

**Dance, Then**  
Psalm 30  
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“You have turned my mourning into dancing,” the Psalmist writes. This is a sign that we have now entered into the final type of Psalms that we will explore this summer. The psalms of new orientation. First were the psalms of orientation, those that celebrated the goodness and the order of creation and praised God for God’s faithfulness. Second were the psalms of disorientation—psalms of lament, confession, and complaint—written in the midst of some difficulty or need. Some of those were profound cries from the darkness.

And Psalm 30 is not without disorientation. This poet has been in the Pit, but this poet has also been rescued, giving testimony to a new orientation arising from the experience of pain and suffering. Psalm 30 is a typical Thanksgiving Psalm. One of the most interesting features of Hebrew thanksgiving psalms is that embedded within them is a lament. Here we read in verse eight “To you, O Lord, I cried, and to the Lord I made supplication.” The poet pleads for God to hear the cry and to help. God does, evoking thanksgiving.

We shouldn’t be surprised that thanksgiving comes after suffering. In the great story of the Pilgrims of Plymouth Rock the Thanksgiving meal is a celebration that they have survived the first winter which killed so many of them and they have now learned to grow crops and hunt food that will sustain them through the second winter. Joy comes in the morning, after the troubles of the night.

And to express this new found joy the poet writes, “You have turned my mourning into dancing.”

In a moment we will sing the hymn “Lord of the Dance,” set to the familiar Shaker tune “Simple Gifts.” Now, let me assure you that this hymn is not a celebration of a particular Celtic dance troupe. The hymn is an Easter song, celebrating the victory of Jesus over the forces of evil that crucified him--

They cut me down and I leapt up high  
I am the life that’ll never, never die.

The lyricist, Sydney Carter, drew upon an old English Christmas Carol entitled “Tomorrow Shall Be My Dancing Day.” Here’s the most fun verse from that carol:

In a manger laid, and wrapped I was  
So very poor, this was my chance  
Between an ox and a silly poor ass  
To call my true love to my dance.

One of the interesting features of both hymns is that they are written from the first person perspective of Jesus and no matter what happens to him, Jesus sees it all as part of the dance and he invites us to share in the dance with him.

Carter, the lyricist, said of his hymn "Lord of the Dance"

I see Christ as the incarnation of the piper who is calling us. He dances that shape and pattern which is at the heart of our reality. By Christ I mean not only Jesus; in other times and places, other planets, there may be other Lords of the Dance. But Jesus is the one I know of first and best. I sing of the dancing pattern in the life and words of Jesus.

Despite the similarities, it doesn't appear that Carter was familiar with the "Hymn of Jesus" from the Gnostic text *Acts of John* which Pat read a moment ago. That is a story of Jesus leading his disciples in a dance and proclaiming "Grace danceth. I would pipe; dance ye all."

That Gnostic story is quite a fun one. Jesus knows this is his last night, his last supper with his friends. Both to celebrate that moment and to prepare for his impending arrest, torture, and crucifixion, he sings and dances. We are reminded once again of the intimate connection between suffering and joy, between lament and thanksgiving.

Sydney Carter, the lyricist, said of his hymn "Lord of the Dance" "I did not think the churches would like it at all. I thought many people would find it pretty far flown, probably heretical and anyway dubiously Christian. But in fact people did sing it and, unknown to me, it touched a chord ... Anyway, it's the sort of Christianity I believe in."

His worry was because many Christians don't picture Jesus being so exuberant. Plus, many traditions, like my own Baptist tradition, look askance at dancing, because dancing can lead too easily to sexual temptation.

Another reason Sydney Carter thought churches might not like his hymn is because he drew inspiration for the hymn from a particular statue of the Hindu god Shiva.

Friday night I attended the Choir Party at Alice Love and Dave Nichols house, and behold, in their garden, was Shiva, Lord of the Dance. Which makes sense since Alice and Dave are dancers. She loaned me the statue so I could use it for the sermon today.

You might have seen these images--Shiva has many arms, one leg is kicked up into the air, his hair is blowing with the movement, and he is surrounded by a ring of fire. In one hand is the drum that made the first sound of creation and continues to mark time. In the other hand is *agni*, the fire that will destroy the universe. With his other two hands he makes gestures dispelling fear and promising refuge. With his feet he tramples upon ignorance and illusion, which hold humanity back from enlightenment.

The Sanskrit word Nataraja translates to Lord of the Dance and is used of Shiva to represent his Dance of Bliss when he becomes the cosmic dancer, destroying a weary universe and making preparations for a new creation. The Hindu Lord of the Dance is a symbol of salvation, as illusion and ignorance are defeated and humankind is liberated.

"O Lord, you brought up my soul from Sheol, restored me to life from among those gone down to the Pit. Sing praises to the Lord, O you faithful ones, and give thanks to God's holy name."

So, repeatedly this connection is being made in Hindu sculpture and Hebrew poetry and contemporary music that joy is born in the morning after the dark of night, that dancing comes after mourning, that creation results from destruction, that thanksgiving arises from lament.

When we are in need, we call to God for rescue, and when God rescues us, we erupt in praise and thanksgiving. Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann writes that “the Psalms regularly bear witness to the surprising gift of new life just when none had been expected.” Or again “the hymn in its primal assertion is a statement of victory that has happened in a situation that could have ended in defeat but did not.”

The task of thanksgiving, then, is to acknowledge our life, our joy, our blessings as gifts that might not have been, and, thus, are all that more to be treasured.

And not to stop simply with words of praise and celebration. God has rescued us, now let’s do something with ourselves. Let’s share that gift and bless other people. To give thanks is to make a commitment to be good stewards of the gift God has given to us.

This is Homecoming Sunday, when we gather together to picnic on the patio, fellowship with friends, and launch into the activities of a new school year. Today is a day of goodness and celebration.

So, dance, then, for God has drawn us up from the pit and clothed us in joy.