Jonah, Jonah, Jonah, I used to think he was kind of a comical character until I realized today that I and probably most people resemble Jonah. Jonah, the unwilling prophet, the one who didn’t think that certain people deserved God’s mercy. Yet, God called Jonah and didn’t allow him to sit in his comfort zone. First, Jonah had to spend some time in the belly of a whale and then he had to warn the people of Ninevah that God was going to overthrow them. They seemed to understand the urgency of Jonah’s message and also the evil that had led to such a statement. It almost seems like everyone in this scenario was thrown out of their comfort zone including God! Here is an instance of corporate repentence that I think if we are honest there is a lot to learn from for us today. After all we are a nation that recently had an insurrection followed by what seemed to be an almost miraculous transition of power even though we’ve been doing democratic elections for over 200 years now as a nation.

Very few people want to leave their comfort zones. These are places we feel safe, we understand how things work, we are often surrounded by people who think a lot like we do and do not challenge us too often. The pandemic, not being able to gather together for worship, the light shown on systemic racism and overt racist people, and the insurrection have been eye openers to us all and to the world. These things have all been disrupters of our comfort zones. Wednesday, we saw the first woman, the first black woman and the first woman of Indian heritage become vice president. We saw a peaceful transition of power. Today, my colleague spoke at staff meeting about the pandemic of racism where even at a place like IU where diversity is welcomed, even here there is overt racism every day. It is internal and external. People come in for health care daily calling are black brothers and sister’s derogatory terms that make my hair curl. He spoke of the need for us to speak against every and all instances of racism in any form. Of not allowing people to treat others in our facilities as anything less than human beings with dignity and respect. We need support both in public policies openly stated and by making sure these policies are being enforced. This is something that should happen everywhere. As he said there is no vaccine for the pandemic of racism. We are given an opportunity at this juncture of our history to do something different. To come out of our comfort zones to teach and prophesy against the evil pandemic of racism and all forms of discrimination. The highlight of the inauguration for many of my friends, myself included was a brilliant young poet named Amanda Gorman. She is poet laureate at the age of 22. A graduate of Harvard. She is also a woman who knows what it is like to do something out of her comfort zone. She has an auditory processing disorder which led to a speech impediment which she has worked diligently to overcome. She started writing and performing poetry as a way to move beyond her disability. So much so that today she is an amazing poet and performance artist with no trace of a disability. Not only that but she is also a prophetic voice who has now spoken on a world stage and challenged us all to be the light of change and unity in this world.

* I don’t know how many of you tuned into the bishop’s sermon last Sunday but I found it to be inspirational. In it she speaks of us as Christians and a community listening carefully to the “music” around us. Listening closely to those whose voices have not always or ever been heard. Have you heard Vice President Kamala Harris say “I am speaking”? The bishop spoke of finding ways to incorporate, to blend into one song, one huge composition all the voices of this world. She talked about prophetic voices happening just inside the church but also outside the church in places where we don’t always go to listen. What she said took me out of my comfort zone because I find the church building so comforting and safe, and that’s where we gather together as a community. The bishop said we must not stay in that building but we must bring the church outside into the community listening and bringing together all voices and listening for God’s wisdom in them. Some of you already do that. Some of us yearn to do that. To listen and share our stories with those outside our comfort zone and see if we too can hear God’s mercy as we seek to reconcile with those we label as the other, the irreconcilable. How do we make this happen in this world, in this community? Jesus gives us the perfect example today. He goes for a walk along the sea shore and says: “Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” And immediately they left their nets and followed him. Of course, we are not Jesus…but even for Jesus, not all who were called followed, but some did. We did. It wasn’t a perfect group of disciples, they often didn’t understand what he was teaching. They were however, faithful and loved this God/man they followed. They knew they were on the right path, it’s the only way they could have dropped their nets and followed him wherever Jesus took his message. The disicples too were often outside their comfort zones as they met people from many different places, with many different ideas, with many different ideas about how to follow God. Amanda Gorman talked about being the light in her poem. I want to share with you a poem written in 2017 by Ms. Gorman. A woman who knows what it is to not only leave her comfort zone but to excel and spread her joy, her love and her hope all over the world. An American Lyric:

*An original poem written for the inaugural reading of Poet Laureate*[*Tracy K. Smith*](https://poets.org/poet/tracy-k-smith)*at the Library of Congress.*

There’s a poem in this place—  
 in the footfalls in the halls  
 in the quiet beat of the seats.  
 It is here, at the curtain of day,  
 where America writes a lyric  
 you must whisper to say.

There’s a poem in this place—  
 in the heavy grace,  
 the lined face of this noble building,  
 collections burned and reborn twice.

There’s a poem in Boston’s Copley Square  
 where protest chants  
 tear through the air  
 like sheets of rain,  
 where love of the many  
 swallows hatred of the few.

There’s a poem in Charlottesville  
 where tiki torches string a ring of flame  
 tight round the wrist of night  
 where men so white they gleam blue—  
 seem like statues  
 where men heap that long wax burning  
 ever higher  
 where Heather Heyer  
 blooms forever in a meadow of resistance.

There’s a poem in the great sleeping giant  
 of Lake Michigan, defiantly raising  
 its big blue head to Milwaukee and Chicago—  
 a poem begun long ago, blazed into frozen soil,  
 strutting upward and aglow.

There’s a poem in Florida, in East Texas  
 where streets swell into a nexus  
 of rivers, cows afloat like mottled buoys in the brown,  
 where courage is now so common  
 that 23-year-old Jesus Contreras rescues people from floodwaters.

There’s a poem in Los Angeles  
 yawning wide as the Pacific tide  
 where a single mother swelters  
 in a windowless classroom, teaching  
 black and brown students in Watts  
 to spell out their thoughts  
 so her daughter might write  
 this poem for you.

There's a lyric in California  
 where thousands of students march for blocks,  
 undocumented and unafraid;  
 where my friend Rosa finds the power to blossom  
 in deadlock, her spirit the bedrock of her community.  
 She knows hope is like a stubborn  
 ship gripping a dock,  
 a truth: that you can’t stop a dreamer  
 or knock down a dream.

How could this not be her city  
 su nación  
 our country  
 our America,  
 our American lyric to write—  
 a poem by the people, the poor,  
 the Protestant, the Muslim, the Jew,  
 the native, the immigrant,  
 the black, the brown, the blind, the brave,  
 the undocumented and undeterred,  
 the woman, the man, the nonbinary,  
 the white, the trans,  
 the ally to all of the above  
 and more?

Tyrants fear the poet.  
 Now that we know it  
 we can’t blow it.  
 We owe it  
 to show it  
 not slow it  
 although it  
 hurts to sew it  
 when the world  
 skirts below it.

Hope—  
 we must bestow it  
 like a wick in the poet  
 so it can grow, lit,  
 bringing with it  
 stories to rewrite—  
 the story of a Texas city depleted but not defeated  
 a history written that need not be repeated  
 a nation composed but not yet completed.

There’s a poem in this place—  
 a poem in America  
 a poet in every American  
 who rewrites this nation, who tells  
 a story worthy of being told on this minnow of an earth  
 to breathe hope into a palimpsest of time—  
 a poet in every American  
 who sees that our poem penned  
 doesn’t mean our poem’s end.

There’s a place where this poem dwells—  
 it is here, it is now, in the yellow song of dawn’s bell  
 where we write an American lyric  
 we are just beginning to tell.