

Dare to Imagine God's Dance!

A Sermon Preached by Zac Klassen at Bloomingdale Mennonite Church, January 2nd, 2022

During advent we have been invited on a journey of the imagination as we have been dared to think deeply about God's goodness, God's embrace, God's song, God's face, God's robe, and now today, God's dance. The image of God's dance is an appropriate image to end this series with, I think, even though Mennonites may not have always seen "dancing" as an image of God's life or our life in God. I think that the image of God's dance is appropriate to end this series, because in many ways it draws all the previous images together into one dynamic event that we can readily picture for ourselves. Consider the different aspects and movements that might be part of a dance: there are of course people gathered onto the dance floor by the **goodness** of relationship, community, music, laughter, and the movement of bodies! As the bodies begin to move, sometimes they do so apart, creating space for a variety of individual performances, and sometimes those bodies come together in an **embrace**. **Faces** meet with smiles, with intensity and passion, or with awkward laughter. There is always a **song** to guide the dancing, and as people move in a variety of ways, even their **clothing** moves with them. Imagining *God's* dance, you might say, is imagining God as a dynamic and lively event of life in which we live and move [or dance] and have our being (Acts 17:28). Might we say, then, that to receive our life from God is to be invited into a lively dance!

I wonder, though, when you think of God's dance, what kind of 'dance' do you imagine? Is it a square dance, with couples dancing to a very specific sequence? Is it an elegant ballroom dance with classical music playing in the background? Do you imagine a well-choreographed ice-dance skating performance? Or, do you imagine a dimly lit environment, with colorful flashing lights and music so loud and pulsing that you can't help but move to the beat? One of

the interesting features of dances is the lighting. For all the dances but the last one that I mentioned, the dance would take place in full light or, if not in full light, with a spotlight trained upon the dancers. Sometimes, as in the case of ice-dancing, the lighting must be full so that every move or mistake can be scrutinized by judges.

This morning, I want to use our hymn of preparation, “Darkness is not Dark to You God” as our inspiration to imagine God’s dance, not as a dance that takes place in full light, but as a dance that *begins in the dark*. Maybe God’s song is playing a steady beat, calling you up onto the dance floor, and perhaps there are some low lights, but mostly there is a general obscurity to the environment around you. Imagine yourself at this dance. Do you take a step onto the dance floor? How do you feel? Maybe some of you feel anxious; maybe some of you excited or nervous. Is there a path open for you to get onto the dance floor? How do you even navigate your way there in such darkness? Will there be anyone there that you recognize? Will you know what to do when you get there? You probably might feel like saying: Will someone turn on the lights already!? What kind of dance do you have in store for me God?

The image of “God’s dance” as a dance that begins in the dark may seem like an odd choice to reflect on today as we celebrate Epiphany, a day perhaps most often associated with the light of revelation given to us in Jesus, the Christ child. Epiphany technically is observed on January 6th each year given that it is the twelfth day of Christmas. Churches often celebrate epiphany on the Sunday closest to that day but we are celebrating it today! The word Epiphany is Greek in origin, and it means something like: “appearance” or “manifestation” and it was often used in the ancient Greek world in the context of gods who appeared to bring help to mortals. By the fourth century of the common era, Western Christians were celebrating Epiphany as a holiday to commemorate Christ’s manifestation to the Gentiles on the day when the Magi—those

archetypal Gentiles that we will learn more about in a moment—made a journey to visit the Christ child.¹ Far earlier than the fourth century, way back in the sixth century BCE, the prophet Isaiah had foretold a time like this, when God would appear among the people of Israel as they and indeed the whole earth as it sat in “thick darkness” (60:2). Isaiah said that the “light” and the “glory” of God would come to Israel to help them and then shine among them so that even the Gentiles from the nations would come and bring gifts to Israel, tokens of their thanks for being invited to come and experience the Lord’s glorious appearance on the dance floor of the earth. But it is notable that this dance begins in thick darkness.

The Christmas season is often a time that we contrast darkness and light as we contrast wrong to right, war to peace, or evil to good. There is good reason for this. So many of our hymns and scriptures declare Jesus to be the light of the world and at Christmas we talk of this light coming to us as our light—a light that is *not* overcome by the darkness. When God takes to the dance floor in Jesus, you might say, there appears on the dance floor a light that we can’t quite take our eyes off and that we are drawn to! I wonder, however, what we imagine this light to look like? When you imagine the light of God’s presence in Jesus appearing as light over a dark dance floor, do you imagine the whole dance floor suddenly “lit up?” I think we are often tempted to think about light this way—as immensely bright, revealing everything around so that nothing is left untouched by its brilliance. Is this the kind of light that God brings us in Jesus? I wonder, did you note some of the lyrics from our hymn of preparation for today?

Consider these words:

Light obscures the sacred secrets, light makes clear what should be blurred, light defines and sharpens boundaries, light aggressive, harsh assured. Sitting in the shadows waiting, we are met by God the Word.

¹ See <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Epiphany>

Notice that our usual contrast of dark and light is upended in these lyrics. Darkness is now seen as the place of meeting God. Darkness is, as the first verse of the hymn states, “the source of insight,” the path that “leads to what is true.” As I listened to this hymn, I couldn’t help but imagine the Magi singing this as a kind of chant on their journey following the star:

“Darkness is not dark to you God, Darkness is as light to you. Darkness is the source of insight. Darkness leads to what is true.”

Earlier I asked you to consider what kind of light you imagine Christ to be and suggested that we probably often think of it as immensely bright, overtaking all darkness. And yet, I am struck by the fact that when it came to the Magi, they could only come to the light of Christ by following a star that was only visible because it was surrounded by the darkness of the sky. Yes, they followed the light of the star, but the “darkness” played an important role in leading to the source of insight that these Magi sought: the Christ child, lying in a manger.

