed ground. Look around you. Really, Look and see the faces of our community. How many of us have chosen to be the chosen one who will bring light into the darkness? Have you? Have I?

What if we consider the time we share together here at Priory to be an Advent season? What if now is a time of gestation, formation and preparation? What if when we leave here, we accept our commission to go forth and serve a world in need of our gifts?  Sadly, some will abandon and  betray us along the way. Will we forgive?  We ourselves will fail. Will we be forgiven? What if we create enough space in our lives for ourselves and each other to always begin again and again and again. Peace is not the absence of conflict. Peace is the calm of grace when we resolutely determine to never cease in our efforts to carry heaven’s light into the darkness?

My beloved Laura will turn 30 years old on December 19th. How happy I am that I chose to be chosen as her mother. Now I see the same divine maternal love that swept through my being flowing forward through Laura to her children. Christmas will arrive soon after Laura’s birthday. This time of year we can so easily get bogged down by thinking about final exams, papers, projects, parties, purchases. This Advent, let us not lose sight that we journey on a longer arc of an even greater adventure that has been calling out to the hero in each and every human being since the dawn of time. Let us choose to be the chosen ones, vessels of divine redemptive love, and live the promise of peace on earth.

Peace my brother. Peace my sister. Peace my soul.

May God bless us all. Merry Christmas!