

Poetry, Peace & Wild Prophets: Finding Beauty in Life's Contrasts

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[0 : 00] All right, so ever since I was a little child, I have loved words, and most especially beautiful words that are ordered with precision and grace.

That is to say that ever since I was a little child, I have loved poetry. I can still remember this assignment I was given in second grade. Each of us children was to memorize a poem of our choosing and to recite it before the class.

I lovingly chose a poem that I thought was appropriate with the help of my parents. And then on the morning of the recitation, I can still recall the nerves that I felt and then this kind of growing sense of unease.

One after another, my classmates, they were called to the front of the room where they would recite unflinchingly the works of Shel Silverstein or other lesser-known children's poets.

And I started to wonder if I had misunderstood the assignment. When my name was called, I forced my little body to apply to the front of the room. And with all the confidence I could muster, I started to recite, Well, son, I'll tell you.

[1 : 20] Life for me ain't been no crystal stair. It's had taxidents, splinters, and boards sworn up in places with no carpet on the floor. Bare. But all the time, eyes have been a-climbing on and reaching landings and turning corners and sometimes going in the dark where there ain't been no light.

Now, I was like eight, y'all. Okay. So, boy, don't you turn back. Don't you sit down on the steps because you find it kind of hard. Don't you fall now.

For eyes are still going, honey. Eyes are still climbing. And life for me ain't been no crystal stair. Yeah, I read that poem with all the elegance and verve that a second grader could muster, okay? And when I was done, every single kid in that room looked at me so blankly. They didn't seem to understand the finer points of incorporating Black English vernacular into modern poetry, all right? And the reality is that neither did I. I was just in love with the sound of the words that were coming off of the page. That was me as a kid, in love with the poetry of the world.

[2 : 40] And then as I grow into my teenage years, I started to write poetry, these kind of brooding pieces. Maybe some of you did this too. These brooding pieces that were angsty. And for me, that were about the particular pain of holding forbidden attractions that I believed at the time would consign me to hell.

And then later, as an English teacher, I taught a little bit of poetry, but I mostly discovered more of it as I would commute to work in the morning and listen to every single day at 635 NPR's poetry segment.

And it was during this time that I discovered another poem that I really loved. It's called Music by Ann Porter. When I was a child, I once sat sobbing on the floor beside my mother's piano as she played and sang.

For there was in her singing a shy yet solemn glory my smallness could not hold. And when I was asked why I was crying, I had no words for it.

I only shook my head and went on crying. Why is it that music, at its most beautiful, opens a wound in us, an ache, a desolation deep as homesickness, for some far off and half-forgotten country?

[4 : 05] I've never understood why this is so. But there is an ancient legend from the other side of the world that gives away the secret of this mysterious sorrow.

For centuries on centuries we have been wandering, but we were made for paradise, as dear for the forest. And when music comes to us with its heavenly beauty, it brings us desolation.

For when we hear it, we half remember that lost native country. We dimly remember the fields, their fragrant windswept clover, the birdsongs in the orchards, the wild white violets in the moss by transparent streams.

And shining at the heart of it is the longed-for beauty of the one who waits for us, who will always wait for us in those radiant meadows, and also came to live with us, and wanders where we wander.

Now, these days, I don't read nearly as much poetry. And if I'm honest with myself, I feel that is a great loss to my soul.

[5 : 22] I think that we need poetry, that poetry has the power to slow us down. It helps us to pay attention. It challenges us to move from the beauty of the words on the page to the poetry of the world all around us.

As Richard Beck notes while writing about Celtic Christianity, poetry is a spiritual practice and a resource for re-enchantment. Poetry sees the world through enchanted eyes, bringing us into view, bringing into view the deeper meanings, signs, and mysteries at work in everyday things.

Reading and writing poetry is practicing a sacramental imagination. It is practicing a way of seeing that looks at things and then through things so that they can reveal God.

But, as I say all of this, I'm aware that we are not all poetry lovers. I'm aware that, you know, a really important question is, what even is poetry?

Oh, in 2002, author Marilyn Singer asked a group of writers and editors that question, what makes a good poem? And I really love the responses.

[6 : 45] And here are the three that I particularly love that I think can nourish us today. A good poem, said J. Patrick Lewis, is a blind date with enchantment.

It must be an antidote to indifference. Joseph Bruchak took his response in a different direction. A good poem is like medicine, he said. It can be made up of almost anything, but only when its ingredients are put together in the right proportions.

Neither too much or too little can it affect your life. But then, this is my favorite of the definitions of a good poem. This is from Patrice Vecchione.

Good poems can tell us what we already know in our bones, but had never seen or heard or even put into words before. Good poetry gives us ourselves as we've never had who we were before. It also gives us each other, shortens the gap between one and another. Again, good poems give us the world as if for the first time.

