

Where Shall We Go to Dance (3/3)

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The theme for today is, “Where Shall We Go to Dance?” Taking up this theme today, the 31st of December, when we plan a big New Year's Eve bash, makes the question seem trivial. Where shall we go to dance? Obviously, to the ball-room, or wherever the dance will be held tonight.

But that easy answer disregards the strange nature of the dance we are talking about. The text in Ezekiel begins with the spirit leading him to the most unlikely place for a dance, or even for a vision of hope: “The hand of the Lord was upon me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord, and set me down in the midst of the valley; it was full of bones. And he led me round among them; and behold, there were many upon the valley; and lo, they were very dry.”

Not a very likely place for a dance, unless it be a Halloween dance. Certainly not a place of joy. But a very appropriate place for Ezekiel and his people, for they certainly are not living joyful days. They are, as the Psalmist would say, “By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion.” It was no time for song and dance: “On the willows there we hung up our lyres.” The question, the painful question, was not “where will we hold our next dance?,” but “How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?” As Ezekiel quotes them, they were saying: “Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are clean cut off.”

And yet, it is to the valley of dry bones, to a place that epitomizes his people's despair and hopelessness, that the Spirit of the Lord takes Ezekiel, in order to give him a vision and a word of hope and of joy. The Spirit did not take him to the home of a Jewish exile who had done well, so that he could see that there was hope. The Spirit did not take him to the homes that the exiles were beginning to build for themselves, so that he could see that not all was bleak. The Spirit took him to the bleakest and most hopeless of places, to the valley of dry bones. The Spirit did not tell him that in the midst of the night there were a thousand points of light. That may have been true, and it might have been important. But what a people in exile needed was not a bland message: "things are not as bad as they seem"; "things are getting better." What they needed was a more radical message: that even in the midst of the valley of dry bones there was still hope; there was more than hope: there was cause for celebration; for "you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken, and I have done it, says the Lord."

Furthermore, the prophet can only speak truthfully because he is taken to the valley of dry bones and is in the midst of it. In other words, he can only speak truthfully because he is one of the exiles, because he too is "by the waters of Babylon"; because, humanly speaking, he has no more reason to hope than do the others. Because their pain is his pain, he can call his people to share in his hope.

In this kind of situation, to speak truthfully is also to speak credibly. Let me put it another way.

During the last two centuries there has been much discussion among theologians and

philosophers about how to make the Gospel believable in the modern world. When people no longer believe that heaven is up, and hell is down, how do we interpret what the Bible says about heaven and hell? In our modern, scientific age, how do we interpret what the Bible says about miracles? Those are important questions, and if we find answers to them we will certainly make the Christian message more believable. But I suspect that the real problem for the Christian message today is not so much one of making it believable as one of making it credible. If people refuse to believe today, it is not so much because the message does not agree with the modern world view; it is much more because the witness of the church and the witness of Christians does not make the message credible. We say to people that there is true hope in Christ, and then we live as those whose hope lies elsewhere. We tell people in despair that there is hope in Christ, but we refuse to enter their despair. We tell the poor and the homeless and the sick and the lonely that Jesus loves them, but we refuse to show our love to them.

This has been an important issue and even a problem throughout the life of the church. Indeed, we read in 1 John: "If any one has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against his brother in need, how does God's love abide in him?" (1 Jn. 3:17). And in James (2:15-16): "If a brother or sister is ill-clad or in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled,' without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit?" What both of these texts are saying is that truth, God's truth, is much more than a theological doctrine or a philosophical assertion. In God, truth and love are one, and therefore one cannot speak the truth about God without doing the truth of God; that is, without loving.

Thus, perhaps one reason why the church has so much difficulty being heard in today's world is that, although what we are saying may be objectively true, it lacks the truth to which James and John are referring.

Take one concrete example. At the very heart of the Christian message is the promise of the Kingdom of God. Granted, there are people who have difficulty believing that God will really create a new order of peace and justice. But the main difficulty is not purely intellectual. The main difficulty lies in that so many of us who speak about the Kingdom do not act as if we really believe in it.

Suppose I told you that I love Japan; that I believe that the best place to live in the whole world is Japan; that I love Japanese food, and cannot wait till I retire, when I am going to move to Japan, and spend the rest of my days in Japan. And then you ask me, "what are you doing in the meantime?" And I say "Oh, while I wait to be able to move to Japan I am studying Italian." It is ridiculous. If I really have staked my future on Japan I'll be studying Japanese. Otherwise you will not believe me. Nor will you believe that Japan is as marvelous as I say.

And yet, we Christians do a lot of talking about the Kingdom, but we practice little Kingdomesen. We say that they will turn their swords into plowshares, and yet we do nothing while in our very society there are fewer and fewer plowshares and ever more lethal swords; while our farms are in crisis, and all we can think of is building bigger and better bombers. We

say that they will sit each other under their own vine, and each under their own fig tree, and yet we do nothing as ever bigger corporate mergers make it more and more difficult for that dream to come true. We speak of the Banquet of the Lamb and yet we do very little to change a world in which millions go to bed hungry every night, and where children starve by the tens of thousands. And then we wonder why people do not believe us.

Look again at the question of believability and credibility. Do you think that the message of a crucified Messiah was very believable in the first century? Do you think it was easy to convince people that they should follow one whom the Romans had crucified as a seditious criminal? If the modern world poses difficulties for the preaching of the Gospel, so did the world of the first century. As Paul said, this preaching was both folly and a stumbling block. It was not easy witnessing to Christ in those days. It has never been easy. But what made the witness of the early church so powerful was precisely that what they spoke of was the truth by which they lived. Look again at the early chapters of the book of Acts. Practically every time we are told that the church was successful in its preaching we are also told that this had to do with its inner life of love and of sharing. Using the example of James, when a brother or a sister was illclad or lacked daily food, people didn't say: "Go in peace," and let them go. Or, returning to the imagery of Ezekiel, when someone was in the valley of dry bones, Christians didn't say, "what a pity" and continue their merry way. Christians went to the valleys of dry bones, to where people were, and they went with the strange and overpowering convictions that it was precisely in those valleys of dry bones that they could join God's dance: "Inasmuch as you did it to the least of

these, you did it unto me.”

