

## **“A Time to Dance”**

First Baptist Church, Washington, December 24, 2000

2 Sam. 6:12-16; Ecc. 3:1-4; Luke 2:1-20

Christy and I were on the way home from a Lutheran wedding reception several years ago when she said, “Baptists just don’t know how to celebrate, do they?” It was a statement made in the context of the celebration we had just left behind, where young men were tossing back pint after pint of frothy German beer, where old women and little children were whisking up and down the dance floor, doing traditional German dances while the band, in *lederhosen*, played accordions and hopped from one foot to another up on the stage. It was a terrific party, and, yes, it did make most Baptist celebrations seem rather pale and lifeless by comparison.

But, then, Baptists are somewhat handicapped in the celebration department. Having been warned for generations of the evils of drinking and dancing we party in the only way left to us—we eat—and even that isn’t as much fun as it used to be. We are so health-conscious these days, so weight-conscious, that we sit around the Christmas dinner table moaning about our fat-free diets and poking at the thin slice of ham on our plates with a silver fork. What kind of celebration is that? You have to admit that a few pints of German beer would liven up that kind of party in a hurry. Before you know it there would be joke-telling and back-slapping and maybe even a food fight going on. Someone would eventually turn up the music, push back the furniture, roll up the carpet, and soon everyone would be dancing, whirling around the room while little children darted in and out among the grownups’ legs. Inhibition would be lost somewhere along

the way, and soon even the most stern-faced Baptist would find herself laughing, out of breath, and thinking, “Oh, no! It’s happening! I’m turning into a Lutheran!”

I think Christy was right: most of us are not very good at celebrating, and while it is partly because generations of our Baptist forebears have told us not to drink or dance it is also because we still have a little too much Puritan starch in our shorts. Living, as you know, is a serious, sober business. So keep your chin up, your mouth turned down, your eyes wide open, and for heaven’s sake act respectable. That’s part of it, isn’t it? Aren’t we afraid that if we tried to celebrate we would look foolish doing it? That people would stop and stare, point and laugh? We are so inhibited, some of us, by what other people might think that we are almost afraid to have fun anymore, and I don’t think God would have it that way.

I don’t think that this God we call Father wants a family full of children who have forgotten how to play. Can you imagine being the father of the serious, anxious, stern-faced people you find in some Baptist churches (not this one, of course?). Don’t you think God would say, “Children! I know there are some bad things in your lives, but aren’t there some good ones, too? I know it’s not always easy, but is it always hard? Take those frowns off your faces, wipe those wrinkles off your brows. For my sake, children, rejoice! It’s Christmas!” Without forgetting the hard facts of life for a minute the writer of Ecclesiastes says virtually the same thing: “There is a time to mourn,” but there is also “a time to dance,” and Baptist or not when those dancing times come we need to celebrate.

At the birth of a baby, at a wedding reception, when your daughter finally graduates, when your son gets a promotion—all of these are times to take off the frowns,

loosen the ties, kick off the shoes and celebrate. It doesn't even take a big event. There are, in all of our lives, hundreds, thousands, of good reasons to celebrate: a breath of fresh air, rain on a tin roof, the kiss of a child, a note from a friend, the smell of fresh-baked bread, a star-filled sky, a sight for sore eyes, a long, hot bath, flannel sheets on a cold night, a mug of hot tea, the sound of music, a hug when you least expect it, a long-distance phone call, a good report from the doctor, a package with your name on it. All of these, all of these, are reasons enough to rejoice. And when we do I think it gives God pleasure—to see his children smile.

David, you know, was said to be a man “after God’s own heart,” and part of the reason, certainly, was that David knew how to celebrate. When he brought the Ark of the Lord into Jerusalem David danced before it with all his might—twisting, leaping, turning—even though his wife, Michal, later told him he looked like a fool as he was doing it. Maybe he did, having stripped down to only his linen ephod (*ephod?*), but David was intoxicated by the presence of God, staggering from his symbolic nearness in that gilded box, free not only from most of his clothes but from all of his inhibitions. David danced, and like a guest at a good Lutheran wedding reception he celebrated till he fell back breathless, exhausted, and glad he had come. It was this man, the Bible says, and not his socially correct wife, who warmed the heart of God.

“There is a time to mourn,” says the writer of Ecclesiastes, but there is also “a time to dance.” And if there is such a time don’t you think that this time, Christmas time, is it? I can imagine God working on the Incarnation like a father bolting a bicycle together on Christmas Eve, anticipating the look of delight in his child’s eyes. He would want to keep it a secret, of course. He wouldn’t want to give away the surprise too soon.

So he might choose a virgin from a little town in Galilee to bear this gift. Who would ever guess? And he might choose a stable in Bethlehem as the place to deliver this gift. Who would ever imagine? But then, when the gift arrived, he might be so excited about it that he would want the whole world to know, and the last thing he would want the world to do is recite a litany of celebration in a dull monotone. No! He would want the world to clap its hands, to burst into song, to do a few, quick dance steps. And so instead of announcing the news of Christ's birth to the pastor of the First Baptist Church he sends his angels to some shepherds, abiding in the fields by night.

He did it for two reasons, I think: one, because he knew the shepherds would be awake, and two, because he knew the shepherds would know how to party, that the one thing they would be wondrously free from was inhibition. So when the angel tells them something big is happening in Bethlehem they don't say, "Well, we probably ought to stay here and keep an eye on the sheep." They say, "Let's go!" "And they made haste," Luke says, they ran, they raced, they tripped over rocks and roots and stumbled through the door of the stable breathless, laughing, and suddenly struck with wonder. But they didn't stay that way long. When they left that place they apparently banged on windows and doors and woke up their neighbors to tell them good news of great joy: "God is with us! God is here! Let's have a party!"

I know. I know. It's not like that all the time. Life is not one endless celebration. There were things that came along in David's life that caused him to dress in sackcloth, put ashes on his head, and weep. There were times when the shepherds, certainly, couldn't think of one good reason to have a party. Some of you in this room are dealing with sorrows and struggles bigger than we will ever know. And yet, somehow, this one

event transforms all those others. Just when you think things will never be any better a miracle comes along. The night sky is torn open like a piece of black cloth, and angels come pouring through the gap—thousands of them—filling the void with music and with the blinding light of God’s glory. It is a celestial surprise party thrown for the world, and everyone is invited, and all because a baby has been born, a baby who holds in his tiny hands the power to turn mourning into dancing, sorrow into joy.

If ever there was a time to dance, Christmas is it. If we can’t celebrate now, we just can’t celebrate. After the weeks of waiting we call Advent it is finally time—to pull out the stops, shed our inhibitions, turn up the music, push back the furniture, roll up the carpet, and let ourselves go. We don’t need German beer to do it. We only need to drink deeply of that strong, heady, mind-boggling news—God is with us! *God is here!*

And Baptist or not . . . it’s time to dance.

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