

1st Sunday of Advent

Cycle B, 11.29.20

Isaiah 63:16-17, 19; 64:2-7/1 Corinthians 1:3-9/
Mark 13:33-37

LISTENING FOR THE SOUNDS BENEATH THE SURFACE

I'd like to play something for you as we begin our reflection on Advent and today's Scripture. Take a listen:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W5Trznre92c>

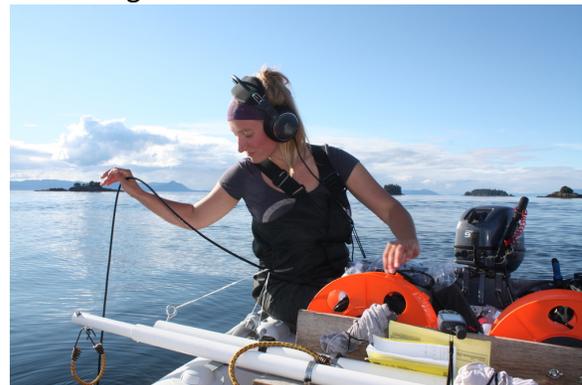
It was much too early to get out of bed on a vacation, especially a vacation in Hawaii, but I had signed up the day before to go on a whale-watching boat. I didn't want to be late for the launch. It wasn't a very large boat – less than two dozen passengers. We had hardly set out a half-nautical mile when the captain abruptly stopped the boat. *Look starboard! I don't think I've ever seen a humpback that close. By law, we can't approach it; but we can't stop it if it approaches our boat.* He probably used that same line with every new batch of tourists. *Look, there's the calf next to the female, and a male is following close behind.*



It was awe-inspiring to be that close to one of Nature's largest and most magnificent creatures. Then, the first mate did something incredible. He dropped a hydrophone into the water – a microphone that listens to underwater sounds. Over the loudspeaker of the boat came the faint sounds like the ones I played a moment

ago. I was blown away. A symphony of muffled sound playing beneath the surface that one can't hear except with that hydrophone.

Dr. Michelle Fournet, a scholar of bio-acoustics, is the director of the Sound Science Research Collective and has been "listening" to the hauntingly eerie songs of humpback whales in Alaska for the past ten years. But this past summer was one she had never seen — or heard — before. In a normal summer, Alaska's bays would have been filled with hundreds of cruise ships and whale-watching boats. But this year, instead of the constant hum of boat motors, the ocean is filled with whale songs. In the absence of the million-plus humans and their noisy engines, humpback whales are singing more, resting more and socializing more.



With tourism at near-zero during the pandemic, the endangered whale populations are thriving in the silent oceans. Dr. Fournet said: *"When an animal calls less, the likelihood of it finding a comrade goes down significantly. Our human presence alters their social structure."* It's the first time in human history that marine biologists have had the technological ability to listen to the whales without human interference. They're comforted by the fact that even though people are not on the ocean right now, the whales are still there.

The message of Jesus in today's gospel is a call to watchfulness and awareness. His is the call of a ship captain: "Look starboard." Like the "song of the whales," so much in life, especially the life of the Spirit, is inaccessible to us because of the noise in our environment – not just physical noise, but the distractions that constantly swirl around us. If the pandemic has done anything good for any of us, it has forced us to slow down our pace, to "throttle down" our engines, like the captain of my boat in Hawaii, so that the waters would be calm -- calm enough to hear what would otherwise go undetected.



Advent invites us to pay attention to the voice of God, the hand of God, the love of God in every joy and sorrow, in every pain and trauma, in every victory and setback before us. Like the song of the whales in the quiet ocean, may we "watch" this Advent to behold the beauty and wonder and grace of God's presence in every moment of our lives.

I was surprised to read an opinion piece in the New York Times on Thursday by Pope Francis. His words seem perfectly fitted for the last days of November and ideal to take with us into these four weeks of Advent as we prepare for the dawn of God's light at Christmas. Speaking of the pandemic, the Pope wrote: *These are moments in life that can be ripe for change and conversion. Each of us has had our own "stoppage," or if we haven't yet, we will someday: illness, the failure of a marriage*

or a business, some great disappointment or betrayal. As in the Covid-19 lockdown, those moments generate a tension, a crisis that reveals what is in our hearts. In every personal "Covid," so to speak, in every "stoppage," the Pope writes, what is revealed is what needs to change: our lack of internal freedom, the idols we have been serving, the ideologies we have tried to live by, the relationships we have neglected. He echoes Isaiah's stirring lament: *All of us have become like unclean people, all our good deeds are like polluted rags; we have all withered like leaves, and our guilt carries us away like the wind.* Having admitted the sins of the people, Isaiah urges them to stand confident, waiting for God to reveal his presence and power.

Lamentation isn't just complaining; it's a prayer of faithful people in the midst of suffering and it's a legitimate prayer for all of us these days. Although we seldom incorporate such a formal complaint in our public prayer, ancient Israel did. And why not? To whom else, if not to God, can we turn when we are oppressed, overburdened, hopeless?



Religious souls lament the absence of God. Tender hearts lament the fate of those who have been marginalized or hurting like the millions infected with the virus. Broken spirits lament the suffering that touches every human life. Through the ages believers have cried out: *Where is God? or: How long, O Lord?*

At our online Thanksgiving prayer service on Thursday I was humbled and inspired by the parishioners who shared their reflections after the scripture readings. Two of them acknowledged their gratitude for prayer and the importance of prayer in their lives, including prayers of lamentation. Marlene Matsuoka shared: *In these COVID isolating days, in the wake of horrible tragedy, we need to believe in God and the power of prayer...and be grateful for every human connection — the ones we know and the ones we don't, and most of all, the ones who simply care, selflessly, and regardless.* And, 13-year old Mary Grace Hawkins, reflected on her family's practice of nightly prayer together: *God is always listening no matter how sad I feel. A simple prayer to God asking him to stay with you in these tough times can make such a difference. It makes you feel that you are not alone and that there is a light at the end of the tunnel.*

I hope that our Advent prayer together, even in this unusual setting, teaches us healthy waiting and proper anticipation. This holy season has the power both to quiet our hearts and to sharpen our expectations. In Advent, we, as Church, take on a very counter-cultural stance. We don't turn our days of waiting prematurely into the commercial Christmas that surrounds us. We take seriously the importance of learning the art of "waiting in joyful hope." Little things that we do, personally and communally, can help us: reflecting on the scriptures we hear on Sunday, filling a bag of groceries for our food drive, using some Advent meditation and prayer material to bring the element of faith to these weeks before Christmas: starting each day with the simple ancient prayer: *Maranatha! Come Lord Jesus!* and then repeating it many times throughout the day.

The message of Advent challenges our impatience, and heals our frustration and anxiety. We're called to wait with greater calmness, to act with greater resolve, to live with greater hope. Look starboard, as the boat captain said, and listen for those sounds of God's voice that are too often submerged but that Advent prayer can bring to the surface if we follow the Master's command: *"Be watchful! Be alert!"*



John Kasper, OSFS