

Keep an Eye Out

Rev. John Allen

When I was in High School I spent parts of two summers learning to sail tall ships. It was kind of a mini semester-at-sea type experience. Along with about 20 other students I learned the ins and outs of work as a deckhand on a 131 foot fishing schooner named the Harvey Gamage. We sailed from Halifax Nova Scotia to Boston as a part of the parade of tall ships.

The days were busy with all sorts of tasks, we had some classes, and there also always seemed to be something to clean, or some dishes to do, or some maneuver with the sails that would take all of us.

The nights.....were quiet.

Only four of us at a time would be awake, one at the helm to steer. The officer standing over their shoulder keeping an eye on everything.

And then two of us on the bow, keeping watch. We were there to look out for, and listen for, other ships or navigation markers.

Shifts on bow watch were an hour. And I remember several of those nights, out of sight of land, overcast skies, deep black sea, just staring out into what seemed like nothing, looking for, something, anything really.

They remain some of the longest hours I can remember.

We had to stay standing, but even still it was common to fall asleep.

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Today we begin the season of Advent.

This is the season in which we prepare our hearts for the celebration Christmas. We mark the passage of this season with this wreath, and its slowly growing light. A light that shines into the longest nights of the year.

But you also know what's coming. You know the Christmas Story. You know the miracle awaiting us at the end of this season. You already know about the baby, and the barn, and the shepherds, and the angels. And so with all this talk of watching and waiting, of hoping and longing, can feel a little like we are heading to a surprise party, but the surprise has already been spoiled, and now we are just sort of playing along.

And that would all be true if Advent was just about waiting for Christmas.

But it is actually about so much more.

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I remember one of those nights on bow watch. We had been told to be on the lookout for the 4 second flashing red light of Bass Harbor Head Light House. Which would tell us we were beginning our approach to our next shore stop in Acadia.

I remember, looking back and forth across the same blankness again and again thinking that any minute now we would catch the first flash of that light on the horizon.

Then I heard a voice behind me. “See anything?” It was the captain, who was a fairly enigmatic figure aboard, he didn’t really have a lot to do with us students, just was behind the scenes making sure everything was going ok. This may have been the first time he had spoken to me.

“See anything.”

“Not yet.” I said.

“What’s that?” He put his arm over my shoulder so that I could look down the length of his arm and sure enough, there was an enormous boat, a container ship. All lit up, right there, about a mile or so off in the distance, crossing our path.

Suddenly, it was so plain, I could not understand how I had missed it. Turns out I wasn’t nearly as attentive as I had thought I was. And not nearly as awake as I felt.

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Here is that little parable from Jesus again:

“It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.”

If Advent were just about waiting for Christmas, it would just be a countdown.

No Advent is the season in which we seek to gaze out toward the horizon of our time, searching for the presence of God as a beacon of hope.

It is the season where we heed Jesus warning to keep awake, to stay alert, for in fact we do not know how God will show up in our lives next.

It is easy to be on the lookout for something you are expecting.

It is another thing entirely to develop the kind of keen eye that can scan even the seemingly void spaces in our lives to see what God might be about to do next.

Advent is our chance to try to learn whatever wisdom the wise men had that sent them chasing after that rising star.

Advent is our chance to learn to listen to the songs angels sing in our ears.

Not to just wait to hear the story again of how it all happened long ago to someone else.

But to believe that God is with *us, here and now*. If we can perceive it.

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This year has kind of felt like one long watch.

One perpetual anxious scanning of a bleak and void horizon, wondering where hope would come from and what it would look like.

So just two tips that I learned.

First, don't be so sure you know what you are looking for. You might be surprised. I think we all have some thoughts about how things might be different after this pandemic, but the moment you get too fixated on watching and waiting for some specific thing, you might miss where God is actually showing up.

And second, don't go it alone. We always had two people up there, usually just because we needed someone to keep us awake. In this season of advent, stay connected with the church, we are watching, waiting, and searching together. We'll miss less when watch together.

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None of us know what is coming next. None of us know just what lasting changes this historic time will leave us. Some of us maybe ourselves awaiting the results of a test. Or fearing for a loved one who is fighting for their life.

Our faith is in Emmanuel, God who is with us.

And we may believe with all our hearts that God is with us. We may trust to the depth of our souls that God is present and active in this world, and in our lives.

We could believe all that, and still not know what we are looking for out there.

Advent is the time when we remember that.

And its the time when we hear these words from Jesus. Words I also remember being whispered to me on the bow of that ship.

“Hey, stay awake!”