

DANCING TO THE MUSIC

Sermon, December 12, 2010

Third Sunday of Advent

Texts: Isaiah 35, Luke 1:46-55; Matthew 11:2-19

There is an old Yiddish saying: "Azde calle ken net tanzen zagt zi der klezmer kennen nit shpielen." Which means: "When the bride can't dance, she says the orchestra can't play." More often than not the complainer reveals more about his/her character than about the alleged reason for complaint. Jesus alludes to this Yiddish wisdom when He says, in apparent exasperation, "To what can I compare this generation? They are like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling out to others: 'We played the pipe for you, and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.' For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon.' The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Here is a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners.'" In short, John the Baptist came playing the mournful tune of repentance and preparation, but you folks didn't respond ... you said something must be wrong with him; maybe he has a demon. Jesus comes playing a joyful tune of redemption and life abundant, and again these folks don't respond accordingly ... they respond by calling him a drunkard and a glutton, hardly a religious man. "When the bride can't dance, she says the orchestra can't play." No matter what was offered, this crowd could find a fault in it, rather than responding by examining themselves appropriately. Jesus concludes, "But wisdom is proved right by her deeds."

In the year 1921, Dr. Evan O'Neill Kane was chief surgeon of the Kane Summit Hospital in New York City. At age sixty, he had been a surgeon 37 years, and in that time, Dr. Kane developed strong feelings concerning the use of general anesthesia in major surgery. Dr. Kane believed most major operations could and should be performed under local anesthesia, for he believed the hazards of general anesthesia (which were considerable at that time) frequently outweighed the risks of even the surgery itself. It became Dr. Kane's medical mission to prove the viability of local anesthesia in most surgical procedures. However, colleagues were skeptical. Also, potential patients were understandably squeamish at the thought of being "awake while it happens." Others feared the possibility of the anesthetic wearing off during surgery. To break down these psychological barriers, Dr. Kane would have to find a volunteer, a candidate for major surgery who would be willing to accept local anesthesia. Well, someone suffering the intense pain of acute appendicitis did come forth to volunteer.

In his distinguished thirty-seven-year medical career Dr. Kane had performed nearly four thousand appendectomies, but this would be the first to remain awake throughout the surgery under local anesthetic. The operation was scheduled for Tuesday morning, February 15. That morning the patient was prepped and wheeled into the O.R. Local anesthetic was administered. Dr. Kane performed as he had thousands of times before, carefully dissecting superficial tissues and clamping blood vessels on the way in, right on through to the completion of the appendix's removal. The operation was successful; through it all the patient experienced only minor discomfort. The patient rested well that night, and the following day his recovery was remarkable; remarkable enough for the patient to go home ... which was just unheard of in that day and age.

Dr. Kane had proved his point. The risks of general anesthesia could be avoided in major operations; the potential of local anesthesia had been fully realized - thanks to the example of an innovative doctor and a brave volunteer. I should mention that Dr. Kane and the patient had a great deal in common ... they were the same man. To prove the viability of local anesthesia, Dr. Kane had operated on himself (*adapted from More of Paul Harvey's The Rest of the Story, Paul Harvey, Jr., Bantam Press, c. 1980, pp. 79-80*). This was a man who had the courage of his convictions! Even when crippled by the acute pain of his own appendicitis, he knew he was right. And he also knew the best way he could convince his colleagues and potential patients was to exercise his convictions by personal example. "But wisdom is proved right by her deeds."

