

Watch in Hope
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The First Sunday of Advent
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Isaiah 64:1-9; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37

“And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.” -- Mark 13:37

In the fall of 1971, Robert Kiely, a professor of English at Harvard, his wife, Jana, and their three young children moved into Adams House, one of Harvard's thirteen undergraduate residences. The Kielys had been appointed co-masters of the House, and with their move, they began what would turn out to be one of the longest and most distinguished masterships in the history of the Harvard house system.

For twenty-six years, Bob and Jana guided, shepherded, and parented *in loco parentis* thousands of Harvard undergraduates through tumultuous years in their young lives and tumultuous years in the College and country. The Kielys are now retired, and Bob was asked to share some of his memories of their early days as masters. He recounted recently for *Harvard Magazine* one incident in particular that made a lifelong impression on him, his family, and the House.

A few years into his mastership, Kiely was asked to lunch by a small group of students who, it turned out, were gay and asked Kiely if he would serve as the faculty adviser of a new support group for gay and lesbian students they were forming for the College that would be headquartered in Adams House. Kiely was touched by their trust and agreed to be their adviser, and soon the group began advertising itself across the campus. Their reception was not universally warm. Some masters and students in other houses supported the group, some opposed it, and most remained silent. The master of one house said that there were no gay students in his house and that homosexuality was an Adams House problem.

Over time, the Kielys became distressed by the bigotry they witnessed in those early years, and so when the time came for the annual Spring Waltz in Adams House, they made sure that the fledgling support group for gay and lesbian students knew they were invited and were welcome to bring their dates, which they did. Men arrived on the arms of men, women with women, and then, Bob writes, a wonderful thing happened. Here's how he described it:

“French Wall, '83 and his date cut in on my wife and me. When I found myself waltzing with a tall handsome junior, I asked, ‘Who should lead?’ I'll never forget his answer: ‘You're the master!’” (*Harvard Magazine*, November-December 2011, p. 72)

When we ask what sorts of things we wait for and hope for and watch for in Advent, I will remember Bob Kiely's story and stories like it. I will remember that throughout human history, there have always been women and men of courage and integrity who could see past the prejudices of their day and were able to confront the forces of darkness with the candlelight of love. They were able to rise above their own self-interest and their own socially-sanctioned privilege as white people or male people or straight people or able-bodied people or middle-class people or Jewish people or Christian people and recognize the not-yet nature of human history.

Whatever the end of the world may mean, it certainly means that we have not yet arrived at it. If, by the word “end,” we mean the end of historical time, then we know we're not yet there, despite the writes and re-writes of folks like Harold Camping. If, by the word “end,” we mean the point or purpose or essence – as in the Catechism question “What is the chief end of man?” -- then we also know that we're certainly not yet there. We are not yet the creatures God intends us to be. So long as there is

inequity in the distribution of resources, so long as there is inequality in relationships, so long as there is injustice in courts and laws, and so long as there are women and men recognizing these wrongs and working to right them – so long as this is the fabric of human history, we will be living in the world of not-yet.

That state of affairs is what the church means by Advent, a season easy to sentimentalize. The Advent calendars Karen gave to the children and which everyone is encouraged to open together, day by day, should not be your only experience of Advent if you're older than twelve. Advent is our preparation for Christmas, to be sure, but it's also a reminder of Christ's second coming, and of the two, the second is the more important.

That's the focus of the readings from scripture during Advent. While the culture around us coos cozy carols relentlessly, we in the church focus our attention elsewhere. We focus our attention not on the disappointment of Christ's first coming, but on the hope of his second. We focus our attention not on history, which is, at best, a curate's egg, but rather on the not-yet of history – history as God intends it and as it not yet fully is. The history caught in glimpses when a straight master waltzes with a gay junior while discrimination swirls around them like the music.

These are the signs, the flickers, the small flames of hope we light each Advent to keep us awake to God's call and pointed in the right direction. Someone told me recently that the headlights on our cars illuminate only a few yards in front of us, but with just that much illumination, you can travel all the way across America even if you have to drive entirely at night.

The word for this first Sunday of Advent, this Sunday when the familiar cycle of the church year begins again, is "Awake!" the verb. It's the verb Jesus urged upon his first followers in today's gospel reading from Mark, and it's the same verb he urges upon us today: keep awake. Don't be lulled to sleep by the lullaby the world steadily hums: the sappy songs of the season, the advertising jingles for the doorbusters on Black Friday and Shrinking Thursday; the reassurances of self-serving politicians that the economy is on the road to recovery and that the return of our unsustainable lifestyle is just around the corner.

And don't lull yourselves to sleep, I'm sure Jesus would be saying to our media-soaked generation, with the vast entertainment industry of movies and television and video games and the Internet. When historian David McCullough was asked what future generations will wonder about us, he answered, "How we could have spent so much time watching TV" (Tune.com, June 20; Christian Century 7/12/2011). A lot of us, it seems, are channel-surfing or updating our Facebook pages while Rome burns.

The Buddha called his followers to mindfulness; Jesus called his to keep awake. They're not the same, but they both warn us against sleepwalking through history. Every Advent the church repeats the warning of its crucified and risen Head: keep awake.

I close with a story about one person who tried, as best he could, to stay awake. A. J. Muste, the labor, peace, and civil rights activist of a generation ago, was said to have kept a nightly vigil outside the White House during the Vietnam War, regardless of the season or the weather. One rainy night, the story goes, a reporter asked him, "Mr. Muste, do you really believe you can change the policies of our country by standing out here in the rain with a lighted candle?" And Muste is supposed to have replied, "Oh, I don't do this to change the country. I do this so the country won't change me."

The Advent candles we light will not change the policies of our country or our world. They are, rather, reminders of the vigil we keep as followers of the Prince of Peace – the vigil of our waiting and hoping and praying and watching that as followers of the One who has died, is risen, and will come again, the world may not change us.