

“The Dancing Queen”

Exodus 15:19-21

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September 28, 2019 will always be a day that brings great joy to the Eberly family. On that day our daughter Carlee married the man of her dreams, Nate Bickley. The wedding was in Portland, Oregon. Everything was just as we hoped, including the dancing. Carlee is the dancer in our family. She majored in dance at an excellent school devoted to the arts. All of her friends are dancers. They are trained and have danced professionally. But the best thing is they love to dance. When things kicked into high gear the dance floor was a flooded frenzy of foot stomping. We got our money’s worth out of the DJ.

And then the dancing stopped. Oh, did the dancing stop. Come March of 2020, we said a sudden and abrupt farewell to waltzes and minuets, the moonwalk and the hip hop, break dance, tap dance, line dance, and the swing dance. There was no more samba or tango, not even the rumba or the Zumba. All dancing came to a halt. And so did everything else. Even if they hadn’t put a stop to dancing, we were all in such a bad way I don’t think anyone had it in them to dance. We were in quarantine, shut down, locked down, keep your distance, stay at home, wear a mask, and don’t get together. Finally, after more than a year, and several months into the vaccine, and a downturn in the spread of the virus, we were greeted with the news that we could gather without masks, those who were fully vaccinated.

With that as the backdrop, try to imagine the energy and expectation in this very sanctuary, when the Shoreline Ringers walked onto what had been set up as a stage right here at the Dunn’s Corners Community Church, Presbyterian. This past June gave us a taste of celebration. The first Sunday in June we clapped and cheered as we honored our graduates. We stood up and expressed our thanks to Andy Wallace for his 25 years leading the music ministry here at the church.

On the second Sunday in June, we dedicated our new pew bibles. The choir was singing. We had a baptism in June, a joyful day of celebration for Mary Slattery's family and for our whole church family.

But it wasn't until the night of June 27th, when the Shoreline Ringers took their place on what was set up as a stage, it was not until the night of June 27th that we remembered we could dance. The excitement built as we enjoyed a beautiful classical piece, *Allegro from Concerto in A minor*. We celebrated Christmas in June as the bells rang out *Hark the Herald Angels Sing* and *O Holy Night*. Our hearts were lifted by a lovely rendition of *The Prayer*. Mack the Knife made an appearance. It was welcome news that Macky was back in town. The ringers included jazz and swing songs, they had one for Duke, Glenn, and Woody. But the number that brought the house down was the number that told us dancing was back. *Dancing Queen* by ABBA had feet tapping, knees knocking, shoulders swaying and heads bobbing. And not just from the ringers. We all felt the need to dance.

Caught up in the excitement of the evening, Sally Owen approached me with a huge smile after the concert. She said, "You should do a sermon on "The Dancing Queen." A sermon on the Dancing Queen? Who ever heard of such a thing? But the challenge had been extended. And it was such a joyful thing, this Dancing Queen, that I began to think, "Could there be a sermon about 'The Dancing Queen?'" Now, I am a great proponent of taking responsibility for your actions, but today I am going to throw that philosophy to the curb. If you don't like this sermon about the Dancing Queen, it's not my fault! Talk to Sally! She made do it.

Just kidding. I'll take responsibility. I don't know whether you will like this sermon, but believe it or not, there is a strong biblical connection and precedent for the *Dancing Queen*. It is found in Exodus chapter 15. On a day unlike any other for the children of Israel, we are introduced to the original Dancing Queen. Her name is Miriam. She is the sister of Moses, that great leader of the Israelites. And on a day that

was unlike any other for the children of Israel, Miriam danced. “Then Miriam...took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women followed her, with timbrels and dancing. Miriam was “having the time of her life...ooh see that girl, watch that scene dig in the Dancing Queen.”

We had been 15 months without tapping our toes when the ringers rang out that invitation to dance. Joy filled the room. Can you imagine what it must have been like for Miriam and the people of Israel. Fifteen months felt like eternity to us with COVID. But in reality, our time of struggle pales in comparison to what Miriam the Dancing Queen experienced. According to Genesis 15, in predicting the captivity of God’s people in Egypt, we are told they would endure their suffering for 400 years. When Stephen preaches about the Exodus in Acts chapter seven, he also counts the years of captivity as being 400. We barely had 400 days of COVID before we got to dance again. Miriam was doing a tap dance on 400 years of suffering and sadness. Believe me, Miriam was the Dancing Queen, and the dancing was sweet after all that sorrow.

I don’t expect all of you who are with us in worship this morning to be ABBA fans, so when I ask the following, it is not a rhetorical question. Is anyone here who might jump with joy when Jeopardy flashes a category for Swedish Pop Bands from the 70s? What I am asking is, do any of you ABBA fans know how old the Dancing Queen is? “Young and sweet only seventeen....” The Dancing Queen of pop rock is only seventeen. What does a seventeen-year-old know about waiting and enduring and hoping and dreaming? Well, if you have ever been seventeen, you will remember it was not an easy time for waiting and hoping and wishing and praying. The time between a Monday morning bell calling you to class and that same bell ringing for the weekend seemed to stretch on forever. If you were waiting to hear back from another person with whom you had romantic hopes, every second might as well have been an hour. And when you sit in that classroom seat on the first day of school, the idea that summer recess might ever come again feels like nothing more than wishful thinking. A seventeen-year-old does know a thing or two about waiting.

