

Join in the Dance
Luke 1: 26-56
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Another Christmas celebration is over...
For the children, Santa has arrived...
And for all of us, so has the Christ Child....

The presents are unwrapped...the turkey has been enjoyed... the extended family has gone home... .. Another Christmas celebration is over... Some of us may have indulged a little too much over the holidays... our waistlines are extended, and our credit cards are hot!

So this period of time between Christmas and New Years' is often a time of reflection... for individuals to take stock...to think about how we would like things to be different for us in the New Year.

Some of us at this very moment, may be in the process of making a mental checklist for self-improvement in the New Year... Speaking of New Year's resolutions...have you ever noticed how many of our resolutions are very individualistic in nature...we resolve..." I will lose weight, I will quit smoking, I will get fit, I will spend less, and I will save more "and so on It is part of the human condition for us to be wrapped up in ourselves...to focus on our accomplishments, and our goals.

So what I am suggesting we do today... rather than thinking about ourselves as individuals, let's focus on ourselves as a group...the Body of Christ, the universal Church...here, we are the Christian community of St. Andrew's Church, Whitby... and all around the world today, the Body of Christ is meeting to worship God in gatherings such as this one.

And so today we ask ourselves...what does the coming of Jesus ...the incarnation of the God who created this vast universe...God's incarnation as a baby...mean to us as a worldwide Church? (PAUSE)

Jesus' birthday commemorates the most momentous event in human history—the entry of God INTO the world God made, Imagine that...God...in human flesh... come as a baby. What does this news mean to us?

For many people, that's where we leave Jesus...in a manger, in a cattle stall, wrapped in swaddling clothes...easy to find, easy to admire but not much more than an historical artefact in our Christmas tradition.

But what if we were to really catch the vision of why Jesus came into the world as a baby? In John's gospel, we read "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that

whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not come into the world to condemn the world but that the world through Jesus might be saved. “

The mission of God is the salvation of the whole world- the whole created order including the natural created order, and he invites us as followers and disciples of Jesus to be His hands and His feet in accomplishing this mission. This idea is summarized in the song, written in 1963, called “Lord of the Dance”

I danced in the morning when the world was young
I danced in the moon and the stars and the sun
I came down from heaven and I danced on the earth
At Bethlehem I had my birth

Dance, dance, wherever you may be
I am the lord of the dance, said he
And I lead you all, wherever you may be
And I lead you all in the dance, said he

There was also another child whose birth story intertwined with the dance steps of Jesus. Think of Elizabeth and Zechariah... In the Bible, Elizabeth was described in two ways- old and barren and Zechariah was described as an old, faithful priest. God spoke to Zechariah through the angel Gabriel and prophesied that he and Elizabeth would be come parents to John the Baptist, the one who would show others the way to the Christ. Didn't God realize that Zechariah and his wife were old? How could a baby become a part of the steps that they were dancing. The angel Gabriel told Zechariah that he would be "dumb, and not able to speak" until the words were fulfilled. Despite their doubt and lack of faith, God invited Zechariah and Elizabeth to join in this new dance...a dance that revived their hope, gave them new purpose as parents, and gave them a role in the salvation history of the world...By their obedience to God's call, they were given their heart's desire in the gift of a son in their old age.

And finally, think about Mary...the mother of Jesus...God too spoke to her through the angel Gabriel who made an unbelievable announcement...that Mary would conceive and bear the Son of God, although she had known no man. The angel Gabriel also appeared to Joseph, to encourage him to not be afraid to take Mary as his wife, because Mary was indeed to be the mother of Jesus. God invited Mary and Joseph to join in the dance...and join the dance they did...a difficult and costly dance to be sure...a dance that changed the history of the whole world... and a dance that brought them both personally amazing joy as well as incredible heartache and pain.

In fact, in 2014, we continue to see God calling us in our Church as well... And it is on this practical message I would like to focus continuing the metaphor of joining the dance.

Over the past few weeks in St. Andrew's Church, I have been sitting near the front of the church. From this vantage point, I have seen a God-inspired sermon illustration unfold

before my very eyes. This illustration has been given in two parts by some of the youngest members of our congregation...

Let me explain what I witnessed...just a few Sundays ago... As the liturgical dancers took their places around the sanctuary in preparation for their dance presentation, a young girl, Charlotte, moved to the front of the church alongside but slightly behind the adult dancers... It wasn't clear to me whether Charlotte was intended to be included in the dance, or whether she just spontaneously joined in...

This is the beauty of what happened...she carefully chose two child-sized matching flags from the flag stands. She waited with anticipation for the "big people's dance" to start...her eyes were glued to the dance leader and the other dancers...sometimes she stood still just observing... at other times she started to sway and flag to the music. As the dance went on, she became a more keen observer of the older dancers...when they bowed low, so did she, when they flagged in the air, so did she, when they turned around so did she. And finally when the dance was finished and the dancers left by the centre aisle, she joined them at the end as they recessed.

