

KGL+
Sermon
Trinity Church Boston
Christmas I Year B
December 31, 2023

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together always be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

In December 2000, Christopher Walken sits in a hotel lobby in the Marriott Los Angeles.¹ Dressed in a rumpled suit, slouching and gazing listlessly at a point between his feet and the faded green carpet before him, we hear fuzzy muzak coming from a cleaning cart left nearby, and the dull hum of a vacuum. As the muzak morphs into a regular beat, we see Walken slowly wake from whatever descent into the banal he had been slipping towards, and he slowly rises from the chair, swaying unsteadily.

And then he stops.

And he dances.

It's not any kind of dancing, though. His body, once seemingly an incarnate hole in the ground, literally takes off— tapping, twirling with luggage carts and strutting up and down the escalators, defying their monotonous one-way direction. A mixture of Broadway musical and what Walken once described as moves inspired by racoons outside his Connecticut home², there is not one part of the ubiquitous corporate hotel that he doesn't travel through, leaping from mezzanine levels, and ringing the front desk bell.

This was the music video for the electronica group Fatboy Slim's song 'Weapon of Choice', debuted in 2001. Walken, best known to Fatboy Slim's demographic as a mostly psychopathic character actor, is hypnotizing as he dances. Deadpan face, he hints at joy only at a few moments when his body literally takes him into a new being through what appears to be uncharacteristic movements, leaping in and out of elevators and in the empty corridors of a charisma-less hotel. The lyrics of the song repeat themselves: "You can blow with this/ you can blow with that" and Walken hints at the existential nature of choices made which could either trap him or liberate him as the man finding himself in the hotel lobby at that particular point. There is a particularly fine moment in the video when he physically demonstrates this conundrum by choosing between two elevators— both possibly ending up at the same place.

Christopher Walken, as many may know, was actually a trained dancer before he became what was considered a 'serious actor'. At 58 years old in 2000, Walken had approached Spike Jonze,

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wCDIYvFmgW8>

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QWaUuqMJUyk>, minute 8:03 is where he says this

the director of Fatboy Slim’s previous music videos, and asked him if he would film him dancing. At that age, Walken was worried that his body was changing, and that he had only a little time left to do the thing which he had loved so much- dancing- with the precision he wanted. Jonze immediately called Norman Cook (better known as Fatboy Slim), and made a proposal, and the deal was set.

The music video took off. It won all sorts of awards that year, was emulated, parodied (the highest form of compliment in those nascent years of the internet), and Walken became a star once again for an entirely new generation of audiences. He said that that video may have been the most successful point in his career, simply because of the intergenerational reach it afforded him. But he also said that it was certainly not the only time he had danced in a movie—in fact, he said that he tried to incorporate a dance move into every film he was in, regardless of the role, and much of the time those moments and moves were retained in the final cuts—you could find him dancing if you knew to look for it.³

“With dancers,” Walken said in an interview a year ago about his creative process, “rehearsal is called repetition — you just do it over and over until the moves become a part of your muscle memory. The whole discipline and the physical aspect is not unlike being an athlete: It hurts and you have to do it and you get sore... And even though I don’t dance much anymore, you carry being a dancer with you for your whole life.”⁴

We serious, pragmatic, realistic people here, sometimes we forget what it’s like to praise. We forget what it’s like to rejoice. We forget what it’s like to carry ridiculous, full-blown delight and joy, even when in the midst of a seemingly dystopian nightmare of a warming, warring world, and proclaim that Good News that God is here. That God abides. That somehow the promises made to those people such a long time ago, still remain, still hold true, and that in the mystery of it all, we are asked not to understand it, but to sing. To dance. To laugh and weep and still know that joy which strangely warmed our hearts on Christmas Eve when we came to the manger so reverently—that that love remains, even in the harsh light of day, even in the glare of commercial corporate hotel lighting.

In the reading from Luke this morning, Simeon and Anna see their hopes in the holy family as they come to honor God in the Temple—offering what they have, the sacrifice of the poor, two doves. They have been waiting for this moment their whole lives, hoping against hope, and while each of them knows—as prophets are wont to do—that this holy incursion by the Most High will never be welcomed easily by a broken world intent on power and sublimation, and yet they still rejoice. Simeon sings the song which we echo every day in our liturgy of Evening Prayer, which allows that God’s gift doesn’t always come conveniently, but God’s grace always comes.

³ <https://thehollywoodinterview.blogspot.com/2010/01/christopher-walken-hollywood-interview.html>

⁴ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/2022/02/17/christopher-walken-severance/>

Simeon and Anna praise God. They delight. They hold the long wait and the fulfillment of promises so many have discarded because it took too long for them, or it seemed illogical to believe. They have chosen again and again the hard-won freedom of belief in a God who chooses to come closer to God's people. Even if they won't live to see the fruition. Even if they don't completely understand it. They believe. And they sing.

A 2013 New York Times article, recently re-riffed this past month, asked the question: "Why don't we dance more?" Self-consciousness, lack of opportunity, professionalization, "clubs opening too late for parents", the ongoing reduction of roles to either viewer or performer, all of these, the article says, lead to a profound lack of opportunity for dancing throughout our lifetimes. "Isn't this madness?" the article asks. "Shouldn't we engage in celebratory movement at least some small part of the time?"⁵

Yes. Yes we should. When we are stuck in the mundane hells of our own or others' making, the endless cycle of horror, then outrage, then reaction, then avoidance of each and every news alert. This is a broken place. But praise is resistance, friends. Praise is prophecy. Praise and hope and joy aren't counterintuitive, they are necessary for those who believe that Christmas is more than one night, one rendition of 'Hark, the Herald Angels Sing' long.

Maybe we need to be a little more Simeon and Anna in our lives, and especially a little more Christopher Walken—quietly adding in a dance move to every bizarre character and scenario he (and we) inhabit—because that is who he, and we, are; who he, and we, were created to be; sore muscles and repetition and all, making even the soul-crushing emptiness of a business hotel a place of beauty and redemption. And that is who we are too, who we can be, eyes open to witness the impossible and the miraculous right in front of us if we so choose it.

Let us dance.

Amen.

⁵ <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/13/magazine/why-dont-we-dance-anymore.html>, also see the more recent riff on the question, from a slightly different perspective: <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/12/02/briefing/why-dont-we-dance-more.html>