Last Sunday during the Forum hour Jerry Frazier shared an article written by Amanda Gorman called, “Why I almost didn’t read my poem at the inauguration.” Amanda basically shares in this article how fear almost stops her from reading her poem, “The Hill we Climb.” If you have not read Amanda’s poem from the inauguration, please google it, it will be well worth your time.

The words and thoughts from Amanda’s article have rolled around in my mind all week. Her words have challenged me, and they have helped me to think more deeply about the fears I carry inside myself. Let me share one paragraph from her story:

The night before I was to give the Inaugural Committee

my final decision felt like the longest of my life. My

neighborhood was eerily quiet in that early morning dark,

though I strained my ears for noise to distract me from

the choice that lay ahead. It felt like my little world stood

still. And then it struck me: Maybe being brave enough

doesn’t mean lessening my fear, but listening to it …

What stood out most of all was the worry that I’d spend

the rest of my life wondering what this poem could have achieved. There was only one way to find out.

Jesus is standing beside the Sea of Galilee, or depending on who you are speaking with, the Lake of Gennesaret, the Sea of Tiberias, or Lake Kenneret. This large harp-shaped lake has been called all three names during the last 2500 years. It is morning and Jesus casually gets into Simon’s boat and tells him to put out the boat into deep water and let down his nets for a catch.” You can almost hear the hopeless sigh in Simon’s voice as he tells Jesus, “Master, we have worked all night long but have caught nothing. Yet if you say so, I will let down the nets.”

There is only one way for Simon to find out what Jesus was up to. He had to push the boat out into deep water as Jesus had instructed him to do, even if he held no hope of catching any fish. As Simon rowed the boat out into deep water, I wonder if he found ways to distract his attention away from Jesus? Did Simon’s world stand still as he threw the net once again into deep water, while he listened to the water lap against the side of the boat? We are only told that the nets became so full of fish they began to break.” Simon, just like Amanda Gorman, knew ‘there was only one way to find out’ what Jesus was up to, he had to jump into the boat with Jesus.

There is no mention of Jesus performing a miracle to entice Simon to jump in the boat, but he jumps anyway. Perhaps, it is as Amanda Gorman writes, “Maybe being brave enough doesn’t mean lessening my fear, but listening to it.” Simon listens to Jesus, in spite of fears that may plague him. Even though they had already fished all night, and caught nothing, Simon listens. Simon might have thought, “Does Jesus think he is better at fishing than I am, a trained fisherman? After all, Simon had worked at fishing for several years, and knew all the struggles attached to this industry.

The fishing industry in Palestine was fully under the control of the Roman Empire. Caesar owned every body of water, and all fishing was state-regulated for the benefit of the urban elite. Most of what they caught was exported, leaving local communities impoverished and hungry, and if that wasn’t enough to discourage a fisherman, the Romans collected high taxes, levies, and tolls each time fish were sold. And, say a fisherman might want to do a little poaching to feed his family, if caught, they would be jailed or killed for theft.

Yet, when Simon Peter sees the abundance of fish, he is overwhelmed. There is no mention of Roman taxes he might owe on such a large haul of fish. There is only awe and shock as he falls to his knees and realizes he is standing in the presence of a miracle man named Jesus. Jesus tells Simon, “Do not be afraid.”

Do not be afraid, Simon, now that you know who Jesus is. Do not be afraid as you try to make sense of this miracle. Instead, offer thanks for the abundance of trusting in Jesus, and know that I am calling you to fish for people. And as they brought their boats to shore, Simon, James, John, and Zebedee, left everything on the shore and followed him.

When Amanda Gorman finally made the decision to recite her poem at the inaugural celebration she wrote, “I can’t say I was completely confident in my choice, but I was completely committed to it.” Four men might not have felt all that confident as they walked off with Jesus, leaving their boats and livelihood behind them, but their steps committed them to a new life. And their choice changed their lives, as it did the life of Amanda.

Let me read a small portion of Amanda’s inaugural poem, “The Hill we Climb”:

When day comes, we ask ourselves, where can we find

light in this never-ending shade?

The loss we carry. A Sea we must wade.

We braved the belly of the beast.

We’ve learned that quiet isn’t always peace, and the norms

and notions of what ‘just’ is isn’t always justice.

And yet the dawn is ours before we knew it.

Somehow we do it.

Somehow we weathered and witnessed a nation that isn’t

broken, but simply unfinished.

We, the successors of a country and a time where a skinny

Black girl descended from slaves and raised by a single mother can dream of becoming president, only to find herself reciting for one.

And, yes, we are far from polished, far from pristine, but that

doesn’t mean we are striving to form a union that is perfect.

We are striving to form our union with purpose.

To compose a country committed to all cultures, colors,

characters and conditions of man.

And, so we lift our gaze, not to what stands between us,

but what stands before us.

We close the divide because we know to put our future

first, we must first put our differences aside.

We lay down our arms so we can reach our arms out

to each other.

February is Black history month. I honor the words and actions of Amanda Gorman, because just like Simon Peter who stepped into a boat with little hope, Amanda leaves us a legacy of youthful confidence, in the promise that we as people can live with differences and still find ways to reach our arms out to one another. As Amanda says in her submitted article, “I may have worked on the words, but it was other people who put those words to work. What we’ve seen isn’t just the power of a poem. It’s the power of the people.”

You might say two people stepped into their vocations, a simple fisherman who trusted Jesus enough to push his boat out to shore and be surprised beyond belief at the miracle taking place, and a young woman by the name of Amanda Gorman who is vulnerable enough to write an article stating how afraid she was to step behind a podium and recite a poem before the president of the United States, and millions of people watching on screens across America. Her last words ring as true as the words of Jesus, “The truth is, hope isn’t a promise we give. It’s a promise we live.” Jesus said, “from now on you will be catching people.”

What promise are you living into right now? Fear will always be with us. Amanda says, “If you’re alive, you’re afraid. If you’re not afraid, then you’re not paying attention.” We must listen to the fears of our own hearts and minds, otherwise, we will not live into the hope of relationship that Simon Peter and Amanda show us as being the core of practicing love for each other. Jesus said, “Truly I tell you,” unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” What is the kingdom of heaven? It is being humble and vulnerable before God and each other. It’s admitting that we do have fears. It’s reaching our arms out far and wide to embrace each other. Then, we will begin to live. Amen.