If God’s dance starts in the dark, maybe we have a few things to learn about God from these Magi. Who were these strange dancers stepping out, in the dark, onto God’s dance floor? We imagine that their outfits were exotic, and we know they carried with them interesting gifts: Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh. Some theorize that there is a spiritual meaning behind these gifts, and this came out in the “We Three Kings” song. Gold because Jesus was King, Frankincense to represent divinity because Jesus was God in Flesh, and Myrrh, often used in embalming, because Jesus was one day to die a sacrificial death.² Other interpretations also abound, including that these were simply precious gifts worthy of someone very special and had no particular spiritual meaning behind them.

² http://www.ignatiusinsight.com/features2008/smiesel_epiphany_jan08.asp

Beyond just the gifts that they brought with them, these Magi were themselves interesting characters! Their name, *Magoi* in Greek, suggests several possibilities for their identities. They were possibly interpreters of the stars, in other words, astrologers. While many will note that the bible clearly condemns the practice of astrology,³ in this case, it was true, as the Psalm says, that

The heavens...tell...the glory of God; and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours forth speech, and night to night declares knowledge. (Psalm 19:1-2).

The Magi could also have been Persian priests or perhaps dream interpreters (as Matthew 2:12 might suggest). Regardless of which of these options is more accurate, the fact of the matter is that these were influential people from the nations, the Gentiles, that stood at some remove from Israel and likely worshipped many other Gods. And yet, here they are, following a star that they saw because they were paying attention to the heavens, coming to visit the King of the Jews.

When I think about the Magi, I can't help but think about the diversity of the dance that God has invited us to imagine and to join in! And here again I think it is instructive to think about the ways the church often misuses the contrast between light and dark in our thinking about the world and especially in our thinking about "the other." It would be quite easy for us to paint the Magi as evil pagans who represent precisely the darkness that Christ's light overcomes. When such a view is combined with the idea that *we* are the people of the light, then it is one small step to put us into the position of thinking that *we are exclusively the people of light* bringing the good news to all those who are other than us and so, by definition, sitting in

³ There is some debate in the literature about this and the reality is that the history was probably mixed on this with some in Israel practicing astrology and others outright condemning it. On the one hand, Israel's law clearly prohibited any kind of divination (Deut. 18:10-11) and many will lump astrology into this without question or distinction. On the other hand, some scholars will note that the practice was widely accepted in the ancient world, including in Israel around the time of Jesus, to pay attention to the heavens as a means of discerning the meaning of worldly events. One could make a case that Jesus participates in such a practice in Matthew 24:29, for example. For one analysis on this question from the perspective of Jewish history, see <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/astrology>.

darkness. But what is so amazing about the Magi's story is that God invited them to encounter God through a very "Gentile" medium: namely, the interpretation of the stars. He didn't ask them to give up everything about their Gentile identity in order to join in God's dance.

There is a parable hidden in the story of the Magi, I think, for what in our present age is a fraught conversation about Christian mission. How do we reach people with the good news of Jesus Christ in a time when we are struggling with the history of colonialism? When we have too often seen ourselves as the light and the world as the darkness? When we have too often put demands on those who would like to join God's dance, demands like, you're welcome if you change your dress, your culture, or your language. I don't even begin to imagine that I have answers to all the difficult questions about joining in God's mission to the world, but I do think that the Magi give us one inspiring picture of how God is always already present and at work in all peoples, cultures, and faiths in ways that upends the crass dichotomy of Christian "light" and pagan "darkness." Often Christian mission is approached with the assumption that the Christian "we" begin with the light that we then "bring" to others. The truth to this assumption is that indeed, God has called the church to be a "city on a hill" and a light to the nations. But remember before when I asked you to consider what kind of light you imagine Christ bringing? What if the light that Christ asks us to be to others is not the full light, the "harsh," "self-assured," light that defines all "boundaries" of truth, but is a more subtle, gentle, but no less appealing and attractive light? A light that does not do away with all mystery but that invites people into the mystery of God's dance that is revealed to the world in Jesus.

Did you notice the combination of words I just used?: "Mystery" and "revealed." Sometimes in the church we talk of God's revelation as if it does away with mystery. But this is not the kind of revelation God imparts to the world in Jesus. Jesus comes to reveal God's love

and light, yes, but not in such a way that answers all our questions; not in such a way that gives the church exclusive knowledge to the truth. The mystery revealed to the world in the Christ child is like a star shining in the dark. It beckons and draws us continually, but when we have that encounter with “divinity” as we bow at the manger, we do not suddenly have it all figured out. Instead, we are invited into an endless dance of discovery. And what is most amazing about this dance is that because it is God’s dance and not ours, all people are invited to it. We don’t get to police the dancefloor or set a cover charge. All are invited to rejoice at the coming of one who’s life is good news and peace for all the world.

How sad, it is, then, that we often make God’s dance boring by trying to limit who is invited or by trying to light up the dance floor artificially or by trying to set up the dancefloor in one small corner of the world. God, on the other hand, invites us to be willing to dance in the mystery and wonder of the dark, to discover God’s dance happening in all sorts of places. One of the wonderful truths that we learn from the Magi is that God’s joyful dance is happening all the time beyond the walls of the church. I encourage you to reflect on this truth this morning while we listen one more time to “Darkness is Not Dark to You God.” While your bulletin has listed a different hymn of response, I thought it more appropriate and helpful to listen again to “Darkness is not Dark to You God.” I encourage you, as you listen, to pay attention to what jumps out at you in this hymn and maybe we can discuss it during second hour. While you listen, I also encourage you to imagine it is being sung those dancing, rhythmic Magi, following the star on their journey to see the babe in a manger.