

December 27, 2009
Text: Luke 2:41-52
Creekside COB

Ballerina Theology

I never learned to dance. I was taught to sing and I love music, but in my family and church, dancing to the rhythm of music was frowned upon. Consequently, even as an adult the moves do not come easily. I have tried dancing several times. Cary and I were even persuaded by friends to attend the pre-Lenten Ball at Notre Dame many years ago. The four of us practiced a few steps for that occasion. Afterward, Cary snuffed my hope of being a dancer. He said, when it came to dancing, I was a lost cause. Any moves I make now are done in private—like creating liturgical motions to scripture verses or songs. But on my bucket list of “things to do before I die” is learning to dance just well enough to get me off the list of “lost causes.”

As I read today’s scripture, what came to me was the beauty of people in the Christmas story moving in sync with God’s purposes, something I think of as “dancing with God.” Luke 1 and 2 forms a parenthesis around Jesus’ infancy and childhood. The beginning parenthesis is Mary’s visit from the angel telling Mary she would birth the Savior of the World. The closing parenthesis folds around the end of Jesus’ recorded boyhood, when his fascination with Holy Scriptures got him in trouble with his parents. Jesus was only 12 years old then, and by Jewish law, he would not become a man until he turned age 13.

The stories of Mary’s visit by the angel and Jesus at the temple are told only in Luke’s Gospel. Matthew begins with genealogy. Mark jumps right in to John the Baptist’s ministry. John expounds on “the Word made flesh.” But Doctor Luke tells most of the Christmas story, except for the coming of the magi, which appears in Matthew.

Mary’s “dance with God” begins with words, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” After a visit to her cousin Elizabeth, Mary’s responding

Magnificat is a beautiful acceptance speech of the angel's news. Matthew, however, tells Joseph's side of the story. He didn't take the news easily—it was unthinkable to a God-fearing Jew like Joseph for his fiancée to be pregnant before marriage. When an angel appeared to him in a dream to tell him, "Don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife," he too joined in the dance.

At the other end of the parenthesis is Jesus' experience in the temple during Passover. His family's yearly pilgrimage to Jerusalem was a community thing. There was a buzz of excitement and anticipation among the travelers. Jesus had freedom to move among the caravan of visitors to Jerusalem. But when everyone headed out for home, Jesus wasn't with the group. It was bedtime before Mary and Joseph knew Jesus was missing. If you ever lost a child in a throng of people, you know the panic Jesus' parents felt. Even more frightening, the child who was missing was the Son of God, the son God made them responsible for! By the time they found Jesus several days later, the parental edges were ruffled and sharp—"Why did you treat us like this? We've been frantic, searching for you."

Whether his parents realized it or not, the child Jesus was on a journey from manger to mission. Jesus was gifted but not all knowing. The desire to listen and ask questions of the temple priests had his utmost attention, and his gut told him this was the right place to be. Likely Mary taught him what she knew—perhaps even shared the incredible story of his birth. He likely spent time at the Nazareth synagogue. But his understanding was well beyond his years, and made the temple elders marvel.

I discovered several interesting tidbits in these two chapters. In Luke 2, there are two statements about Jesus' maturation. After Jesus' baby dedication, Luke says, "The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom, and the favor of God was upon [him]." After Jesus' experience in the temple, Luke says something similar: "Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor." Wisdom and favor characterize Jesus' growing up.

The other tidbit is the phrase "favor with God." Luke uses the term 8 times in the first two chapters. How do you get in favor

with God? By understanding that God has the right to lead. Acceptance of God's incredulous plan shows profound trust and faith in God. God created the world with a purpose in mind. Mary, Joseph, and Jesus respected that purpose. For that reason, they found favor with God.

An internet author writes this story. "When I meditated on the word GUIDANCE, I kept seeing "dance" at the end of the word. I remember reading that doing God's will is a lot like dancing. When two people try to lead, nothing feels right. The movement doesn't flow with the music, and everything is quite uncomfortable and jerky.

When one person realizes that, and lets the other lead, both bodies begin to flow with the music. One gives gentle cues, perhaps with a nudge to the back or by pressing lightly in one direction or another.

It's as if two become one body, moving beautifully. The dance takes surrender, willingness and attentiveness from one person and gentle guidance and skill from the other.

My eyes drew back to the word GUIDANCE. G-U-I-D-A-N-C-E. When I saw "G" I thought of God, followed by "u" and "i". God, you and I dance.

Just as the ballerina mirrors the steps of the lead dancer, so we are created in God's image. Already in the Garden of Eden, that dance got messed up. Adam and Eve gave up the beauty of "being in the image of God" in order to "be like God" (Vernard Eller, *War and Peace*). In contrast, ballerina theology is knowing that God must lead the dance. God is the choreographer, the partner who supports and guides our dance of life, and God doesn't mind taking the supporting role as long as we are aware and attentive that God must lead. As the old Shaker tune, "I am the Lord of dance," said He."