[7 : 54] A fine poem needs mystery, too. It doesn't say everything. If you were to compare a poem to a simple math equation, say one plus one equals two, then a poem is butterfly plus jagged scar equals his warm breath on your neck.

It's another way of knowing that makes perfect sense, but not logical, linear, rational sense. It's the way the heart knows, and the soul, and the logic of dreams.

As we move through Advent this year, I'm convinced that we need the poetry of Christmas. After an election season that has been especially hard for some of us.

After a year of watching utter devastation unfold in Gaza that Amnesty International has now officially called a genocide. Through the personal devastation and the disappointments of our own lives.

I'm convinced that this Advent, many of us could use a blind date with enchantment. Many of us need medicine in just the right proportions.

[9 : 15] We need other ways of knowing that are akin to the logic of our dreams. We recently finished a sermon series in which we did the necessary work of paying attention to our personal and cultural monsters.

But if we only pay attention to our monsters, we miss a lot. We miss the poetry of the world. We miss being prepared for the coming of Jesus and the comings of Jesus every single day in our midst.

The season of Advent is brilliant because it both helps us fully acknowledge the forces that shadow our world. Despair and conflict and sorrow and hatred.

And it challenges us to rekindle the candle of our lives in service of hope and peace and joy and love.

Paying attention to the poetry of our lives and the poetry of our world is one way of rekindling the flame. So this Advent, along with the traditional scriptures that often we read and hear this time of

year, you're going to hear a lot of poetry from the pulpit as an invitation to enchantment and healing and holy imagination.

[10:41] So Pastor Anthony started us off in that direction last week if you were at the evening service. And today I'm going to follow his lead and take a traditional Advent text about John the Baptist.

And look at it with you. Now, to preach about John the Baptist can, and to hear about John the Baptist during Advent, can sometimes feel challenging.

It can sometimes feel out of place during the merrymaking of December. But we need John. John reminds us, as one Advent devotional that I particularly love puts it, that the love that descended to Bethlehem is not the easy sympathy of an avuncular God, but a burning fire whose light chases away every shadow, floods every corner, and turns midnight into noon.

This love reveals sin and overcomes it. It conquers darkness with such forcefulness and intensity that it scatters the proud, humbles the mighty, feeds the hungry, and sends the rich away empty.

Now here is another way to think about John. John the Baptist. John the Baptizer. Using the lens of poet Lucille Clifton's stunning poem simply called John.

[12:06] Somebody coming in blackness, like a star. And the world be a great bush on his head, and his eyes be fire in the city, and his mouth true as time.

He be calling the people brother, even in the prison, even in the jail. I'm just only a Baptist preacher. Somebody bigger than me coming in blackness, like a star.

So, if you have your Bibles or Bible app on your phone, let's go to Matthew 3, 1 through 12.

It'll also be on the screen if you prefer to read along. Matthew 3, 1 through 12. In those days, John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness in Judea, proclaiming, Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.

This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, The voice of one crying out in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.

[13:21] Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region around the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he, John, saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for his baptism, he said to them, You brood of vipers, who warned you to flee the coming wrath?

Therefore, bear fruit worthy of repentance, and do not presume to say to yourselves, We have Abraham as our ancestor. For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham.

Even now, the axe is lying at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. I baptize you with water for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is more powerful than I, and I am not worthy to carry his sandals.

He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear the threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary.

[14:39] But the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire. So y'all, this is John.

There is only urgency in his message and in his way of life. John, this John, makes his home in the wilderness, the same physical and spiritual geography that was home to the Israelites as they found their new identity after being freed from slavery.

He makes his home out beyond the control of the empire. He eats the food of the poor, locusts and wild honey. And in his mouth, we find the same message that we will soon hear Jesus preach.

Repent. Repent. Repent for the kingdom of heaven has come near. Change your mind. Turn around. John calls everyone to participate in the waters of purification that are a sign of changed life.

And what is really interesting is that in Matthew's telling of this story, it's the religious insiders, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, who are invited to change.

[15:56] It's the ones who know the right words. It's the ones who perform the right actions. For John, the need to change from the previous and poisonous ways of empire, from the poisonous ways of our own self-righteousness, whether that has a secular root or a religious root, that is the most important thing, that change.

No lineage or pedigree can exempt us from that. We are called to change and to bear the fruit of change. The king is on the way, cries John.

And we prepare the way. Now notice that, and this is one of the things I love about this, that Matthew describes John's heralding by riffing on a portion of Isaiah in which God promises that the Israelites who have been exiled in Babylon will essentially be delivered back to their homeland over a highway that is made through the wilderness.

You have to see that in your mind's eye. Because as with all highways, the terrain has to be adjusted to make it possible to pass through.

