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Deserts die at the oasis: Resisting resignation

The Great Watch



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Advent - arrival - actually means, literally translated, future. Thus, in the season of Advent, and in the Stories of God that accompany it, there is a curious mixture of present and future, of presence and absence, of possession and expectation. That curious mixture is mirrored in the Word of this first Sunday of Advent, where we find the Jeremiah speaking about days that are to come, when words of salvation will be fulfilled by God and promises kept. But that day is not yet here. In the Gospel, Jesus describes a world that is breaking apart, but prescribes only watching and prayer as antidotes.

This curious mixture is also mirrored in the hearts that are assembled at the threshold of Advent. Within our ranks are hearts that smile at the manifestations of God's presence in their children, but also hearts that are seeking that presence anew after taking leave of some loved ones who have finished the journey. There are hearts touched by wonder and wound, quest and question.

It is to this curious mixture that Advent addresses itself. It suggests to us that where human hearts keep watch for God, where they practice the virtue of watchfulness, there the encounter with God becomes a living possibility. After a year that was filled to bursting, but often not bursting with fulfillment we need to start again, and the starting block is watchfulness. But for what should we be keeping an eye out?

The prophet Isaiah tells us a short, but helpful story.

»Watchman, what is left of the night? Watchman, what is left of the night?»
 The watchman replies, «Morning is coming, but also the night.
 If you would ask, then ask; and come back yet again.» (Isaiah 21, 11-12)

The watchman who stands on the parapet normally gazes outwards across the landscape to detect and warn of approaching danger. But the question posed by the people is not about the danger that lies outside the walls. It is about the fear that resides within their hearts. They built the walls to keep out the danger. But that feeling of security comes with a price. Now they cannot see the horizon. And if you cannot see the horizon, you cannot tell the progression of the night, nor the advent of a new dawn. The watchman does not offer a final solution for their fear, but offers them an oasis. »Morning is coming, but also the night. If you would ask, then ask; and come back yet again.« We can find comfort here and now in knowing that someone else, the watchman, who takes more risks than we can right now (he stands exposed on the wall while we stand secured behind the wall), can see more than we are able to perceive, and that he is willing to tell us tales of what is yet to come. We can take comfort here and now in the watchers of our lives, who might not have a final solution to our problem, but who invite us to come back and ask again, who give us more than one chance to speak of that which afflicts us and who thereby offer us their accompaniment on a journey longer than we would like.

The watchfulness God asks us to practice in and through Advent teaches us to keep our eyes open for the oases of life, the signs of grace, favour, and goodness, often small and unassuming, which are scattered throughout our lives. We must keep watch for the oasis in the midst of a troubled, chaotic and confusing world that has become our desert. But deserts die at the oasis. If we wish to counteract resignation, then there are three things with which we must grapple if we are to master the art and craft of Advent, namely to keep our eyes open for the oases.

First, we must be watchful against the withering of the heart.

Jeremiah knows this peril in Israel. The people are waiting on better days after years of political instability and insecurity. They are waiting for God to show them the solution. But with the waiting can come the withering. It is all too common to wait for a change that is not forthcoming. We wait for a response to our protests against a politics of injustice. We long for a reply to our call, our challenge, and our request. Often we are waiting still. It is decidedly hard to keep hope alive. Gradually, at times imperceptibly, the initial watchfulness becomes a tiresome drudgery, until there dawns a day when we no longer bother to keep watch.

Such can be the way we come to ignore Jesus' admonition to »watch and pray«. Be awake to what is happening and to the subtle, seminal possibilities. Keep the dialogue alive with God about all these things. In the hiddenness of God, we transgress against watchfulness. Parent's hearts »fade like a leaf« (Is. 64,6) when their unbroken pleading for their children does not lead to their turning away from drug addiction. Among our people there are those who no longer »call on [God's] name or attempt to hold on to [God]« (Is. 64, 7) when they find no relief from mental or sexual abuse, physical battering, or the numbing indignity of unbreakable unemployment. At first we look for God, but gradually we think he has »hidden [his] face from us« (Is. 64,7), and we tire of the search for that face. Finally there dawns a day when we too no longer bother to look. It is very necessary to keep an eye out for an oasis, a sign of hope, a sign of progress. But it is also decidedly hard to do so, because there is always more desert than oases. That is why we need to practice.