Our Gospel reading is about another man who had the courage of his convictions, another man who, I believe, knew the best way to convince his colleagues of those convictions was to boldly exercise his convictions by personal example. Today is the third Sunday in Advent - the rose candle in the Advent Wreath is lit. The candle of **JOY**, it is the color of the dawning light in the sky just before the Sun appears. In some traditions this candle is also referred to as the "John the Baptist" candle. Now, at first glance John

seems a somewhat odd character to portray Joy. Matthew introduces him in his gospel as this somewhat eccentric man in the wilderness, whose diet consists of locusts and wild honey, wearing clothes designed by Camel Klein, and who preaches a somewhat dire message of judgement, repentance and preparation ... not exactly one's picture of Joy. But this is the same John whose mother was Elizabeth. After her angelic encounter with Gabriel, Mary had rushed off to see Elizabeth, who was in her sixth month of pregnancy. Elizabeth was carrying John the Baptist in her womb; Mary was carrying Jesus. Elizabeth tells Mary the baby danced for joy inside her (*yes, we do have a biblical record of a Baptist dancing!*), and according to Luke, Mary responded with the words of the Magnificat we just read responsively. John as a pre-born infant danced in the darkness of the womb because he recognized his Lord. He knew who Jesus was from the get-go!

And I'm sure that while John was growing up there was much discussion between his parents and Jesus' parents about the events of their conceptions and births. Stories about how John's aging father could not speak from the moment he first received news he would have a son, and he didn't get his voice back until he had named his son by writing on a tablet. Stories about trying to convince skeptical neighbors and relatives about how Mary's baby was conceived. And all of these things and more would have been on young John's mind as he watched events unfold. The gospel of John, chapter one, tells us that John sees Jesus and says to his audience, 'Behold the Lamb of God. There He is!' And John's faith was certainly confirmed when he saw the Spirit of God land on Jesus in the form of a dove at His baptism, and he heard the voice of God audibly speak saying, 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.' I don't think John had any doubts, ever, as to whether or not Jesus was the Messiah.

And now, in today's Gospel, John finds himself in an apparently hopeless situation, he finds himself in the darkness of imprisonment. Like Dr. Kane, John had exercised the courage of his convictions at great personal risk to himself. He had angered King Herod by publicly calling attention to the king's sexcapades with his brother's wife (*who is now Herod's wife*). Now John was in the dark dungeon, and was about to pay for his boldness with his life; he would not leave that prison alive, and I think he knew it. We are told that John sends a couple of his disciples to Jesus to ask this question; "Are You the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?" Jesus sent His response back to John, reiterating things John would certainly have already known. Remember, John had known Jesus from birth, even before birth! He had watched him all his life. Yet, Jesus says, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me." Again, I think it's logical to assume John knew about these miracles, and he also knew that Jesus was referring to the prophecy of Isaiah 35:5, "Then will the eyes of the blind be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, And the mute tongue shout for joy." "

Was John having doubts? That seems to be the understanding of most commentators and scholars. Whether you're a prisoner in a literal jail or whether you're a prisoner of circumstances beyond your control, the darkness of imprisonment can indeed call into question the most fundamental things you believe. Faith is tested in darkness. You know, I believe it is significant Jesus was born at night, because genuine faith is often born (or, re-born) when life gets dark. But, was John despairing in the darkness of that dungeon? Was his faith wavering? Like that Yiddish bride who couldn't dance, was he complaining that Jesus wasn't playing the Messianic tune properly. Can it be that this one who danced for joy in the darkness of the womb cannot dance in the darkness of the dungeon? *I don't think so.* I don't think John needed any further convincing about the identity of Jesus. So, why did he send his disciples to Jesus with this question?

I could be wrong, but based on what we know about John, I think he did this for the benefit of his disciples rather than for his benefit. *"But wisdom is proved right by her deeds."* More than likely, John knew what was in store for his immediate future. Things were dark now, and he knew they were going to get a whole lot darker in the immediate future. I think he knew that it was his disciples who were going to need a whole lot of encouragement. *They* needed to know, *they* needed to have the confidence and hope that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. Perhaps John reasoned that they needed to encounter this Messiah themselves, personally; they needed to hear from His own lips words of hope. And they needed to believe in and cling to that hope, even when ... *especially* when ... things got dark.

So John says to his disciples, and he says to us from the darkness of that dungeon, "Go, talk to Jesus yourselves, encounter Him for yourself. Don't just take my word for it, find out for yourselves that He is indeed the Messiah. Put your trust in Him, and cling to the Hope He brings, even when things get dark."