

## **“Language Blossoms”**

**Rev. Maeve Hammond**

**Isaiah 1:1-10 | Romans 15:4-13**

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Friends, I have a pop quiz for you today. I promise you won't be graded! When I ask you, “what is the language of Advent,” what comes to mind? That may sound confusing...Put another way, what are the words we center our attention on during Advent? You may guess the words of hope, peace, joy, and love - the four elements of Christ's incarnation. If you guessed those words, you were right! Hope, peace, joy, and love are the language of the four weeks of Advent, each designated and distinguished by a particular candle. As we prepare ourselves for the celebration of the birth of the Christ Child, we can focus on each word as the weeks pass and bring us closer to Christmas.

We ask ourselves, what does the language of Advent--hope, peace, joy, and love--mean to us? Through study, discernment, prayer, and emotional and spiritual preparation, we ready ourselves once again for the great revelation of “Emmanuel, God-With-Us, Love Incarnate, Divinity Enfleshed” – the Sacred Mystery of Jesus Christ, fully human and fully divine, fully earthly teacher and fully mystical presence (“An Advent Wreath Litany”). Last Sunday, the first week of Advent, we lit the Candle of Hope. The next two Sundays, we will light the Candle of Joy and the Candle of Love, respectively. This Sunday is, of course, the Candle of Peace. So, what does Christ's Peace mean to us?

We all likely have our own definitions of what peace means to us as followers of Christ and as individuals within the world. Perhaps, your definition of peace changes during Advent or, perhaps, the word peace lands differently this year in the grand totality

of what we have collectively and personally experienced in 2025. I thought, though, that I would share just one definition—or, rather, exploration—of what peace could mean to us during this season. This comes from Rev. Dr. Anna Blaedel’s “An Advent Wreath Litany” from 2018, from the liturgical resource site *enfleshed*:

The Peace of God-With-Us does not come as law and order, or enforcement and control. Peace cannot be imposed from us on high. Peace cannot be commanded. The Peace of God-With-Us is chaotic, wild, unruly, unpredictable. The Peace of God-With-Us is collective, liberating us from deadly complicity. Peace is gestating in darkness; it comes unexpectedly. Peace invites our expectation, and demands our participation. Prepare the way, for peace with justice. May Peace be birthed among, within, and through us, this Advent. O Come, O, Come, Emmanuel....

*This* is the liberating peace of Christ and God’s Kingdom: a peace of wild, collective, active, created, transformative belonging. Not one of hierarchy, exclusion, perfection, dogma or righteousness. When I was serving as an Assistant Chaplain at Suffolk University during my third year of divinity school, I had found “An Advent Wreath Litany” by Rev. Dr. Blaedel and used it in my student programming. Since then, I like to look back on the litany when I can, and when I remember, because I find Rev. Dr. Blaedel’s words to be moving, liberating, and theologically-rich. This Advent season, though, I decided that I wanted to dig a little deeper into the author of these words. Who are they? What in their life could have inspired this particular theological interpretation of peace during Advent? What tradition did they come from, and what else have they done? I hope you’ll join me down this little research rabbit-hole that I took this week, so we can learn a bit more about the life and story of this author. Through reflection of their story, I believe we can also learn more about the truth of Christ’s peace.

Ordained in the United Methodist Church, or UMC, Rev. Dr. Blaedel is a full-time college chaplain in Iowa and “theopoet” who writes at the intersection of theology and

poetry as the co-founder and co-director of the liturgical resource site *enfleshed*. In an Iowa Public Radio article from 2023, Rev. Dr. Blaedel describes the UMC as “my place of spiritual belonging, my religious home, my faith community, my place of tradition” (IPR 2023). It’s the denomination into which they were baptized and raised and first felt the call to ministry. However, in 2016, Rev. Dr. Bladel experienced a painful rift in this relational, covenantal, and spiritual home. Until just last year (May 2024) as some of you know, the UMC’s denominational rules stated that, while LGBTQ+ folks could attend worship and be part of the body of Christ, they could not serve as ordained clergy or perform same-sex or queer weddings. Rev. Dr. Blaedel, a queer person themselves, knew the rules, but they also loved the UMC and the potential for further inclusion and love.