What did Charlotte bring to the dance?

- She brought her child-like wonder
- She brought her love and her enthusiasm
- She brought her willingness to learn and to follow

Did she know the dance? NO

Did she know the music? NO

Did it bother her that she didn't know the dance and she didn't know the music? NOT A BIT

Why did Charlotte feel comfortable joining the dance? Well...this was her church...she felt comfortable here... She had seen the dancers before...she herself had flagged during musical worship before,,, she was encouraged to join in by her parents... she was included by the adult dancers who generously made space for her...and she was adored and loved by those who could see her act of worship.

What Charlotte brought to the dance was a delightful spontaneity, a lack of self-consciousness, and a willingness to join in, to join in in the dance.

And what about you? What about me?

Are we willing to join in the dance?

What is holding you back? What is holding me back?

There are many things that might be holding us back...some of the reasons are common to most of us, and some of the reasons are as individual as each of us are.

Generally speaking, most adults are less comfortable with spontaneity and change than children are. Adults can be more self-conscious and self-aware than children are. And most adults have generally had difficult experiences in life that might have caused them to move to the sidelines, and step away from the dance. You may feel a little bit on the sidelines even today. But bear with me...the second part of Charlotte's story will encourage you to consider getting back into the dance.

Providentially, the sequel to Charlotte's dance a few weeks ago, unfolded again last Sunday...This time another young girl started to flag to the praise choruses, then another child joined her, and then Charlotte joined her...and last but not least Charlotte's sister Sabrina joined in the dance.

When the children were flagging enthusiastically but dangerously close to the lit advent candles, an adult stepped forward to guide them away from the flames...when Sabrina arrived at the front but didn't have any flags for the dance, Charlotte generously gave up one of hers and shared with her sister...the two sisters were flagging side-by-side with one flag each...when Sabrina decided that she wanted her own flags, a Sunday school teacher stepped forward to find flags that were a manageable size for her...from one child, the dance grew and grew and grew...do you catch the vision?...do you see the joy? There was a great deal of synergy in the dance...one dancer feeding off the other...more experienced people helping the younger ones...no one dancing alone...

And I think this is where we find the secret to the dance.

Just like Elizabeth who was an encourager and a safe haven for Mary at a time when she must have felt incredibly frightened and alone, so we need each other in order to dance. We need to dance together in mutual forgiveness, respect, love, and sharing. In the seasons of a church, the steps of the dances may change, the intricacy of the dance may evolve and the call of God may take different directions. So too, as individuals we can we hear different calls of God to the dance in different seasons of our lives.

God is calling us as a Body of Believers to join in the dance...for some of us, God calls to us in a still small voice... for some of us, God has been chasing us, like the hound of heaven...for others of us like Jacob, God is wrestling with us in the night, willing that we will catch God's vision...willing for us to receive God's blessing...willing us to work towards God's vision for the redemption of the whole world...willing us to experience life in all of its abundance...willing that everyone on earth will experience the Peace of God.

Although I am not by any stretch of the imagination a dancer, I know that dances can be very simple and they can be very intricate and complicated and they can move from simple to complicated and back again. When I was studying Physical Education, I was always a little bit self-conscious when we were in the dance studio which was lined with mirrors...being left-handed was my feeble excuse for always going left when the leader was going right...she would call out- other right, other right...I really did feel like I had two left feet...dancing was not my first love, nor my second one either.

So I understand practically as well as in a spiritual way that at times, sitting on the sidelines of the dance is where God might call us to be. In fact there have been times in my life that I have been sitting on the sidelines of the dance. But I would encourage you, if you find yourself there today, to ask God if it is time to get back into the dance...to be ready and willing to take the first step...and for those of us who are dancing...let us be sensitive to those who may be self-conscious, need to be shown which steps to take, or are resigned to the feeling that they have nothing to offer others...and help them to get back in the dance. Welcome each other...encourage each other...and love each other...

- It is in the joining that we learn and grow,
- it is in the joining that we honour the memory of those who have gone on before us,
- it is in the joining that we learn how to forgive and embrace those who may have hurt us in the past,
- and it is in the joining that we embrace God in His Mission for the salvation of the whole world and experience God's life in all its abundance.

Lyndsay Grant has shared this photo of their daughters Charlotte and Sabrina and I would like to leave this visual image with you to remind you of the message of God for us today. I love the point of view of this photo- the photographer is standing behind the girls...the girls are sitting together, side by side, not facing the camera, but facing the dance...facing life's potential...facing God's potential...may this also be our experience as we join in with God and with one another in this church to reach others for Christ in our world. Let us be known as that church with the Joy even when the installation of Joy on our front lawn has been dismantled! Join all God's people in the dance! To the glory of God in the Highest!
AMEN