We say that God loves us, that God loves all of humankind, that there is hope even in the most desolate places. But then we refuse to go to those places. We look at them from outside, and we say, “you people in there should not lose hope, for God has promised a Kingdom of peace and justice, where none will go hungry.”

But that is not what God asks Ezekiel to do. Ezekiel is one of the exiles. He shares in their plight and their pain. And, in order to be able to speak a word of hope that cannot be destroyed by adverse circumstances, he must descend to the valley of the dry bones. It is in the midst of the valley of dry bones, and not from some distant mountaintop, that Ezekiel speaks his word of hope, that as it were he tells his people that there is reason to dance, and calls on them to join in the dance.

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This is not only the way the prophet acts. It is also the way God acts. This is precisely what we have been celebrating this Christmas season. God did not tell us: look, there are all kinds of reasons to hope. God did not simply say: “Come up here to heaven and dance with me.” God said: “I am coming to you where you are. I am going to dance with you in your own valley. And if you think that your bones are dry, and that there is no reason for hope, just wait till you see me hanging from the cross.” God invites us to join the divine dance, not by forgetting about the valley of dry bones but by coming to the valley, and by inviting us to begin dancing here, now, as

those who know that even this valley is in God's hands, and that the driest of bones will rise Again, even as Christ rose from the dead. Christmas is God's invitation to a grand ball.

The problem is that the dance is not always what we would like it to be, nor where we would like it to be. There is a well known story in Luke 15, verses 11 to 32. It usually goes by the name of "The Parable of the Prodigal Son." The story, in brief, is about a man who had two sons. The younger asked for his share of the property, went away and squandered it, and finally decided that he had done wrong and that he better return home, even if it was only to be as one of his father's hired hands. When his father saw him, he ran out to him and embraced and kissed him, and ordered that a great feast be set up to celebrate his return.

So far it's a nice story, and we love it, for it tells us that God, as a loving parent, loves us no matter what, and that when we stray God's love is still such that we are welcome back with feasting and rejoicing.

But the story continues:

Now his elder son was in the field; and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what this meant. And he said to him, "your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him safe and sound." But he was angry and refused to go in.

Look at the text: "He heard music and dancing." His father was holding a dance, and he, the older brother, refused to go in. He had nothing against music and dancing. He just didn't like the

occasion. If his father had held a ball for him, to celebrate all his years of faithful obedience and hard work, he would certainly have participated and invited all his friends. But this is not his party. It is not his dance. His father throws a big party, and he refuses to join in, because he does not like what the old man is doing.

Interestingly enough, this is the part of the story we usually leave out. We like all the part about the prodigal and his return. After all, it really makes us feel good to know that if we are like the prodigal God is like a forgiving parent, and will take us back. But it is not quite as much fun to think that we might be like the older son. You see, when Jesus told this parable he was not speaking to unbelieving, horribly sinful people. He was speaking to the most religious people of his time. The scribes and the Pharisees were precisely that. They were religious people. They were people who spent their time studying Scripture and making sure that they obeyed it in the least detail. If they had been living today, they probably would have been the sort of people who would have decided that the best way to end the year and begin a new one is to go a Christian Conference in Louisville and study the Bible! They were not bad people. They were basically good people. They were church people. They were like us. They knew that in a sense they were like the prodigal son. But when they looked around they had no difficulty finding those that were even more like the prodigal than they were. And the moment they did that, the shoe that fit was no longer that of the prodigal, but that of the older brother.

We too, while we know that we have much to repent of, and much sin to be forgiven, we know

that we are not the worst of sinners. We are church people. After all, that's why we are here.

We want to serve God. We have spent time in church, and studying the Scripture, and trying to improve our lives. We feel that we are entitled to an invitation to the divine dance.

The problem may be that the dance is not what we wish it would be. We would like for God to throw a party for us, and we are surprised that God is throwing parties in unexpected places.

We wish God's parties would only take place at eleven o'clock Sunday mornings, in places we have designated for such parties. We wish God's parties would include only the right kind of people, those whom we like, those who are religious like us, those who are interesting, and lively, and young, and clean, and well fed.

And so, like the prodigal's brother, we stand outside, and we hear distant echoes of the dance, but we refuse to go in.



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In the valley of dry bones, Ezekiel saw that God was setting up a mighty dance—the incredibly joyous dance of bones that had no other reason to dance. Today, all around us, God is calling us to dance. You don't have to travel great distances to join the dance.

As I ride on buses or walk along the streets, I am often puzzled by some young person, walking around with earphones, and making strange motions that seem to make no sense. They make no sense until you realize that they are listening to a different music than the rest of us. To me,

they seem crazy. But in truth they are privileged, for they hear music where I hear no more than the racing of engines and the bleating of horns.

In a way, that is what all these passages are telling us. Just put on your earphones, so that you may hear the music that others miss. And you will hear music coming, probably not from the noisy ballrooms where people will be celebrating the coming of New Year, but from the quiet places where people who really believe that God will bring about a New Age are dancing to a strange song, written in Kingdomese. And their dance has strange motions, as they wash each other's feet, as they wipe each other's tears, as they carry each other's burdens, in the unswerving hope that "them bones is gonna rise again."

"Come, dance, wherever you may be, for I am the Lord of the dance, said he."



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