Three Stories:

#1 Kevin was taken to the ballet by his grandmother. He had never been to a ballet before and was interested in the way the

ballerinas stretched their hand high into the air and danced on their toes. He wondered why they did that. So he leaned over to his grandmother and whispered, “Why don’t they just get taller people?”

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#2 A rational, intelligent sort of fellow goes to the bookstore and buys a how-to book on dancing. He takes it home and begins studying. He does everything it says with meticulous care. When the instructions say sway, he sways. When the instructions say lean, he leans. When they say spin, he spins. He even cuts out paper footprints and arranges them on the family room floor so he will know exactly where to step.

Finally, he thinks he has it down pat. He calls his wife in and says, “Honey, watch this!” With book in hand and reading aloud so she’ll know he’s done his homework, he follows the instructions, step by step. He steps with his right foot, he turns slowly to the left. He keeps it up, reading and then moving, reading and dancing, through the whole thing.

Then he collapses exhausted on the sofa and says to his wife. “What do you think? I executed it perfectly! To which she replies. “You executed it, all right, You killed it!”

The befuddled husband says, “I followed the rules, I laid out the pattern, I did everything the book said . . . “

“But,” she sighs, “you forgot the most important part. Where was the music?” With that she puts on a CD. She holds out her hand, and he takes it. The music starts, and the next thing the fellow knows he’s dancing—without the book.

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#3 There’s a Hasidic tale about a famous rabbi who accepted an invitation from a small village to come visit and answer questions about the Torah. The long-awaited day finally came. The excited villagers ushered the wise man into a large room, where they had all gathered.

Rather than inviting the people to ask questions, the rabbi walked slowly and deliberately around the room, silently looking each villager in the eye as he softly hummed a religious tune. So engaging was the rabbi's gentle manner that, before they knew it, the people found themselves humming his tune. Slowly, the rabbi started to dance. Soon the people found themselves dancing with him. The movements grew wilder and more frenzied, and the people of the village soon lost themselves in the dance. Together, they moved as one.

When the dancing finally ended, the rabbi took one more walk around the room, looking deeply into the eyes of each person in turn. "I trust I have answered all your questions," he said.

What do we learn from these stories?

- 1. From the boy at the ballet we learn: We don't need to be taller or wiser or more important—the invitation to dance is for all of us. Reach up, reach out and follow.**
- 2. From the man who learned to dance but forgot the music we learn: The music of the Holy Spirit is what gives life to our dance.**
- 3. From the rabbi who led the dance rather than answering questions we learn: Knowing everything is not a prerequisite to joining in the dance. Hum the tune and follow the Leader.**

Myriads of Bible people demonstrate the art of following God—Abraham, Noah, Moses, Joshua, Samuel, David, the prophets, and even Jesus' disciples. What if they were invited to join Christianity and made excuses instead?

Andrew: I don't think my family would like me to get involved. Besides, my business is booming.

Peter: I don't know. At times the leader of Christianity makes me feel uncomfortable.

Matthew: I can't jeopardize my important position as a tax collector.

Mark: I am too young to make such an important decision.

Luke: I have too many sick people to look after. Besides, I'm a scientist, not a religious person.

Thomas: Christianity seems so unconventional. What thinking man would believe it? (Barbara Jorgensen, *You're Out of Date, God* (Zondervan, 1971), 65)

Too busy. Too risky. Too important. Too young. Too old. Too uncomfortable. Too unscientific. Too uneducated. Mary could have said, "No thank you. What will people say?" Joseph could have divorced Mary. The boy Jesus could have returned to Nazareth, too timid to ask questions of the temple elders. Instead, each of them recognized God's authority and moved in sync with God's purposes.

I think it was Jill Noffsinger Brenneman who once illustrated "giving our all to God." It went something like this. Jill stood behind the communion table and looked at the offering plate in front of her. After some consideration, she put in some coins. After more pondering, she put in her Teddy Bear. More pondering. More pause. Finally, she climbed up on the table and put herself in the offering plate. She gave her all. It's what God wants.

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.

We are called to Love the Lord your God with heart, soul, strength and mind." Cary will be leading us in #512 in *Hymnal: A Worship Book*. Because these words are so striking and dramatic, I invite you to read them together with me aloud. Please join me in unison.

**If all you want, Lord, is my heart,
my heart is yours alone -
providing I may set apart
my mind to be my own.**

**If all you want, Lord, is my mind,
my mind belongs to you,
but let my heart remain inclined
to do what it would do.**

**If heart and mind would both suffice,
while I kept strength and soul,
at least I would not sacrifice
completely my control.**

**But since, O God, you want them all
to shape with your own hand,
I pray for grace to heed your call
to live your first command.**

The Holy Family gave their all. It's what God wants from us, too.