As a Christian with deep roots in Methodism, who had prayed for and with the denomination, served and loved the denomination, and supported it in lay and ordained capacities for years, Rev. Dr. Blaedel found themselves at a crossroads in 2016. Do they hide their identity as a partnered queer person to appease the rules of the institution? Or, do they speak up and out—challenging this ecclesiastical system and embracing the voice that God has given them in all of their belovedness? Should they live and minister in secrecy and in shame, never really letting their own denomination, their colleagues, their students know who they are? Or, do they hold fast to the conviction that discriminatory rules are, in their own words, “not faithful to the best of our tradition and are not serving our church or ourselves” (Little Village 2024)? What would you do, in their shoes? Hide? Or speak up and out? [Pause] They chose to speak out.

Here's how they tell what happened. This comes from an interview with Little Village, an Iowa-based independent news source:

In June of 2016, I rose during a moment of personal privilege and bore witness surrounded by hundreds of United Methodist clergy and laity across Iowa. I claimed my queerness publicly, and used the language that made my queerness, formally, a chargeable offense: "I am a self-avowed, practicing homosexual," I said.... Within an hour, three clergy colleagues, all cis-het [cisgender, heterosexual] white men, none of whom I was in direct relationship with, had filed a formal complaint. They misspelled my name. A week or so later... I received formal notice of the complaint by the presiding bishop. Thus began over three years of a wild and intense chapter of life, as a very private, introverted person under very public charge.... As the years under complaint accumulated, broader solidarities bloomed, faded and shapeshifted.... I became too alone, isolated in the onslaught.

This self-described introverted, queer, Christian minister—whose lifelong work has centered around inviting in the spiritual misfits, creating space at the table in a manner inspired by Christ's Supper, and pairing God's abiding and everlasting radical love with real-life, practical ministry—was suddenly thrust into the national and ecclesiastical spotlight. Over the course of three-and-a-half years, from 2016 through 2019, ministers within the UMC levied three formal complaints against Rev. Dr. Blaedel: two for being an out, queer clergyperson and one for performing a same-sex wedding. Time and time again, Rev. Dr. Blaedel admitted to the charges – yes, I am partnered; yes, I did perform a same-sex wedding; yes, I am an out, queer clergyperson – and defended themselves. In 2019, UMC put Rev. Dr. Blaedel on an "indefinite leave of absence" from practicing ordained ministry as a Methodist minister, though they still continue to minister to students as a chaplain and to readers of faith like me as a writer and "theopoet" (IPR 2023). Their widespread coverage and scrutiny brought attention to the ongoing struggles that LGBTQ+ people of faith face in all roles—lay or ordained. Rev. Dr. Blaedel,

to be true to who God made them to be, had no choice but to adopt a public persona and become the unexpected face of queerness and the Church.

I want to return to and highlight some of the language Blaedel uses in their interview with Little Village. “I rose,” “I claimed,” “my queerness a chargeable offence,” “none of whom I was in direct relationship with,” “wild and intense,” “broader solidarities bloomed, faded,” “I became too alone” – these words belong to them and their experience. These are the words that mark the painful and traumatic prying into, and exclusion of, the life of a clergyperson by the hands and so-called righteousness of a Christian institution.

As you hear this sermon, I hope it's clear that my intention is not to speak ill of the UMC or of Christian institutions at large. I am, of course, an ordained Minister of Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) who serves our United Church of Christ congregation. I am deeply grateful for the loving, compassionate, and grace-filled relationships and support I have found within the institution of the UCC and the PCUSA—from beloved lay leaders to influential representatives of these denominations at the Presbytery, Conference, and national levels. As some of you know, I was, like Rev. Dr. Blaedel, baptized and raised (in part) in a UMC church. I have several colleagues (including those just down the street at Crawford), peers, and friends who serve the UMC. The Body of Christ is an interwoven and divinely-righted (*rite-d*) spiritual institution of its own. Christ is the Head and denominations, congregations, and individuals within institutions are the parts. So, I wish not to disparage these institutions or cast blame, shame or judgment. Simply, the question I would like to raise today, through the lens of our Advent call to peace and Rev. Dr. Blaedel's story, is this: how did

we get here? How are we in a time when Christian institutions, communities, and individuals continue to discriminate against LGBTQ+ and other marginalized siblings in Christ? When humbly respecting people, as Jesus did in His ministry, knowing all of us to be the imago dei, made in the image of God, *when humbly respecting people* is less important than righteously dismissing, harming, and excluding people? How did we get here?

And, to answer this question, “how did we get here?,” I’ll be very pastor-like and bring us back around to the questions I introduced at the top of this sermon: “what is the language of Advent?” And perhaps even more importantly: “what does the language of Advent—hope, peace, joy, and love—mean to us?” For this week, I gave you a reflection on what the language of peace means: a peace of wild, collective, active, created, transformative belonging. Now let me expand these questions: what is the language of Christianity? And what does the language of Christianity mean to us?

