

# DANCING IN THE DARK

## Sermon, December 15, 2019

### Third Sunday of Advent

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

As most of you know, I'm a product of my generation, for better or worse, especially when it comes to my memories of popular music of the sixties, seventies and early eighties ... and I realize that some sermon illustrations I use mean little or nothing to those much older or much younger than I. With that said, let me see how many of you recognize the sermon title? (*about twenty or so raised their hands*). Yes, it was an early eighties hit by rocker Bruce Springsteen. It was the last song written for the Born In The U.S.A." album; he wrote it after his manager demanded one additional hit single to complete the album. After a brief verbal altercation with his manager, Springsteen went off in a snit and complied and wrote it that same (sleepless) night. The lyrics are rather bleak and even a bit dark: *"I get up in the evening, And I ain't got nothing to say. I come home in the morning; I go to bed feeling the same way ... I ain't nothing but tired! Man, I'm just tired and bored with myself. Hey there baby, I could use just a little help. I check my look in the mirror, I wanna change my clothes, my hair, my face! Man, I ain't getting nowhere, I'm just living in a dump like this ... there's something happening somewhere; baby, I just know that there is. You can't start a fire; You can't start a fire without a spark. This gun's for hire, Even if we're just dancing in the dark."*<sup>1</sup> As if he is saying, *"My life is a boring, despairing, nowhere, dark mess, but hey, I'm gonna dance in the existential darkness of it all anyway and put a rocking tune on it."* And he had his mega-hit single to complete the album!

Well, in today's Gospel reading, John the Baptist is also in a dark and despairing situation, but I'm convinced he holds the hope of a Light that will dispel the darkness, a joyful hope that helps keep him dancing in the present darkness of his dungeon cell ... but I'm getting ahead of myself a bit. Today is the third Sunday in Advent, and the rose candle in the Advent wreath is now lit. As mentioned earlier during the Time With the Children, 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 the Baptist 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 wild honey and locusts (*which, by the way, doesn't mean he ate bugs ... see insert*), 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 remember, this is the same John whose mother was Elizabeth. You know the story: after Mary's angelic encounter with Gabriel telling her she was about to have a child conceived by God, Mary had rushed off to see Elizabeth, who was in the sixth month of a rather miraculous pregnancy of her own. Elizabeth was carrying John the Baptist in her womb; Mary was carrying Jesus. According to Luke, Elizabeth tells Mary the baby inside her womb leapt for joy inside her when she heard the voice of Mary calling out (*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 in the womb of His mother, Mary. Apparently, he instinctively 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. Extended families usually grow up together, and as they do they constantly share stories and laughs and memories as life goes on. (*I just enjoyed this again this past Friday, I had a quick trip to Pennsylvania to join my siblings and spouses as we took our mother out to dinner to celebrate her birthday ... I always enjoy such get-togethers; I am one of six children and as of next March all six of us will be in our sixties ... so we have six decades of stories we tell and retell and tell again whenever we get together!*) I'm sure these families shared stories about their unique angelic encounters, about John's aging father who could not speak from the moment he first received news he would have a son, and how he didn't get his voice back until he had named his son "John" by writing on a tablet, stories about trying to convince skeptical neighbors and relatives about how Mary's baby was conceived, and so on. And all of this and more would have been part of John's childhood and young adult memories as he grew and as events unfolded. The gospel of John (*written by another John, BTW*), Chapter One, tells us that an adult John the Baptist sees Jesus and says to all within earshot, *"Behold the Lamb of God. There He is! That's Him!"* John knew Who Jesus was; he always did! He knew him throughout his lifetime, even in the womb! And the adult John was right there at Jesus' baptism, and saw the Spirit of God land on Jesus in the form of a dove ... and 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 Jesus.

<sup>1</sup> See <https://www.songfacts.com/facts/bruce-springsteen/dancing-in-the-dark>

And now, in today's Gospel, John finds himself in the darkness of prison. John had exercised the courage of his convictions at great personal risk to himself and had spoken up about what is right and good. He had angered King Herod (*who professed the Judaic religion and heritage*) by publicly calling attention to Herod's "sexcapades" with his brother Phillip's wife (*she subsequently divorced Herod's brother Phillip and was now Herod's wife*). 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 in today's reading 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?"* Remember, John had known Jesus from birth, even before birth! He had watched him all his life. Why would he ask such a question? The disciples went to Jesus, and 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 that this questioning showed John was starting to have his doubts in this prison ... but I don't think so. 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. 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*, not for his own benefit. I think John knew what was in store, that he would not leave that prison alive. 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 that will give them the light of hope in the face of darkness, and John was concerned *they* would have the measure of faith and hope of certainty that can only come from encountering Jesus personally. Over the years I've visited some people with strong and abiding faith in hospitals and homes, people in terminal condition, who seemed more concerned about the welfare of their families and loved ones than they were about their own welfare. These were people who were calmly and serenely confident in their faith even in their dark situations; 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. I've mentioned this before when we've looked at this passage, but Bonnie Readett's 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, even cheerful; he knew 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. *"Don't take my word for it, don't take your pastor's word for it, don't take your spouse's or your parent's or your child's word for it .... You go and encounter Jesus yourself! Go to him yourself and ask these questions! Hear from His own lips Who He is!"* I think John reasoned they needed to encounter Jesus themselves in order to believe in Him and cling to that joyful hope and faith He provides 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."* Because that's where you find JOY.