But even so, compare the waiting of a seventeen-year-old to that of Miriam. We do not know for certain how old Miriam is, but she is older than Moses, and she is older than the older brother of Moses, the one we know as Aaron. Moses was 80. Aaron was 83. Miriam...She's not young and sweet, she's definitely not 17, but with a waiting born of wisdom the Dancing Queen of Exodus might be something around 85 years old. And she's leading the parade, leading the women with tambourines in hand, leading the women as they shake, rattle, and roll. She can dance, she can jive, she's dancing at 85, see that girl, watch that scene dig in the Dancing Queen.

The fact that the Dancing Queen of Exodus is 85 leads to what is a miracle in its own right. Miriam is dancing! Let me be clear. The miracle is not that she is dancing at 85 years of age...I have seen plenty of pretty slick moves from some of you that have a few decades under your belt. The miracle is not that Miriam is dancing at 85, but instead, the miracle is that Miriam knows how to dance. Where did Miriam learn to dance? When did Miriam learn to dance? She and her fellow Israelites had been beat up and broken down for centuries by the cruel Pharaoh. Who had time to dance during those bitter years of slavery? Who had a reason to dance during four hundred years of slavery? We almost forgot how to dance after 15 months of our pandemic. Israel had gone 4,800 months without dancing. And now, out of the blue, Miriam knows how to dance? This woman, this woman of 85, I'm telling you she really is the Dancing Queen. Miriam knew how to dance even though she never had one single reason to dance her whole entire life.

And then another thought occurs to me. Maybe Miriam knew how to dance because she had been dancing her entire life. I know, I know, I just said she and the Israelites had been enslaved for 400 years. I know, I know, I just said she and the Israelites had not a reason to dance for centuries. I know, I know I said those things, but I'm not so sure that was the case.

One of the terrible things about something like the slavery in Egypt, and even something like the pandemic we have been going through sparked by COVID, is that the scope of the crisis can make us lose sight of the blessings that are taking place even while we are facing the crisis. There is no question what Israel endured in Egypt was brutal and bitter. Still, there was that time when the midwives trusted God and turned their backs on Pharaoh and baby boys were born alive.

- Maybe a little girl named Miriam was watching the miracle of the midwives and her tiny feet were hopping and bopping.
- We know Miriam was watching when her baby brother Moses was cast out onto the Nile River. Miraculously, a woman showed up to rescue Moses and take him into her home. The woman was the daughter of Pharaoh. The home for Moses became the halls of power in Egypt. There must have been a patch of reeds along that Nile River that were stamped down by Miriam as she went laughing and leaping and praising the Lord
- Then in old age she was reunited with Moses, both now octogenarians. Wouldn't you have loved to hear Moses describing to his sister how God appeared to him in a burning bush. As Moses pounded out a steady beat with his staff, Miriam might have burst into the first ever disco dance. What I mean is, Miriam heard somebody say, "Burn baby burn...disco inferno...burn baby burn..." Miriam might not have had a lot of opportunities, but along the way God was helping her learn how to dance.
- Before Israel was set free, the promise was made that they would be set free. Miriam, and all the people must have felt a pulsing rhythm surging within as they dreamed of freedom.
- With each plague there was a chance to prance. "I can do the locust, I can do the fly, get ready old Pharaoh, it's your turn to cry."
- What was the Red Sea except one long runway perfect for Miriam and her maids to romp and stomp?
- And when it was all said and done, when the Egyptians had been swallowed up in a wall of water, when God had brought them

safely to the other side, when Moses proclaimed his praises to God, asking, “Who is like you—majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders...” When Moses was done singing, Miriam took all the little steps that sustained her during the darkest and most difficult days of her life, Miriam took all the little steps and put them together in one great, grand, and glorious dance of praise to God. She took her timbrel in hand and with all the women joining in she danced and lifted her voice, “Sing to the Lord, for he is highly exalted. Both horse and driver he has hurled into the sea.”

I am thankful that after our long season of waiting the Shoreline Ringers gave us reason to dance...I am so grateful that we could rejoice and smile and join them in celebrating the Dancing Queen. We needed that. And what a blessing to have something as monumental and majestic as the Exodus as part of our spiritual heritage. Four hundred years of suffering were washed away as the people passed through the Red Sea. God is our Redeemer. God is our Deliverer. God sets us free. God brings new life. God rescues our lives. God takes us on a journey to the Promised Land. God is the God of new beginnings. With such an awesome and amazing story of salvation, like Miriam we're in the mood to dance. We should dance. We must dance. We have to dance. Miriam is holding out a timbrel for us this morning, calling us to rejoice in our salvation, inviting us to join in the dance.

