

“HOPE DANCING” ©

Sermon Notes for The Rev. Joyce Kelly

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Bloor Street United Church

FIFTH SUNDAY of LENT - March 21, 2010

Based on parts of Rev 21 & 22; II Corinthians 5:16-21, and a hymn by Joyce Kelly
– see end of sermon

“Hope in hearing the melody of the future. Faith is dancing it now,” says Rubem Alves.

How else could spiritual searchers get through Lent? How else could people lost in life find tomorrow?

Hope – the melody of the future – is the hunch that the overwhelming brutality of facts – is not the last word. Faith – that inspires the spiritual dance – lets God’s holy humming lead us on – celebrating and evoking life’s goodness.

Rubem Alves knows. He meets Hope Dancers every day where he lives, midst starving children in Brazil.

Yes, in a world where freedom to betray the best is never overridden, injustice does strut and have its day. But underneath, for those with ears to hear, sounds the deep rhythm of God’s purpose for the earth, which has never been erased and will not, finally, be denied.

The world is made that way. Theology calls it Prevenient Grace. Light shines, indomitable, even in deepest night. And it will prevail. “Hope is hearing the melody of the future. Faith – dancing it now.”

I

Emily Dickinson says:

Hope is a thing with feathers that perches in the soul, ☉ and sings
the tune without the words and never stops at all.

And sweetest, in the gale, is heard; ☉ and sore must be the storm ☉ that
could abash the little bird ☉ that kept so many warm.

I've heard it in the chilliest land, ☉ and on the strangest sea; ☉ yet,
never, in extremity ☉ it asked a crumb of me.

Whatever life brings, there it is – Hope (that spark that God builds into our souls) relentlessly waiting to sing into our days, to lift our spirits above our greatest fear or beyond our harshest diagnosis or hungriest day.

But that melody is not easily heard. Once, says a Jewish tale, guests at a lavish wedding party were dancing, laughing, bobbing their heads and arms and legs in time to a lively rhythm. Outside, a deaf man passing the brightly lit windows, saw them whirling and flinging their limbs about. “It’s a house filled with madness,” he said. Being deaf, he could not hear the music to which they danced.

Always, there are those who scoff, who can’t hear Hope’s music (or won’t), who keep themselves far from lighted rooms. And some days, that’s us!

Always, too, there are sure-footed hope-dancers who move against injustice and despair wherever they find it.

II

Hope-dancers move to the music of a coming day before it is widely heard. Hard to explain to the tone-deaf, they are, finally, impossible to dismiss. Like streaks of dawn, they herald the sun before it rises. Though evidence of Friday’s cross glares at us at every turn, Hope-dancers stubbornly argue Easter Day.

A few years ago, Bruce and I were visiting a Pueblito project in Belo Horizontes. Unlike our cities, Brazil favellas (slums) are on the outskirts. We walked dirt paths between immaculate cardboard shacks, and were greeted by crowds of shy curious children – ‘shy’ until our camera prompted lots of posing and laughing.

This favella is luckier than most. A spring feeds a natural pool right in the middle of town - clean water, not only for drinking, but also for washing clothes on the rocks. Women and children, with jugs and bundles of laundry, gather there every day.

But there is other water, too – a stream a foot or two wide, that winds its way around and under the shacks. Children play alongside that water, too – jump across it, play in it. That stream is a brilliant dark green. It flows, not pure from Mother Earth, but from a factory directly across the street – an impressive 3-storey brick building with lush weed-free lawn and paved street out front – that clearly separates it from the dirt paths of the favella.

That factory makes bathroom fixtures – for us, for export – across from homes with no running water or electricity, let alone a tap to turn or a toilet to flush. All the workers come from that favella – pennies for 12-hour days, 6-day weeks, lots of them, parents, leaving even infants and toddlers at home, sometimes cared for by 5 or 10-year-old sisters, school no option. If father and mother are both lucky enough to have jobs, together, they might be able to put food on the table for 1 meal a day – not more.

