

A husband was purchasing a ball-point pen. The clerk asked, "Doing Christmas shopping?" He answered, "Yes, this pen is for my wife." "Is it a surprise?" "I'll say, she's expecting a new car." Some of you may be surprised at what you receive or, rather, at what you don't receive this Christmas! A little boy paid a visit to Santa and presented him with a list of requests: a bicycle, a train, a bat and ball, a rocket set, and an airplane. Santa was impressed. He said, "Thanks for the list. I'll check between now and Christmas to see whether or not you've been a good boy." The little boy reached over, took the list back, and said, "Never mind, I'll settle for the bicycle."

Yes, some of us are often surprised at what life gives us, even though we know better. Glenn Fuller opened this Advent season with an excellent sermon on point counterpoint. Before light, there is darkness. There are times when you don't feel like dancing. Glenn said, "Jesus came not into a sentimentalized, romanticized, spiritualized world. He came into a world of darkness, of deep fear, of oppression by the foreigner...And the world is still evil; it still lies in darkness."

In our lifetime, we have witnessed major social changes; even the youth here today live in a different world from the one into which they were born. Sometimes the changes make your head swim. Traditions, customs, old ways are all changing. There has been a significant loss of authority; the government, school, and church have lost their former authority. There have been far-reaching liberation movements and social revolutions. Although wars have been confined to local confrontations, increasingly we find ourselves on the brink of global disaster.

As a reaction to the monumental changes, we have witnessed a resurgence of conservatism: political, social and theological conservatism. It seems to be a gasping and grasping attempt to hang on to the past, like hanging on to a tree trunk in a tornado, only to find that the tree is also uprooted and flying with the wind. I suspect that the people who have the most difficulty with the changes are people who were very comfortable in the old days. The drastic changes in our society are disturbing to people who had it good. Some of you here this morning have difficulty understanding why change had to come, why our great nation is undergoing a social revolution. Some of you wish for the old days when there was order and where most people knew their place.

But, some others of you here this morning are rejoicing in the changes. Those of you who are black or members of some other ethnic minority are indebted to the civil rights movement. Finally, blacks have a chance. No longer are they in the back of the bus. Unless the current whiplash turns the clock completely back, blacks can live where they please and enjoy job security--no longer passed over for promotion, no longer the last to be hired and the first to be fired.

Some of you here this morning may be homosexual. Some of you may have homosexuals in your family. Gays and lesbians have long suffered pain, harassment, job discrimination and ostracism from their families. Because of the gay liberation movement, now there is a growing awareness and hope for gay people to live in the open and be guaranteed the right to work.

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Some of you here this morning are women who want to be more than a wife and mother, who want a career, who want to compete in a "man's world." Because of the women's movement, in many places women are granted equal pay for equal work. There are signs of hope that women will no longer be discriminated against because of their sex.

We are living in the midst of monumental change--disturbing to some, welcomed by others--as a nation, as a planet, as a church, as individuals. The old is gone, and it is not clear where we are going. Woody Allen puts it this way, "More than any other time in history, mankind faces a crossroads. One path leads to despair and utter hopelessness. The other, to total extinction. Let us pray we have the wisdom to choose correctly." We gather here this morning in the church of Jesus Christ to celebrate the first advent--the birth of the Messiah--and to anticipate the consummation of God's revelation in Jesus. We gather this morning to tell each other again that the future is not as bleak as Woody Allen predicts. We gather this morning to celebrate again the hope we have in the dancing day.

Of course, we want to conserve. We want to conserve that which is good in the past. But, let's not conserve the wrong things. Rather than try to hold on, let go. Rather than try to restore the old ways, let's rejoice that some of the old unjust hurtful ways are disappearing. There is hope for a better world. Let the old world go, and let's influence the present. Let's mold it. We have an unprecedented opportunity to create the future. Let's not get disillusioned or so disturbed by the changing times, we forget the future. Let's help bring God's future! We can help create and fashion a world which approximates the kingdom of God, a world where all people are treated with respect and dignity, a world where everyone gets a chance, where everyone is guaranteed the right to an education and the right to employment, a world where everyone has food and shelter, a world in which our children and grandchildren will still have a planet, a world that has gone beyond war.

God's future is our hope. Rejoice this Christmas! We live in hope! Our God is a dancing God, and nothing inhibits, prevents, stifles or represses the Holy Spirit. The God who raised Jesus from the dead can dance through the worst of scenarios--undefeated, unscathed, victorious. We all have images of God to help us understand the creative and redemptive force we call God. Some people image God as a man, a man in the sky who resembles Santa Claus. A smaller minority image God as a woman. Some image God as king, or ruler. Some picture God as spirit which is closer to the truth, but spirit is difficult to image unless you think of a ghost.

