

## **“On Dancing When we Hear the Flute”**

LUKE 1: 57-58

(JOHN THE BAPTIST IS BORN; ELIZABETH AND THE WHOLE NEIGHBORHOOD REJOICE)

MATTHEW 11: 7-19

(JESUS TELLS THE PEOPLE WHO JOHN THE BAPTIST IS, AND HE’S FRUSTRATED THAT THEY DO NOT RECOGNIZE—AND REJOICE.)

Preached by Carolyn Bohler

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Redlands First United Methodist Church

Last Thursday night an event happened in L.A. that reminded me of something unusual that occurred a couple of years ago at a metro stop in the center of Washington D.C. As we just heard Jesus complain, “A flute was played, and no one danced.”

Well, not exactly.

A man, a violinist, dressed in a long-sleeved T-shirt and a Washington Nationals baseball cap opened his violin case and began to play, at 7:51 a.m., in the middle of the morning rush hour.

This violinist played for the next forty-three minutes as 1,097 people passed by.<sup>i</sup> He was one of the finest classical musicians in the world, playing on one of the most valuable violins ever made. He was participating in an experiment. Would people “have time for beauty?”

The violinist involved in this experiment was Joshua Bell. He just last Thursday played at the Hollywood Bowl. [Ask whether anyone has seen him.] Joshua Bell’s music is not quiet; he makes a lot of noise. He plays with his full body, with athleticism and passion, almost dancing with his instrument—and his hair flies.

It took three minutes before “something” happened at that subway station. A middle-aged man passer-by altered his gait for a split second, turning his head to notice that there seemed to be some guy playing music. The man kept walking, but at least he noticed.

Six minutes into the performance, someone actually stood against a wall and listened. During the 45-minute performance, seven people stopped what they were doing to hang around and take in the music for at least a minute. Twenty-seven gave money; 1,070 hurried by, oblivious.

Joshua Bell said, afterward, “It was a strange feeling that people were actually, ah . . . ignoring me.” He was laughing, at himself. When you play for ticket holders, you are validated, ahead of time. Here, he actually had some butterflies as he thought to himself, “What if they don’t like me? What if they resent my presence?”

Of course, this violinist was out of context. Perhaps it’s not fair to call the Metro passer-bys unsophisticated boobs. Most of them were in a hurry. Context does matter.

One commuter, John David Mortensen, heard the music before he saw the musician. He noticed the sound was pretty good, so he looked around to find the violinist, and then checked his cell phone, to see how much spare time he had to listen. He had three minutes to listen, so he did. He didn’t know classical music at all, but there was something about what he was hearing he really liked. He said, “Whatever it was,” “it made me feel at peace.”

One woman recognized him. She had just been to a concert of his. “I was just trying to figure out what he was doing there...” She gave him \$20.

Most people looked straight ahead, minding their own business, and when interviewed later, they said they were too stressed to pay attention.<sup>ii</sup>

One of the commuters commented that it was not too surprising that people did not notice the violinist, for last year there was a man who died at that stop, and no one noticed him, either.

Regarding beauty, one man did hear. John Picarello heard the music, located the violinist, and took a spot next to the shoeshine stand, across from the lottery line. He did not budge for nine minutes. When the reporters called him back to ask about his morning commute—this man who had listened a full nine minutes commented that there was a musician playing that morning. When the researchers asked, “Haven’t you seen musicians there before?” Picarello said, “Not like this one.” “This was a superb violinist. I’ve never heard anyone of that caliber. . .”

After this experiment, Joshua Bell headed off for a concert tour of Europe, and then returned to the States the very next week to receive the Avery Fisher prize as one of the best classical musicians in America. [PAUSE.]

About 2000 years ago, something unusual occurred at a way stop in the center of Palestine.

A flute was played, and no one danced.

Well, not exactly.

A man, a Rabbi, dressed like most of the people, opened his mouth and heart and began to share God’s love in a brand new way. He did this in the middle of rush hour and plenty other times during the day as well.

This Rabbi preached, healed and taught for about three years, as thousands of people passed by. He spoke of the classical Hebrew Bible texts, but he added many new parables and teachings of God’s love present with them.

However, interestingly enough, this Rabbi was not just frustrated that people didn’t notice the dramatic beauty of his message; he complained that the people had not recognized the prophet, John the Baptist, who clearly was showing the way to the Prince of Peace, who was just about to arrive! It was not a personality thing for Jesus. John the Baptist was announcing a whole new religious era that was just about to come. He, Jesus, represented the arrival of the new era of God’s Love made more active in the World. If the people didn’t realize what was happening, it may not fully happen!

Jesus’ parable—our scripture text for today—was this: “we played the flute for you and you did not dance; we sang a dirge, and you did not mourn.”

