

A Sermon By  
Rev. Jim Hickman  
Corona United Methodist Church  
Corona, California.  
July 25, 2010

A Controversial Video  
Psalm 30:11-12a  
Ecclesiastes 3:1-8, especially verse 4

This was some a week for controversial videos. One video caused the forced resignation of a government official, and then an apology for rushing to judgment without all the facts. It looks like she will be back in government service soon. The second was a video that was making the rounds a week ago. It was one the internet and was even shown on the evening news and discussed in the newspaper. The video was of Adolek Kohn, who is a death camp survivor, wearing a T-shirt that said “Survivor” dancing with his grandchildren in front of Auschwitz, Dachau and in the Polish Lodz ghetto. The song “I Will Survive” played in the background. Vanessa Gera, writing in last Sunday’s *Press Enterprise*, said,

To some of images of Adolek Kohn and his family shuffling off-beat at such hallowed places is an insult to those who perished; to others it’s a defiant celebration of survival...

...the 89 year old dances at places that might have been his grave, surrounded by offspring who would never have existed if Hitler’s Final Solution had been carried out completely.

(Vanessa Gera, “Daring to Dance, Laugh” *Press Enterprise*, July 18, 2010, p. C3)

Gera captures the problem exactly: is it sacrilegious to dance in the face of such tragedy, or is there something spiritual here? Good question.

And Gera does a good job of discussing it (if you still have last Sunday’s paper laying around, you may want to read her analysis. It was very good. It was in section C). In it she writes,

This may strike some as tacky, but cultural anthropologist Mark Auslander notes that while dance may be considered trivial in Western society, [think of “Dancing with the Stars”], throughout history it has been used to ease “human responses to traumatic loss, from initial overpowering grief...and transforming it] in joy in the regeneration of life.”

“...dance in and of itself can be a powerful, even sublime response to the horrors of war and genocide,” Auslander said. (*Ibid*, p. C3)

What *do you do* when you have come to a Greek Island to work a mine left to you and while there the woman you love is killed and the trestles you’ve built to bring the oar cars down collapses under the weight of the first ones? What you do?! (Those of you who know *Zorba the Greek*, what do you do?) You dance!!

Is it unseemly? Not in other parts of the world.

Is it unmanly? Not when it is a genuine expression of feeling.

In his new book, *The Language God Talks* Jewish writer Herman Wouk revisits a portion of his major book, *War and Remembrance*. He lifts out and summarizes the portions that are set in WWII Europe. He does this in order to lead us up to a scene in a concentration camp where one of his characters, a scholarly secular Jew named Aaron gives a lecture to his fellow inmates. He begins with a pedantic comparison of a Shakespeare play's characters and their original setting in Homer's *Iliad*. Then Wouk says,

Stepping down from the lecture without his notes...he [Aaron] bursts out to measure the [suffering at the hands of the quarrelsome gods of ancient Greece in] the *Iliad* against the [suffering in] the book of Job [in the Old Testament]...Arron Jastro is sounding like...a popular preacher of the *shtetls*, as he goes on to personify...the suffering Job. He hears his hearers come alive, faces alight, hungry for his words. This outpouring...in the mother tongue, rising in wave upon passionate wave of Yiddish, to a bitter acceptance of senseless disaster, and of faith—faith however tortured, faith in Job's incomprehensible living Redeemer.

Aaron breaks off and sits down, but his brother Udam stands and takes his place.

Udam—Udam—Udam

Udam is Polish Yiddish for Adam, “Man.” The audience at once responds in a low chorus,

“Udam...Udam...Udam

Man—Man—Man

Man is of the dust and returns to dust...

He is like the clay jar that breaks,

The flower that fades...

The passing cloud, the dream that flies away... [pause]

Udam begins to dance like an old rabbi, takes his brother's hand and together they step round and round, hands upraise as in prayer; Then Udam shifts to a lively old song of Messianic hope...

Outside the barracks the audience disperses, stirred, and consoled...

(Herman Wouk, *The Language God Talks*, pp. 143-145)

The Bible tells us that there is

A time to weep and a time to laugh,

A time to mourn and a time to dance. (Ecc. 3:4)

I know some will react to Wouk's story with an outrage that the Jews did not take up arms and fight back. That is a good question—why didn't they? But we are not talking about a time for defending oneself. We are talking about times when the pain and the evil are so overwhelming that the only possible responses are to cry or to dance.

From what I saw of the video and read or heard in the news, it seems most people are interpreting it as an act of defiance in the face of evil:

I will overcome!

I have overcome!

And I think that is probably what Mr. Kohn and his family were saying. But as I thought about what I was seeing and those wonderful lines of Psalm 30,

You turned my wailing into dancing

You removed my sack cloth and clothed me with joy,

That my heart may sing to you and not be silent.  
As I read those lines I reflected on how that is not something *I do*. It is something that God does. Robert Darden, in his book *Jesus Laughed*, says,  
“You turned my mourning into dancing,” not because we deserve it, but because God is God. It’s grace.

And then he adds,

I know nothing except what everyone knows—  
If there when Grace dances,  
I should dance. [repeat the last two lines]

Robert Darden, *Jesus Laughed* p. 113

This all fits with something I’ve been reading about this spring. Several writers have talked about Christianity’s tendency to turn things upside down (e.g. “But many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first,” Matthew 19:30). And how in turning them upside down we are freed to find the hope and life and future where there was only death and loneliness and hopelessness.

The next time life dumps all over you, will I expect to see you dance? No, I won’t expect it. Those cultural expectations can be very hard on us. But if in the midst of a crisis you feel just a little urge to spread your wings, and dance a few steps—remember this sermon. For as that philosopher of fifty years ago, Snoopy, would say, “To Dance *is to live*, and to live *is to dance*.” [*Peanuts* comic strip from files]

Amen.