But, how about dance? Can you image God as a dance, the dance itself? Can you see the grace, vitality, and joy? I can see butterflies dancing, leaves dancing in the wind, rippling water dancing over the rocks, neutrons and protons dancing in relationship to each other. A dancing God is never quenched or stopped. The dance rises above the obstacle, or dances around it. A dancing God can take the most impossible of circumstances, the most discouraging of situations; and energize them, redeem them, with vitality, movement, and hope.

One morning Sidney Carter backed his car out of the garage and heard a crunching sound. He got out of his car to see that he had backed the car over his three-year old son and killed him. How do you live with something like

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that? He grieved and during the process of grief, rediscovered hope. He took an old tune from the Shaker religion and set his own text to the tune. We know the song as "Lord of the Dance." In the midst of his darkest day, Carter experienced the presence and the power of the dancing God.

I danced in the morning when the world was begun,
I danced in the moon and the stars and the sun.
I came down from heaven and I danced on the earth.
At Bethlehem I had my birth.

I danced for the scribes and the pharisees,
But they would not dance and they wouldn't follow me.
I danced for the fishermen, for James and John.
They came with me and the dance went on,

I danced on the Sabbath and I cured the lame.
The holy people said it was a shame.
They whipped and they stripped and they hung me high.
They left me there on a cross to die.

I danced on a Friday when the sky turned black.
It's hard to dance with the devil on your back.
They buried my body and they thought I'd gone.
But, I am the dance and I still go on.

They cut me down and I leapt up high.
I am the dance that'll never, never die.
I'll live in you if you'll live in me.
I am the Lord of the dance said he.

REFRAIN: Dance, dance, wherever you may be.
I am the Lord of the dance said he.
And I'll lead you all wherever you may be,
And I'll lead you all in the dance said he.

Dance! Get out on the floor! Leave the observers' section; leave the sidelines and get involved. One of the advantages of modern dancing is that you don't need a partner. In my day, the girls sat on the sidelines, looking hopeful, giggling with each other, giving the boys the eye. The guys gathered in one corner, seemingly talking to one another; but, each keeping one eye on the girls. Eventually, one of the guys would break off from the rest, sidle up to a girl and ask her to dance.

Now, in the modern dances, you don't have to wait to ask or to be asked. You can dance by yourself, and no one knows or cares if you don't have a partner. Isn't that great! And, you don't even have to know how to dance! Just get out there and shake; at least, that's what it looks like to me. And do you know what is terrific about the youth today? They don't laugh at you! They tolerate you and each other. You can do your own thing, your own dance. There are no expectations; just dance.

Some of you, though, are already dancing, but you're dancing the wrong dance, or not dancing the beat, you're not moving with the rhythm. Your ears are listening to some other tune. You're listening to fear, or prejudice, or

self-doubt telling you, "Oh, you shouldn't be out here dancing, making a fool, a spectacle of yourself. Let others take care of the world. Don't get involved. Go sit down, be part of the problem, rather than part of the solution!" If you're listening to those voices and those tunes; if you're dancing the wrong dance, let Jesus tap you on the shoulder and ask, "May I have this dance?"

Sisters and brothers, let's dance!

PRAYER OF INTERCESSION, By Glenn Fuller

Dear God and Parent, who revealed yourself at this sacred season in the form of a babe, even Jesus the Christ, Immanuel, Messiah, Savior, Lord; we praise and thank you for this wondrous gift.

Open us anew:

To the mystery and wonder of your advent,
To the innocence and purity of the Baby Jesus,
To the austerity and simplicity of the manger of Bethlehem,
To the gladness and joy in the hearts of Mary, Joseph and the
shepherds.

To the triumphant and victorious power of the love of the Christ
Child, which overcame the darkness of the ancient world, and
can overcome our darkness.

We pray for our people in hospital and rest homes; for shut-ins and convalescents in their own homes and apartments. We pray especially for David Blackburn. Fill them all with your healing.

We pray for our people who this Christmas will be bereft of loved ones. Fill them with your love.

We thank you for the long and fruitful lives of those whose birthdays we celebrate: Clarence Foiles, George Dodds, Marie Green, Pearl Hannah, Ruth Thomayer, Al Werry.

We pray for those who have little material Christmas because of homelessness, poverty, loneliness, mental illness, or unbelief. Minister to them with the reality of your presence.

We pray for our world of darkness, of destruction, of despair. Fill it with new manifestations of the Light that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

We pray for ourselves that we may take time in the midst of busy preparations:

To receive anew Christ in our hearts this Christmas,
To understand afresh the love and power of the Christmas message.
To worship again in the mystery and wonder of this season,
To express ad infinitum the love that is given through the Christ of
Bethlehem through every segment of our lives.

Through Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray together,
(The Lord's Prayer)

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DOUGLAS MORRIS
FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
PALO ALTO, CALIFORNIA

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