Secondly, we must keep awake lest our hearts harden.

If spiritual atrophy prowls on the one side, then spiritual arteriosclerosis skulks on the other. Disappointment, betrayal and hurt can easily build callouses on the soul. Nikos Kazantzakis once wrote: »I spoke to the almond tree, 'Sister, speak to me of God'. And the almond tree blossomed.« But if we let the desert experience of life harden our hearts, we will miss the moments where almond trees, playing children, enduring friendships, helping hands, bread broken and shared, wine outpoured, oil massaged into wounded skin and fire lit against the darkness speak to us of God. Jesus' desire that we should keep awake demands that we make sure that the sudden arrival of God in the midst of our desert sojourn, the ultimate oasis experience, is not met with the scepticism. To keep an eye out for the oasis means that we must be watchful that we do not become people who believe that we have heard it all before. We must resist transmuting into hardened, suspicious cynics, who believe that only deception is to be found. We must refuse to become as cold and calculating as the world that has so bitterly disappointed us. Otherwise we will treat every oasis of life as a *fata morgana*. That is the ultimate tragedy of life: to walk past the waters of life, because we *think* they are not real. As the Bedouin say: »You overlook an oasis precisely at the point, where you least expect to find one«. Who would know this better, than those who constantly practice in the desert?

Therefore, to be watchful requires a third exercise, namely, that we must awaken our lives to the fact that we are immersed in the mystery of God.

We must keep watchful for the sake of a heart attuned to mystery. Such a heart avoids the pitfalls of resignation by adopting two attitudes.

First, we need to nourish a tender hopefulness. Such a tender hopefulness expects to hear something more than all that has already been said, therefore it listens. It has the hope of being surprised, therefore it seeks more than it has already experienced. It holds fast to the hope that it will see more than has already been revealed, thus it casts a second glance. The heart immersed in mystery has the conviction that God has not issued cutbacks in the department of spiritual gifts, strength and grace. Thus, it seeks, everywhere and always.

Secondly, the heart immersed in mystery does not define the mystery it seeks. The hardened and withered hearts all too often try to define the grace they seek like a consumer who rifles through the Christmas catalogue to determine, size, quality, quantity and colour. We are looking for the end result, the solution to our problem, the finished product. An oasis is not a permanent solution to the crisis of the desert, but deserts die at oases. Just because we have not found the definitive solution, does not mean that we have not found a source of life. Mortals do not live by bread alone, nor does life live from permanent solutions alone. The journey counts in the kingdom of God, not just the arrival at the destination!

In our desert experiences we often want more than an oasis. Then we tend to curse the greatness of the small, even while it could nurture, sustain and strengthen us. It is possible to pray for love and stare at the heavens in frustration while the mystery of God clings to us in a child who clutches our ankles. It is conceivable to ask God to touch our souls and miss the wonder of the all holy mystery in the tenderness of a friend who strokes our cheek in the hour of pain. The empty mailbox can blind us to the neighbour who meets us next to it every day. The problem here is definition. In the face of God, the presence of the all holy mystery, you do not define. You genuflect. You adore. And you seek mystery on its own terms. One of its terms is, that we are given oases long before we finally emerge from the desert.

Yet, none of this serves life without watchfulness. We need to practice watchfulness. Advent is for people who make a life-long journey through exhausting deserts. Watchfulness does not come naturally to us. We need to practice, and often. With amazing ease we can find ourselves nodding off when the wait is long or the seeking is more difficult than we imagined. We

need to keep awake in hope, so that you may always look beyond what we have come to take for granted in our friends, in our families, in our fellow citizens, in our lives, and even in our fears. And we need to stay watchful, so that we do not turn to easy or cheap solutions when we should be turning to the wonder of God that is still unfolding, in us and in the world. That is really the point. We do not stand watch in order to grasp the grace that comes to us. We stand watch, in order to be grasped by the God, who comes to us.

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