If Jesus were at the Metro stop in Washington DC, today, talking to us about himself and John the Baptist, he might say, “We played the violin for you, and you do not listen; a person died right over there, and you didn’t notice.”<sup>iii</sup>

Jesus meant that the people were not paying attention to Divine Wisdom in their midst. They were oblivious. They walked on by—both John the Baptist and himself, the Christ. Jesus granted that John the Baptist was eccentric. He fasted a lot and did not drink wine. He wandered, too.

Yet, the very people who rejected John for fasting and not drinking were rejecting Jesus *for* eating and drinking. It seemed to Jesus at the time that the people would reject

*any* prophet. No one would fit their expectations. They would not change their daily behaviors, *but walk on by* the Prophets—Divine Beauty and Wisdom—in their midst.

Jesus was unusual, too. Here he was, talking as if he knew God intimately, yet he certainly didn't seem overly religious. Not only did he eat and drink; more confusing, he ate and drank with people who were looked down upon. What kind of Savior is that?<sup>iv</sup>

Many people went on as usual, without dancing, that is, without responding with joy and with action, with a communal spirit, when they heard Divine Music in their midst.

The New York Metro is far away from us; John and Jesus lived a long time ago, and were far away. Yet, we have revealers of God—where we are—in stores, at church, even in our homes! We sometimes think the real people in our midst couldn't possibly reveal the Divine, so we hope for someone else—another friend, a different boss, a special spiritual leader—a new relative! How do we NOTICE God/Beauty/Music so that we can prompt ourselves to dance?

Backing up in time just a little, focusing upon the mother of John, we find an exception in this tableau of oblivious living. We see Elizabeth, the mother of John-the-Baptist. The Gospel of Luke is the only place we find reports of the births of both John and Jesus. Luke takes time to focus upon the beginnings, describing how, when Elizabeth gave birth, her neighbors and relatives heard that God had shown great Mercy on her and they all rejoiced with her. They rejoiced as she rejoiced. I can just see—in my mind's eye—all of them dancing, as they heard the music of the Divine, present with them.

I am making too much of a tiny phrase in the Gospel of Luke. It's not fair. Nothing says Elizabeth danced. Nevertheless, she did give birth and rejoice, surrounded by her neighbors—community dancing with us matters.

I know it is easy to dance when a baby is born. It's a whole lot harder to fully appreciate violin music at the Metro stop or the “flute music” of John the prophet and Jesus the Rabbi when people are not quite sure who they are.

I am going to imagine right now (and I invite you to join me)...I'm imagining many people around the world really paying attention to Jesus' idealistic yet possible message of love. I'm imagining the continued process of peace in Iraq. I'm imagining those who are stranded on the hurting side of many budget cuts finding avenues of survival—even thriving. I'm visualizing communities coming to the aid of those who need them—with showers, food, or care and respect.

I am now imagining that you and I are all dancing as we hear the flutes in our lives. We are dancing because Beauty Is, and we see-hear-taste-touch-smell that Beauty; we stop if we need to in order to take it all in, so that we internalize the Beauty and we do DANCE! As we recognize what is within us and what is around us, we find ourselves dancing more than we ever dreamed, for we hear flutes in all sorts of places...coming from all directions.

May we choose to make these imaginings happen! May we notice all sorts of violinists and flautists—whether they are in the pew next to us, across the dinner table, or growing with gorgeous flowers and strong roots in our neighbor's yard. May we dance. May we have more compassion than we thought we could muster in our lives. May we truly behave as if the Prince of Peace who loved everyone DID in fact come, just like the Prophet who ate and dressed oddly had been saying all along!

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<sup>i</sup> He performed six classical pieces, some of the most elegant music ever written. The information shared here is from an article “Pearly Before Breakfast,” by Gene Weingarten, Washington Post Staff Writer, Sunday April 8, 2007; W10.  
[http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/04/04/AR2007040401721\\_pf.....](http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/04/04/AR2007040401721_pf.....) 4/9/2007

<sup>ii</sup> These two lines made a Welsh man famous in 1911: “What is this life if, full of care/ We have no time to stand and stare.”<sup>ii</sup> Guess the profession of this poet who was famous for his two-lines? He was a hobo. “What is this life if, full of care/ We have no time to stand and stare.” The hobo poet noticed beauty.

<sup>iii</sup> ‘We wanted to skip rope, and you were always too tired; we wanted to talk, but you were always too busy.’

<sup>iv</sup> John the Baptist began to preach in the wilderness in order to reinvigorate Judaism and prepare it for the soon coming Messiah. In order to do this, John re-enacted the entry of those Jews into the Promised Land by leading them to the waters of the Jordan, to be baptized... Jesus was attracted to this reform movement also passed through waters as part of the reinvigorated nation. At some point following Jesus’ engagement with John, Jesus also began to preach. Jesus and John really weren’t relatives or even very close acquaintances...At one point John professes not to know what Jesus is doing or who he is... The early church might have seen a need to bring these two men close together, so that the disciples of each, their followers, would not compete with each other. ...we should not be disputing, for we are really related...