

Dec 19 2021 Fourth Sunday of Advent

In the name of God, Abba/ Imma, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

The writer, Toni Morrison, shared the story of coming across a fragment of a newspaper article from the 1850s. It's a story about a woman named Garner. She was enslaved in Kentucky, had two small children. The Ohio River froze over, and she managed to escape, slipping to the other side, hoping to make contact with the Underground Railroad, and get further north for protection. But before that could happen, four slavers chased after her, found out where she was, and went to capture her. When she saw them coming--she was in some sort of hutch or shed, whatever it was--she took the life of her elder child, four or five. She was captured. They put her and the infant in the boat to go back across to Kentucky, and on the way she intentionally dove into the water, hoping to drown both of them. The infant died, but she did not.

She was put on trial in Kentucky, but they were torn with what to charge her with. Was this just a property crime? Because slaves are property, she'd violated the law. Or--if they charged her with murder, would they have to accept that black children were human beings? The story played around the country for quite a while.

Now, when we hear that story, we are appalled at that mother. But if you look at the story through the mother's eyes, her choice was to kill the children or to condemn them to a life of pure evil and slavery. She made a choice. This is the story that became the catalyst for Toni Morrison's novel, Beloved.

This week, Senator Raphael Warnock spoke on the floor of the Senate—perhaps some of you heard that--very eloquently. He said, 'Isn't it something? We were able to lift the rules of filibuster in order to protect the American economy. Can we consider doing the same thing for voting rights to protect democracy in this country? You said I'm all for bipartisanship. I think it's a great thing. But to what end is our bipartisanship practiced? You know, it was bipartisan agreement that kept slavery alive in this country for hundreds of years. It was bipartisanship, which said *'Jim Crow is okay'* and the reign of terror persisted. It's bipartisanship, which says *'Women shouldn't have the right to vote'*, until the women overturn that. It's bipartisanship which says *'There's just nothing we can do about school shootings. They just have to go on and on and on, because, you know, we can't do anything. We can't pass gun laws. We can't take any action.'* It's just... right, right? I mean, shall we face a choice? Is it the economy--or democracy?

Mary had to make a choice seemingly between two apparent??, but opposing goods, good choices. And this is what we call the *classic double bind*, when we don't know what's happening, and we don't know what to do, and we feel caught in between. Mary's whole life was being disrupted. Should she continue as a fine young woman, maturing, you know, to be a good person in her times? Or, should she take this path of becoming utterly disreputable, bearing an illegitimate child, and the shame of all that.

This is the trial of faith that comes to all of us. All of us. This is why the faith is so hard, because these choices keep coming to us again, and again, and again. God enters our lives in any way that God chooses. What Mary experienced was completely unexpected. And yet it's fascinating, isn't it, how strongly we human beings feel about the way in which God should behave: *God's not supposed to do that. God's supposed to follow the rules, and supposed to come through for us in the way that we want. Why does God not get that?*

The Bible is filled to overflowing with these stories of people being surprised, and transformed, and changed in ways they never anticipated. God is free to shatter our expectations at any time. But God will not do it without our consent. That's why Mary's story is so, so important. God will not impose force, compel us to do anything. God will not. God waited for her consent.

That's why this Annunciation poem is so powerful, especially that portion where it's saying we are presented with these opportunities, aren't we? Time and time again? They may be crises, but they are before us--the occasions when we have to make a choice, and it's tough. It's difficult, and all of us know there are times we have walked away. Right? Just: *'I can't take it. I don't need it. I don't want it. I don't have the courage. I'm too tired. Not now.'* We've all done it.

And the poem says, *'And God does not smite us.'* God will not do that. God will not smite us. But that doorway closes. Mary said, 'Yes.' She consented, and she found that courage to live into her choice.

And then she goes to her cousin Elizabeth to share the good news--and Mary then sings a war hymn. Friends, this is classical, Jewish lyrics for a war hymn. This is documented throughout Judaism.

Mary sings, 'Our God is great. Holy is God's name, who blesses me for generations to come. The God, who ripped down rocket ships, and private jets from the 1%, who will rout the arrogant and the ignorant, and the warmongers, and the greedy,

and the vicious people on this planet, who will lift up the lowly, the imprisoned, the enslaved, the impoverished, who will show mercy to all, who will fulfill that promise of justice and equality for all.'

Do you think we should throw Martha out of here for singing that song? Is that appropriate in church, Martha?

So, we have a major social choice before us and it is not between the economy and democracy.

It is between democracy and idolatry. What will we choose?

It is the creative energy of this double bind that stretches us to see beyond our own imaginations, to make possible things we didn't think could happen. It stretches us to see reality in new ways, to see God in new ways, to have new relationships--with each other and our times. It empowers us to stand up and say, 'Yes.'

Yes, we will live. Yes, that Advent light is shining the courage upon us to consent--to hope, to change, to transformation. Like Mary, we must face the choices before us.

Merry Christmas.

Amen.

The peace, which surpasses all human understanding, keep our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.