As a people, our faith comes, in part, from the holy written Word. Our Scriptures are our sacred texts, written by ancestors of faith and compiled by religious leaders and scribes. While we hold onto our Scriptures with deep reverence and respect as the tenets of our religion, our Protestant tradition does not believe that the Bible is literal, fundamentalist, or inerrant. Instead, we believe that all Scripture is divinely-inspired but written by humans—humans who were mostly, if not entirely, men of certain educated and elite classes in antiquity. If we were to meet these authors today, they would literally speak a different language (ancient Hebrew or Greek), likely hold very different beliefs on religious rules and social conduct, and have life experiences that we (for better or for worse) could not even imagine. God revealed aspects of Godself to these authors as

they recounted the tales, triumphs, woes, visions, and sacred encounters of our prophets, our ancestors, and Christ himself.

We, in our limited human understanding, have the great blessing to glimpse God through these pages. We hold this great blessing along with this truth of our tradition: humans are imperfect beings who understand and interpret the world through their own biases, worldviews, and experiences, reflected through their language. I like to think of our lives as this vast stretch of time, this long pilgrimage, where we search for God's voice, and quiet our own, to understand what truly matters and where we must go next—and still, as humans, we have limits in fully capturing God's truth, Christ's truth.

If I were to sum up how we got here, how Christian institutions, communities, and individuals continue to discriminate against LGBTQ+ and other marginalized siblings in Christ, I would be inclined to go back to the source of our faith—the written Word. How did we get here? Language. Look at almost any page of the Bible in a standard translation, and you will find, linguistically, the mirror of ancient societal and religious patriarchy and male-dominated hierarchy reflected back at you. A mirror whose reflections have shifted and evolved as civilizations and interpretations have shifted and evolved. “For now we see in a mirror, dimly,” to quote 1 Corinthians 13, where we can glimpse God, yes, yet the full truth, the wholeness of God, is distorted by human words until we humble ourselves to Christ's hope, peace, joy, and love.

When patriarchal language is all that we know to describe our faith and our religious experiences / when we do not question why we are taught at a very formative, early age that God is a big, bearded, white man in the clouds / when our family members, politicians, and Christian institutions intentionally, or unintentionally,

perpetuate oppressive ideas about gender, sexuality, class, and power through the justification of “well, that’s just what it says in the Bible” / when we are not willing to be curious about the history of the creation of the Bible or why God would ever truly desire us to see Godself within human-created, unjust systems and ideologies → this is what can happen. We learn that our Divine Creator (an omniscient, timeless presence without face, body, or gendered features) is He—no questions asked. We learn that our Divine Creator is Lord and Master—He of hierarchy, wealth, ownership. We learn that our Divine Creator entrusts power into the hands of the man and the husband—He who dominates and subsumes the woman and the wife. We learn that our Divine Creator puts us into boxes—He who decides who is in, who is out, who is worthy of love and human rights, and who isn’t. That’s what the language says – but not who God is. Christ is hope, peace, joy, and love.

I have to believe that there is a link between the patriarchal language of some Scripture translations and Scriptural interpretations, even within a mainline Protestant denomination similar to ours, and the painful exclusion and scapegoating that Rev. Dr. Anna Bladel, and many others, have endured. Yet, here is the hope in this story and in ours: just as has been done over the past thousands of years, we too can newly interpret the written Word and find the sources of Christ’s hope, peace, joy, and love. And we can seek Divine inspiration beyond patriarchal translations of the written Word to imagine the language of God’s whole truth. We can speak the language of the Peace of God-With-Us: the God of wild, collective, active, created, transformative belonging. With God’s help, we can lean into the playful spirit of curiosity and possibility to feel the vastness of God’s Kingdom here on earth.



Friends, may the shoot that sprouts out of this Advent season be the language of God's truth. May we remember that how we speak reflects our world, and our world reflects how we speak. May our words not cause harm or destruction, exclusivity or discrimination. May truth blossom into God's spirit of knowledge and Christ's spirit of hope, peace, joy, and love. May we, too, blossom into fuller, more curious, and more loving versions of ourselves, as guided by the Holy Spirit that seeks infinite connection and compassion between all people and all living things. May the story of Rev. Dr. Blaedel and the Scriptures of our church ancestors bring us to reckoning, out of which emerges only the deepest abiding love. Amen.