

DANCING IN THE DARK

Sermon, December 11, 2016

Third Sunday of Advent

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

Years ago I told this congregation the story of Dr. Evan O'Neill Kane. In 1921 he was the sixty year old chief surgeon (*and co-founder, along with other members of his prominent family*) of the Kane Summit Hospital in northwestern Pennsylvania, my home state. Dr. Kane had been a surgeon thirty-seven years, and in that time, he developed strong reservations concerning the use of general anesthesia in major surgery. In that day anesthesiology was not nearly as fine tuned as it is in our day. 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 mission to prove the viability of local anesthesia in most surgical procedures. Colleagues were skeptical, and potential patients were squeamish at the thought of being "*awake while it happens.*" Others feared the possibility of the anesthetic wearing off during surgery, which would make for extreme discomfort and anxiety. To counter these fears and preconceptions, Dr. Kane would have to find a willing volunteer, a candidate for major surgery who would be willing to accept the risks of having only a local anesthetic applied.

Well, someone suffering 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 time the patient would remain awake throughout the surgery under local anesthetic. The operation was scheduled for Tuesday, February 15, 1921. Tuesday 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; enough for the patient to go home ... which was just unheard of in that day and age.

Dr. Kane had proven his point. The risks of general anesthesia could be avoided in major operations. The potential of local anesthesia had been fully realized, largely thanks to the example of an innovative doctor and a brave volunteer. Some of you may remember this, but I should mention that Dr. Kane and the volunteer patient ... were the same man. To prove the viability of local anesthesia, Dr. Kane had operated on himself. (*Ten years later he would do so again, giving himself a hernia operation at age 70!*). 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.¹

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 (and disciples) 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. As mentioned in the Time With the Children earlier, this is the candle of **JOY**; it is the color of the dawning light in the sky dispelling darkness 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 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. According to Luke, Elizabeth tells Mary the baby leapt for joy inside her (*actually, the original Greek can be rendered the baby DANCED for joy ... yes, we have a biblical record of a Baptist dancing!*), and 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 immediately recognized his Lord. He knew who Jesus was from the get-go, even before he and Jesus were born!

And I'm sure that while John was growing up there was much discussion between his parents and Jesus' earthly parents about the events of their conceptions and births. Families grow up together, and as they do they constantly share stories and laughs and memories as life goes on. I'm sure these families shared stories about

¹ Adapted from *More of Paul Harvey's The Rest of the Story*, Paul Harvey, Jr., Bantam Press, c. 1980, pp. 79-80. See also https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Evan_O'Neill_Kane

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. I'm sure there were stories shared 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 John's mind, part of his childhood and young adult memories as he grew and as he watched events unfold. The gospel of John, chapter one, tells us that John sees Jesus and says to all within earshot, "*Behold the Lamb of God. There He is!*" John knew Who Jesus was; he did throughout his lifetime! And John was right there at Jesus' baptism, and saw the Spirit of God land on Jesus in the form of a dove ... and John certainly heard the audible voice of God saying directly from heaven, "*This is My beloved Son, in Whom I am well pleased.*" I don't think John had any doubts, ever, as to the true Messianic identity of his kinsman.

And now, in today's Gospel, John finds himself in the darkness of prison. 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*), and Herod had John arrested to shut him up, literally and figuratively. Now John was in the dark dungeon, 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 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?*" Remember, John had known Jesus from birth, even before birth! He had watched him all his life. Jesus sent His response back to John, reiterating things John would certainly have already known. 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.*" I think it's logical to assume John already knew about all these things, and it's also logical to assume he knew Jesus was alluding specifically to words of prophecy about the hoped-for Messiah, words found in Isaiah 35, which we read at the opening of worship, "*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.*"

Most commentators I've read and most sermons I've heard seem to think John was starting to have his doubts in this prison ... but I don't think so. Sure, when 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 certainly tested when it gets dark. But, was John despairing in the darkness of that dungeon? Was his faith wavering? Was that why he asked, "*Are you the One, or should we expect someone else?*" Can it be that this one who danced in the darkness of the womb, in prenatal certainty that Jesus was the One, can't dance in the darkness of the dungeon? Again, 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. John knew what was in store. 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 once he was gone. *They* needed to know, *they* needed to have the confidence and hope and assurance of faith in Jesus the Messiah, and John was concerned that *they* would have the measure of faith and hope of certainty that can only come from encountering Jesus personally. I remember visiting some people in hospitals, people in terminal condition, who seemed more concerned about the welfare of their families and even of their pastor than they were about their own welfare. These were people who were calmly and serenely confident in their faith even in their dark situations; these were people who knew where they were going, and they wanted to be sure *those they loved* had the same comfort and faithful confidence when they were gone. Bonnie Readett is here this morning; her father, the Rev. Bill Silbert, was like that ... I remember visiting him years ago at Miriam Hospital not long before he passed, and it was such a joyful visit! I came away wondering who visited who ... he was calmly and joyfully confident of his faith, of his ultimate destination, and his overriding concern was for the care and faithful well-being of his wife and daughters and sons and family and friends after he was gone. I think John was like that in prison; he wanted his disciples and friends to have the sure and serene comfort of hope and faith after he was gone. Perhaps John reasoned they needed to *personally* encounter this Messiah and hear from His own lips words of hope. And they needed to believe in and cling to that hope and faith, even when ... *especially* when ... things would get 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. Hear Him, believe Him, believe IN Him, put your trust in Him ... and keep dancing to His tune ... even when things get dark.*"