They worry. But they don't stop there. They also dream. They dare to hope. And, in God's time, they begin to dance.

Thanks to some generous-hearted middle-class women in Belo who catch the rhythm of their hope, co-op daycares begin to open – called 'Casa de Vovo' (Grandmother's House.)

These women know the work of Pueblito Canada, which has been important to Bruce and me for years, and to others in this congregation, I've discovered. The Guatamalan Project initiated here, which we still support, is now in the capable hands of Pueblito – who, for decades, has helped put words to the Hope-tune that locals hum – until they are self-sufficient, like the many co-op daycares in Brazil.

The Hope-Dancing hymn that we're going to sing in a minute started in me that day. The melody hummed in my heart all day as we visited that favella and Casa de Vovo. But the words came full-blown in days that followed.

III

Hope-dancing is contagious. It's empowering to meet people who can Hope-dance to the melody of a future that they sense is coming. Hope-dancers know that Christ is

here, so all things are possible, tears will be wiped away, war studied no more. “Behold,” says God in Revelation, “I make all things new.” Not just someday, but now! “These words are trustworthy and true,” it says. Hope-dancers know that in their souls; it shows on their faces.

A few days after our visit to the favella and daycares, we set off on unmarked terrain (rugged dirt roads only a Hope-dancer could find) in a car that clunks along on Hope, and the excited determination of our unfazed driver Alyneer.

After a bumpy couple of hours, we arrive, in the heat of the day – to a packed hall. Even the tall open windows had people standing in them, trying to find space – and catch a breeze. The hall is filled with people – singing, praying, laughing, having a great time – as they learn about their rights – that by law, Brazil provides medical care, puts a clinic in every village for a certain number of hours every month.

They role-play. One is doctor; many are patients. They line up in long queues, and wait, and chat in line, posture, and wait some more – for the doctor, who finally arrives. “Doctor, I have this ailment.” “Go take a pill and you will get better.” (All in fast Spanish – lost on me.) Next!

“Doctor ...” another ailment ... another pill.

Then, after about 3 patients (who hardly get a look), Doctor says, “Well that’s all I have time for today.” “Oh, no, Doctor, the law says you have to be here for 6 hours every month. You cannot go yet. Or – we will have to report you.” So doctor stays.

Patients are healed – not their hurting bodies, but the ailments of their heart and soul. Hope rises in them. They are empowered.

On and on it goes, with great enjoyment – roll-playing reluctant doctor, persistent patient, police who they sometimes do have to call. They practice words and body language they will use when the real situation arises – how they will stand up for their rights. They encourage one another. Together, they learn to Hope-dance.

Their faces shine. Alyneer, our 5-foot tall dynamo with heavy foot and great laugh, says, “I don’t feel poor when we do this. We know that God has not forgotten us. Jesus is dancing with us. We have Hope.” And once a month, they rekindle it.

At the end of the day, Bruce and I were inviting our lovely host to come visit us in Toronto. She said, "Oh, we will never again fly anywhere." The economy was in freefall. Yet, this woman, middle-class by all standards, had no sadness in her eyes, just joy in her voice. She said, "We will not travel, but we can do this" – her eyes sweeping the Hope-dancing crowd.

IV

No wonder early Christians secretly carved images of Jesus deep inside caves – as Orpheus, mythical poet and musician who could charm the birds into singing a new song, and coax trees and rocks to dance.

No wonder mystic John on the prison Island of Patmos still fascinates us. John's revelation was of a future that God painted in his mind's eye, with mystical words for Christ's church, set to a melody that made his soul and Hope-dancers of his day, strong. Surrounded by injustice and Friday brokenness, he saw, ahead of time, a new world order. Free at last.

John's hope was not self-generated. It was not based on an optimistic reading of the days' news. Injustice and violence (the world's forever Friday), was a very real beast with indescribable horns of flaming evil. Things were as bad as they seemed.

