

“KEEP ALERT!”
Isaiah 64:1-9; Mark 13:24-37
November 30, 2008
The Rev. Elizabeth Oettinger

When I was fifteen and a half, I started learning to drive. In those days, the first place where one got behind the wheel was not the church parking lot, where I notice many young drivers beginning now, but the mall. Yes, back in the olden days, the shopping malls were closed on Sundays, their parking lots deserted except for novice drivers leaning to navigate the mysteries of steering wheel, accelerator, and brake pedal. My dad mostly took me on those first trips, and I was feeling pretty confident about my skills when he handed me over to a good friend of ours, a professional driving instructor named Charlie, but who my sisters and I had called ChaCha since we were very young. It was ChaCha in his dual control car who took me out for my first foray into driving on the road where there were other cars, and pedestrians, and God help me, left turn lanes with separate signal lights. About five minutes into this first voyage, I almost killed us starting to turn left into four lanes of on-coming traffic. Oops. ChaCha took over control of the car, pulled me to the side of the road, and then settled in for a chat. The trick of driving, he told me, was not so much learning to control steering and road speed, though those were important, but learning to read the road, knowing what I was looking for, being alert to potential hazards. “So,” he asked me, “what are you looking for, what are you paying attention to out there?”

It was a good question for a young driver. What we see and notice has a lot to do with where our brains cue us to look. And that’s true not just for driving. In our gospel reading today from Mark, Jesus says over and over again: stay awake, keep alert, pay attention. And all of that is very good advice generally. Most of us need to be reminded, not once but many times, to live all our lives more mindfully, to focus ourselves on the present and more fully appreciate where we are on any given day in any given moment. But there’s a reason that the “stay awake,” “keep alert” texts of the gospels are always read on this first Sunday of Advent. We hear them on this Sunday in particular, this first Sunday of the Christian year, because Advent time directs us towards what we are to pay attention to. Especially in these days of 24 hour news and being bombarded by all sorts of information from seemingly endless sources, we, many of us, need direction. Where should we look? To what do we pay attention?

We all live in the same world, but have you noticed that this same world is perceived very differently, even by just the people you know. Most of us have last week gathered around Thanksgiving tables with friends and family and friends and family of friends and family. I don’t know about you, but I have sat through more than one Thanksgiving dinner in my life where the conversation was somewhat like tiptoeing through a mine field. If you talk about politics, oh dear. If the subject turns to our nation’s youth, they are either all going to the dogs or are the best, most promising generation yet. Food is an increasingly dangerous subject these days with dedicated vegans and steadfast omnivores at table together. And in some family gatherings, pretty much everything from Uncle Henry’s new wife to the price of milk can be controversial.

What accounts for that difference? There are obviously multiple factors involved, but one significant factor is how we sift through information, decide what is important, what we’re paying attention to, and what that means. For us as Christians, in Advent, the texts, the music, the rhythms of the church direct us

to prepare for Christ's coming into the world. The story of the baby in the manger is not meant to be a sweet sentimental tale, though we have too often made it so. The story of the Christ child is written to be the astonishing revelation that God once again has chosen us, chooses us again and again; that God has decided to dwell with us, among us, in the midst of the dust and clamor of this world. Not just in some perfect heaven but here. And what it means to prepare for that in Advent time is to learn to tune our eyes, our ears, and our hearts so that we see and hear, we pay attention to signs of God's presence around us. And the fact is that in most cases we won't see that presence unless we are looking for it. We will miss it or dismiss it. We will call it by another name that drains its power. God is here. From the drought stricken deserts of the Sudan to the refugee camps of the Middle East. God is here from the barrios of Miami Beach to quiet little Corvallis and all places around and between. God is here, standing by God's creation and working in ways both subtle and astounding to heal, to reconcile, to give life, to make new. And in Advent, we spend four weeks reminding ourselves to be alert to the signs of that presence, pushing ourselves closer to believing, truly believing that we engage in this posture, this exercise called faith not just for God but with God—partners in loving, defending, and healing.

My favorite definition of faith in the Bible comes from the letter to the Hebrews, that "faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen." The focus of this first Sunday of Advent is hope; and in this world where there is so much that can make us hopeless, so much that pushes us towards cynicism, self-indulgence, or despair, our best and surest antidote to such self-defeating and earth-defeating attitudes is to keep alert, to pay attention, to actively seek and hold to the signs of God's coming.

So what does it mean to seek God's presence? We hear stories of those who see angel choirs or have unbidden, clear, immediate experience of God's presence. And boy, I'd give a lot for that or for a bright neon sign in the heavens or an engraved invitation, but generally our perception of God's nearness, of God's hereness, is more subtle or oblique. One quick example: I remember last January, about two days after Jessie was diagnosed with cancer. I was standing in the check out line of Eddie Bauer buying some clothes. I had left Corvallis so fast I had little with me. Lois Van leer was on the phone, and I was telling her the news, and pretty distraught. Out of nowhere, the woman behind me, touched my shoulder and silently offered me a Kleenex. A little thing. But I'll never forget that touch.

We have to look and see with eyes of faith, and when our seeking eyes are met with examples of courage, or devotion, the stirrings for peaceful change or simple kindness in unexpected places, we choose to take notice and name it God and allow ourselves to live more hopefully. Which is to say we live believing that we are not alone; we live believing that our lives have meaning, that we can make a difference, and love is truly more powerful even than death. God has chosen to be with us. Now we are asked to choose to look for and believe in that presence.

So keep alert! Stay awake. What we choose to follow, what we choose to see and name and find important, what it is we're looking for: these, more than we know, define who we are as people and how we will act in the world. If we would truly be the people of God, then we are looking for all that images or sings or whispers or holds aloft hope; we hold fast to that hope; we live out from that place of hope. We say "yes" to that which we see and our "yes" gives us faith to believe in what is still unseen.

None of us can do this perfectly; we can't do it all the time, but this Advent season, it is our invitation to practice, to be in training if you will, a season to be deliberate about what we notice, an opportunity to look, really look for signs of God's nearness. And if we train faithfully, if we look and notice, pay attention, and dare to let hope bloom in our hearts, then we are promised that come Christmas, we will hear the old story and sing the familiar carols, and joy will break out within us. Thanks be to God. Amen.