

It Got Real

Scripture text: Daniel 6:6-27
The Rev. Matthew McCaffrey
Center Church on the Green, November 29, 2020



It's more difficult these days to shop at a bricks-and-mortar retail store, even for essential items. And when it comes to the sorts of things you'd purchase while traveling, or on vacation, those whose livelihood depends on selling cute floppy hats and "wish you were here" postcards and plastic sand toys have had to resort to sending lots of email and placing tons of advertisements in social media in the hopes that someone will see it.

Of course, sending out that many offers means they're going to go to people who have no idea what they're talking about.

Recently my New York Times stories were being interleaved with photos of a decidedly odd T shirt. This black shirt has a blue line drawing of a boat and the curious slogan: "Muster Drill: Interrupting Bar Service Since 1972." I had no idea what a "muster drill" might be — I know I don't have one in my tool box, and I've never seen any of the contractors who have done work at our house using one. So I decided to look it up.

Some of you already know, I'm sure, that a "muster drill" is a mandatory safety exercise that takes place on a cruise ship during

the first day of sailing. It's where you learn where the life boats are, and how many of them are available. It's the time to get familiar with life preservers, and with what to do in case of an emergency. The crew keeps a very careful attendance record, and you could end up being put off the ship if you refuse to take part. It doesn't matter how many times you've been on a cruise, or whether you're feeling up to it, or if you'd prefer to be enjoying your first day on board. Muster drills are mandatory, and they apply to everyone.

Most people think of the muster drill as an annoying ritual. They chose to book a stateroom on a cruise ship so they could relax, unwind. They already know all this stuff. All this talk of evacuation and life preservers and following the crew's orders flies in the face of what they were told about the cruise ship when they bought their tickets: how safe it is, how they can leave all their cares behind. How does any of this stuff apply to them?

Well, you could look at one cruise, a very short jaunt out of Italy and into the Mediterranean. The *Costa Concordia*, an enormous modern ship carrying over 3,000 passengers and over 1,000 crew members, ran aground off the coast of Italy the evening of the day she embarked. A rock named "Scola Piccola" tore a 160 foot gash in the hull. 32 passengers, 5 crew members, and a salvage worker died in the aftermath.

The confusion on board ship was rampant. Passengers were “invited” to return to their cabins a half hour before an “abandon ship” order was issued. Some crew members moved passengers to the lifeboats before an order was given. There was general confusion about what to do and when to do it.

When asked afterward why there had been so much chaos on such a large ship, one response popped up over and over again: Almost no one had taken part in a muster drill before the grounding. No one knew what to do.

When the rule suddenly became real, no one was ready.

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Muster drills are just one regulation that exists blissfully out of the consciousness for most of us. And that’s because there are many...many...more rules and regulations and laws than the ones of which we are commonly aware.

Most of us have a little law library in our heads. You know, that list of what we can, and cannot, do as responsible members of society. We learn toddler etiquette like “don’t hit or bite each other” and only later find out that, yes, there’s also a law about that for grown-ups. Those of us who learn to operate a vehicle find out about stop and go, fast and slow, wait and proceed. We learn that

there are all kinds of laws and rules about where we live, what we wear, how we deal with each other.

But the giant cloud of laws is much bigger than that. There are laws about how we treat our environment, how we participate in the financial market, how we are to be treated as consumers. Many of them are so specific to given situations or so technical that we've never heard of them, and they might as well not be real. With a measure of luck, or protection, or providence, they would for practical reasons not really apply to us.

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And that's the position in which King Darius finds himself. He's the Persian and Mede king who has taken over the Babylonian empire. His realm believes in laws and decrees, and he's the decreemaker. He has a whole stable of governors and regents to keep those decrees from coming back on him. Darius is the law-giver, not the law-receiver.

But in this story Darius has found the Jewish expatriates in his midst to be more than perplexing foreign captives. They live by another code, a Law that they claim is given by the God they worship. That Law requires them to act truthfully and honorably, and unlike his own satraps the Jewish exiles act straightforwardly with him. Darius has been moving to bring them into his inner

court, and in the process paying less attention to his own governors.

The decree that the governors propose seems about as important to Darius as a muster drill. So what if everyone is supposed to bow to him for 30 days? He's the king, right?

But it gets real when it turns out that the Jewish expatriate Daniel is ensnared by the rule, because of the very act that the king finds so refreshing. The king's grief is real, and his hope that Daniel's God will save him is poignant.

When Daniel emerges from the lions' den, King Darius's hope becomes a reality. So does his anger at those who betrayed his trust. And this ruler who had been at the mercy of his minions found hope and faith awakened in him.

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Advent got real for me this year.

I hope I don't disillusion any of you when I say this, but preachers and faith leaders always HOPE that Advent is a meaningful season for the faith communities we serve. We know it's hard for people to hear an invitation to sit quietly, to be expectant, to hold off on the Christmas carols until Christmas Eve, to hear long-ago and far-away stories about other people who waited.

But in this bleak time when no one is exempt from the rules of pandemic infection, Advent is suddenly REAL for me. Now I understand in my heart the cries in ancient prophecy: “Save us! Deliver us! Send us your love! Send someone to stop this affliction!”

It’s all. So. Real.

Advent is not an abstract, long-ago idea. It’s what we need to make sense of all the isolating, the fear, the endless precautions, the exhaustion. And it’s the framework that invites us to HOPE: to hope, yes, for the effectiveness of vaccines and for enough time to dodge the virus while we’re waiting—but also to hope for comfort and reassurance and angels with healing in their wings and the knowledge of Emmanuel...GOD-WITH-US.

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So I pray today, and I hope. I pray for each and every one of you as you take a moment to find the Spirit’s presence in your own spirit. May this season become real: a time of real insight and renewal. May you find real comfort in the promises of God our strength.

May hope lead to a real encounter with God’s healing. Amen.