But what caught his ear, and hummed in his heart, and moved his feet to dance, was the deep rhythm of God's purpose for the earth, which, he knew, had never been erased and would not, finally, be denied.

"Truth crushed to earth will rise again," said Hope-dancer Martin Luther King.

Mother Earth will breathe freely again, persistently greening water in her arteries restored.

The world is made that way. It bears God's indelible blessing. As God says in Genesis, "Behold, it is very good!"

Hope-dancers in this broken world provide startling witness. With irrepressible rhythm, they move to the music of God's coming day.

You Hope-dance in many ways, like when you support Jesus' ministry through this church – with your time and talent - ideas, energy, generosity.

We Hope-dance together when we support Community Café's welcome to neighbours from the streets around, ToGoGo Grannies who keep the African rhythm, Canadian Foodgrains Bank who help us respond to climate change and world hunger, Jeremiah's Field with no-interest loans that get people started, the GEM Fund, the Book Sale, support for children (who wouldn't otherwise go) to summer camp.

The list goes on – social justice projects of this congregation, and of other Hope Dancers beyond these doors. You are part of Jesus' dance as you work on committees, as you sing in the Choir – a big commitment – Thursday night and Sunday (every week), as you serve tea and coffee on Sunday, visit those who need a visit, and as you pray ... yes, at church on Sundays, but (pray, dear God) every day as well. Seen and unseen, known, and known only by God – we are stewards of all that God gives us.

You Hope Dance when you make your financial offering, when you assess carefully, and give faithfully, the best you have to offer. And what better time to re-assess than Lent? You'll find interesting information in today's bulletin. Some people tithe – which is good. Some follow General Council's recommended 5% (not the Biblical 10) which recognizes that United Church support usually extends beyond church walls. Some aren't able to give financially right now.

We all give according to our best prayerful assessment – our time and talent, whatever that looks like to you and God.

So let the dance go on, the dance for which we long, to which we be-long.

And, Hope-dancing all round us, with us, is the great crowd of witnesses, angels, archangels, the communion of saints, the eternal circle of the faithful. And, thanks be to God, Christ leading us. Amen

Call to Worship - Welcome

Says Gerard Manley Hopkins:

Nothing is so beautiful as spring –

when weeds, in wheels,

shoot long and lovely and lush;

Thrush's eggs look little low heavens,

and the ear, it strikes like lightning

to hear him sing; ...

What is all this juice and all this joy?

A strain of the earth's sweet being in the beginning ... In Eden garden.

Come, in the name of Jesus Christ, let us worship.

PRAYER OF APPROACH and CONFESSION - *w silence*

Lord, we come to you with open & searching hearts

we praise you and we bless you.

Approach us, dear God,

as we approach you.

Lord, in these Lenten days of mercy,

fill the still centre of our souls.

In these days of challenge,

help us find our strength through you.

In these days of waiting,

open our hearts to the mystery of your cross.

And now in the quiet, we listen; we wait ...

We cast off all the old that is not life-giving,

We breathe in Life in a new way.

Behold, Holy God, your promise true,

make all things new in us, we pray,

through Christ our Lord. Amen

“Hope Dancing” words by Joyce Kelly

tune: Westminster Abbey

Hope is dancing with God’s future

making all things new today.

Justice beats her ancient rhythm

casting violence away.

Still God’s undiscouraged Spirit

breathes new Life into our day.

Dance with Hope and dance with Justice,

dance with saints of glory past.

Dance into tomorrow’s blessing

led by Spirit and held fast.

Move with great creative power

in God’s melody recast;

Ring in the voice of prophets

through the age of tyranny,

Speaking Truth despite oppression

calling forth humanity,

Shining faces filled with Christ-Light,

Hope and Justice, Harmony.

Stretch your heart, embrace Creation

Filled with graces meant for you.

Give with overflowing measure

Share God's gifts in all you do.

Lean into God's mighty Promise

"Behold, I make all things new."