

FIRST SUNDAY OF 2012

"DO THE DANCE!"

Reading: Psalm 72:1-15, Jeremiah 31:7-14, Ephesians 3:1-12, Matthew 2:1-6
Preached at First Presbyterian Church, Baldwin on January 1 2012

On this first day of a New Year I want to ask you,
"Have you got your dancing shoes on?"
I want to think this morning about a verse that appears in Jeremiah 31:13,
*"Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance,
and the young men and the old shall be merry."*

Consider the changes that have taken place since our great-grandparents days. Industry. Technology. Health Care. Education. Media. Music. Transport... air travel, not a dream, but a common way of getting around... men on the moon... computers.. i-phones...the list just goes on and on.

Consider the changes that have taken place as the centuries have rolled by. The population explosion. The discovery and settlement of a world that didn't turn out to be flat. The founding of nations and peoples. The constant interaction of tribes and ethnic groups and language and power.

Consider the rise and fall of great Empires, the Spanish, the French, the British. Consider the survival of nations of old... the Asian nations, India and China, the Middle Eastern nations whose ancient conflicts remain unresolved. Consider how only a short time ago in earths history the geographical land mass of the Australia's and the America's were not known to have been in existence to most Europeans.

Also consider the role of the Christian Church within the scheme of things. The might of Rome and the power of the Eastern Orthodox tradition shaping the religious landscape. The bloodthirsty crusades by followers of both Mohammed and Christ. The phenomena of the Reformation, the growth of Protestantism and more recently Pentecostalism, TV evangelists and Mega-Churches.

History, the nations, the tribes, the religions, it's like a great dance; the partners weaving in and out, sometimes one taking center stage, sometimes another taking a seat at the sidelines only to reappear once more on the floor. And all the time, the ship of progress, the growth of knowledge, taking us ever forward, to.... well, who knows?

Consider also the terrible mistakes that are made as the ship heads onwards. In the last century - two world wars and countless thousands of other conflicts. In this century, 911, Iraq and Afghanistan. Refugees. Holocaust. Ethnic Cleansing. Chemical Warfare. Atomic Bombs. World Hunger.

The technology and know how and resources available to put an end to poverty, and so much more, which instead have been squandered on weapons of destruction that can destroy us, and every other living thing on the planet, a million times over. Consider how

nations continue to live in fear of each other, building walls to separate themselves, some seeking to be the biggest and the best and the most powerful, others seeking only to survive.

The history of the nation of Old Testament Israel gives us a fascinating picture of what it means to dance in and out of the will of God. Created out of a faith experience, a people called to reveal the One true God to the world, so often they just do not keep step with what God is doing.

The Old Testament does not just span a few centuries, but talks of time in terms of generations. Noah and Moses and Abraham and David and Isaiah and Daniel, were not contemporaries. They are separated by hundreds of years and many generations between them.

I fear that we sometimes forget what an enormous slice of history upon this planet is contained within the books of the Bible. They contain the earliest stories about the dawn of Creation itself and conclude in the relatively recent past, just a couple millennia ago when the early church was founded after the resurrection of Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Think about that the next time you open it's pages. Here is wisdom as old as language. Even before people had figured out what writing was, some of the earliest stories circulated as tribal memories and folklore, told around campfires and family meals, not one thousand, but many thousand years ago. It's the original, the real thing.

And what a story it tells! We look to the turbulent events of our fore-fathers, the last two hundred and fifty years, the last thousand years, but see... the stories in our Bibles - sometimes their frankness and warlike imagery startles us, it's tales of genocide and immorality and violence leave us with as many questions as we find answers.... but has it not always been so?

As century rolls over to century, can we not see how the Spirit of God dances in and out of the history of the whole world, sometimes recognizable, sometimes unseen, sometimes misunderstood, sometimes mistaken?

Look again. The stories of the Bible are not about nameless characters or faceless individuals. We know these people. Abraham and Sarah. Moses being placed in the bulrushes and his struggles to come to terms with who he was and what he was called to do. David the little shepherd boy who became the King. Ruth and Naomi. Amos. Daniel in the lions Den. The list goes on.

And we see God dances, not as a wandering spirit searching for a home, but as the Holy Spirit in the lives of people with names and character faults, and jobs to do and homes to live in, people not wholly removed from this world, but who would be unrecognizable from the average person we walk past in the Mall on a shopping trip.

To such people, people such as you and I, come the promises of God. People with a tendency to walk away from God rather than towards God. It is as though God catches us by the arm, turns us around and says, "Let's Dance!". It is as though, when we are sitting alone, feeling left out, feeling nobody understands what we are going through, God whispers in our ear, "Dance with me".

Again our text (Jeremiah 31:13) "*Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance, and the young men and the old shall be merry. I will turn their mourning into joy, I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow*"

"Dance then wherever you may be, I am the Lord of the Dance said He,
And I'll lead you all, wherever you may be, And I'll lead you all in the Dance said He"

The suggested New Testament reading for today gives us the account of the Wise Men following the Star to Bethlehem. Wise people keep seeking. Wise people do not disregard the religious insights of generations of spiritual folk. Wise people unravel their Bibles for they recognize a Sacred Story that weaves throughout time. Wise people are prepared to travel within the mystery. They treasure the questions as much as the answers.

And for those who are not so sure, the Savior goes seeking them. Seeking people to bring their gifts and talents into God's service. Seeking people who are prepared to dance to the beat of a different drum than that which their current generation or surrounding culture suggests. Seeking people who are prepared to travel through life with an angels song in their hearts that rings out, "Glory to God in the highest and on the earth be Peace!"

So my message to us all as we face a new year is simple; "**Do the Dance**". With God as your partner allow God to show you the steps, let the rhythm of the Holy Spirit be the rhythm that runs through your life, allow the harmony of each others fellowship and the melody of the living words of Jesus Christ that come to you through the Scriptures be the music that fills your days.

Do the Dance!

Rev. Adrian J. Pratt