If you've ever been to, like, the mountains of North Carolina, where North Carolina is where I grew up, so we would often travel for vacation out west. Or if you've been to Virginia, you've seen the way in which highways have been cut through mountains.

[17 : 29] roads have been leveled to make it so you can get from one place to the other. And in the days of our spiritual ancestors, there would have been a desire to make the highway as straight as possible and as level as possible to be worthy of a king.

So this herald John invites us to adjust the terrain, not only of the external world, but first of our hearts, in light of the coming of the king.

Now, again, hearing John's voice of change can feel jarring and out of place during Advent. We so often want to get to that silent night and that baby Jesus in the manger and to presents.

Let's be honest about presents, too. But on this Sunday of Advent, when we light the candle of peace, I want to remind us that to get to peace, we need John's voice.

I once read Richard Rohr, maybe I heard him, I don't remember, say something really interesting about John. He said that John's diet of locusts and wild honey can remind us that prophets are people who willingly encounter both the bitterness and the sweetness of life.

[18 : 57] They don't shield themselves from either. And I would say that that is true of anyone who longs to lead a prophetic life in the way of Jesus.

Just as Jesus both wept and feasted under empire, so must we. And I have a hunch that genuine peace for ourselves and for our world can be found in no other way than willingly encountering both sides of life and willingly encountering the bitterness and the sweetness.

Because in so doing, we are willingly encountering the truth about reality. Maybe we somehow align ourselves with the truth of the world, even though that truth somehow seems like a paradox.

But then, in addition to John's way of life saying something to us about peace, John also uses this imagery that reminds us of the urgency and the path of change.

I find especially intriguing this image of the winnowing fork, which would have been like a kind of shovel that was used at harvest to take the grain, throw it in the air, and then the wind, using the wind to separate kind of the grain of wheat from the husk that was on the outside of it.

[20 : 28] Now, one way of interpreting the winnowing fork in that image is in thinking of the pieces of grain as people, like the grain are the people who will be saved, the chaff are the people who will not.

But another way I think during Advent that's really helpful to think about that image is that each grain has a husk that needs to be blown away before it can become nourishing.

As we think about change during Advent, we might ask ourselves, what are the husks that hold us back from becoming nourishing in the ways that God wants us to be?

What old ways of thinking, what addictions or attachments, what ways of performing goodness?

Because a hard truth that John insists upon is that as we welcome peace, we express willingness to repent, to change our minds, to adjust the terrain of our hearts.

See, the tendency is to believe, and I fall into this all the time, is that the end of conflict will come when those people out there change. If they would just change, we could get to peace, we could get to the kingdom, milk and honey, flourishing, all of that.

[21 : 53] But there's something in John's words and John's message that does not allow us to pass the buck. Our willingness to change when that is needed is intricately bound to our ability to welcome peace.

And our ability to welcome peace is what is at stake. John tells us that the good news that we need to hear amid all the shadows of the world, that the Prince of Peace is on the way.

And it's not a matter of if, but of when and how often. Our proper work is to pay attention, as Mary Oliver says, to pay attention from inside the bitterness and the sweetness of the world.

Our proper work is to change, to adjust the terrain of our hearts, to allow the husks which hold us back from God to be blown away so that we can receive the coming Prince of Peace.

In what ways can you intentionally open yourself to the pain of the world and the beauty of the world? It can be so easy, particularly as people who live in this city, to swing, to pay attention to only the hard stuff.

[23 : 16] Or then to go in the opposite direction and to just block it all out. But how can we stay in touch with both of those things, this Advent? And then in what way do we need to adjust the terrain of our hearts?

And where do we need to experience re-enchantment, healing, or logic beyond the linear to come fully awake to God on Christmas morning?

Able Church. This Advent, let's nourish our imaginations with the peace that John sees on the horizon.

Let's use the poetry of creation and the poetry of the world to do that. Now, I asked as the pastor of the peace question for you to describe an image of peace for you, a time you felt peace, and to think about what caused that.

So I just want to end with a poem that provides another image that I find stunning of peace. The peace that we seek and the peace that we await.

[24 : 27] It's called First Snow by Mary Oliver. The snow began here this morning and all day continued. It's white rhetoric everywhere calling us back.

To why, how, wince, such beauty, and what, the meaning, such an oracular fever.

Flowing past windows and energy it seemed would never ebb, never settle, less than lovely. And only now, deep into the night, it has finally ended. The silence is immense.

And the heavens still hold a million candles. Nowhere the familiar things, stars, the moon, the darkness we expect and nightly turn from.

Trees flitter like castles and ribbons. The broad fields smolder with light. A passing creek bed lies heaped with shining hills.

[25 : 31] and though the questions that have assailed us all day remain, not a single answer has been found. Walking out now into the silence and the light under the trees and through the fields feels like wine.

Amen.acts