We could learn something about dancing from the good folks of Seward, Alaska. Most of the town gathered together in the high school gymnasium a few weeks ago. They gathered to watch a swim meet. It wasn't just any swim meet. It was the finals of the 100-meter breaststroke at the Tokyo Olympics. And the swimmer they came to watch wasn't just any swimmer. Hometown hero Lydia Jacoby had made the finals in the Olympics. In one of the most joyful moments of a competition filled with joyful moments, the crowd of people is dancing. At one point as Lydia swims most of the people in the crowd are bouncing up and down in rhythm, sort of a synchronized spirit section. With each breath Lydia takes, with each stroke she makes, that whole

gym shakes and that whole gym bakes. The emotions are sky high, seemingly as energized as they can be. And then she wins! And then Lydia wins! There is a joyous eruption as the whole state of Alaska celebrates yet again a Gold Rush...a Gold Medal Rush.

What I loved about the video of the people watching Lydia Jacoby is that they didn't wait until the end to dance. They didn't wait until she won gold. They danced the whole time. With each stroke. With each lap. With every turn. With every single splash, meter by meter they danced.

As people of faith, we do the same thing. Yes, we dance at the gold medal events. We dance at the Exodus, when the Red Sea is parted and the enemy is defeated, when freedom rings and hopes fill our hearts. We dance at the gold medal events like the Lion's Den and the Fiery Furnace. We dance when the grisly giant Goliath tumbles and we dance when the walls of Jericho crumble. And we also dance at the time trials and qualifying rounds. In fact, we dance at the smallest of things, because every sign that God is at work brings joy to our heart and a spring to our step. Like Miriam danced when the midwives displayed courage, like Miriam danced when Pharaoh's daughter demonstrated compassion, like Miriam danced at the news of the burning bush and the promise of deliverance and the flies and gnats and swarms of locusts...like Miriam danced we dance not just when the Shoreline Ringers roll into town and play a rousing rendition of Dancing Queen. We dance at the little blessings and the small victories. While this pandemic has broken our hearts and bruised our spirits, wounded our souls and put a halt to many plans, maybe COVID has taught us not to wait until the Gold Medal moment to dance. Maybe COVID has taught us to dance at things we once took for granted.

- When the shelf at the store is filled with toilet paper...dance
- When we can enjoy a meal at a restaurant...dance
- When we can have friends over to visit...dance
- When families can gather on a holiday...dance
- When students can attend school in person...dance

- When the church doors are opened, and we can gather in person...dance
- When the choirs sing and the bells ring...dance
- When the organ plays and when voices are raised...dance
- When a baby is covered with the waters of baptism...dance
- When there is a smile or a tear of joy...a word of encouragement...the shake of a hand or gentle hug...we dance...we dance...we dance.

We don't wait for the gold medal to dance. If COVID has taught us anything it has taught us to treasure all the little blessings and moments of wonder and joy and kindness and concern. With each one of those moments, we dance. We dance at the little blessings and victories and moments of happiness.

- When a baby boy is born in Bethlehem, even though Herod's wicked power is on full display...we dance.
- When one leper is healed, when one lame person walks, when one who is blind sees, when the deaf hear...what do we do? We dance!
- When multitudes are fed with miraculous bread...what do we do? We dance!
- When a tax collector leaves his ways behind...when a weeping woman hears the good news that her sins are forgiven...when people who desperately need a touch of God's grace hear Jesus say, "I am willing," and when with his words he extends his hand to give that warm and gentle touch...the touch that comes from the Son of God...what do we do? What do we do? We dance!
- We dance even when the sky turns black. We dance when the shouts of Hosanna turn to cries of crucify him.
- We dance even when his closest friends turn away and deny they know him.
- We dance even when he is arrested, tried, judged, and condemned.
- We dance even when they whip him and strip him and they lift him high...high on the cross to die. It might be a slow and mournful

dance, a dance filled with sorrow for the sins of humanity, sorrow for our own lack of faith and times when we have turned away from Jesus, but even when he hangs on the cross, we dance.

- We dance because we believe Jesus has come to seek and to save the lost, and we know that includes us. We dance because we believe Jesus loves this entire world, and that includes us. We dance because Jesus promised never to leave us and never to forsake us. He promised to be with us always... always... always... even until the very end of the age. We dance because on a day when all hopes were crushed and every dream was danced, a miracle happened. The stone rolled away from the tomb. And the grave was empty.
- We dance because what the angels said that day is what the angels will say every day for the rest of eternity. He is not here. He is risen from the dead. He is alive.
We dance because Jesus Christ is risen from the dead.
“He can dance...he can jive...Jesus our Lord is alive.”

Miriam, keep that tambourine handy. You never know when the moment will be right for the people of God to dance. But when that moment comes, we want to be ready to dance and we want to be ready to sing to the Lord, for he is highly exalted. Hallelujah! Amen!