

Finding the Light at Sea

Epiphany 1 (A)

Written by Penny Duffy

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The wisemen followed the star — the pure, bright, singular light in the vast night sky until it came to rest over the Christ child, the promised light of the world. And there, the wisemen fell to their knees. Here in the dark of winter, we celebrate God's pure light. Epiphany — a revelation, a sensing, a sudden knowing, in this case for the wisemen who humbled themselves, knowing that this small child would lead us out of darkness.

For we long for light — that beautiful counterpoint to the endless emptiness of deep darkness. As John's Gospel puts it, "the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it."

Allow me, if you will, to tell you a story that mirrors those very words. It is a story of light and humility, as so many epiphanies are.

We are in the deep, dark, raging North Atlantic, 100 miles off the coast of Nova Scotia, headed for Cape Cod. I am alone at the helm of our 33-foot racing sailboat. I am 32 years old. Wind shrieks through the rigging. The boat is pounding through waves that are not only breaking over the bow but rising up off the stern. It is cold. I'm in long underwear, jeans, a turtleneck and sweater, a woolen mate's cap, and foul weather overalls, jacket and boots. Night has fallen. It is pitch black. And I know two things.

First, I know that the boat is overpowered by sail. In strong winds, the more sail that's up, the harder it is to control the boat and the greater the chance of being knocked over by a heavy gust. My father and I had shortened the sail before the storm hit — a tricky operation in the best of weather, impossible to do alone. We absolutely *must* shorten it some more.

The second thing I know, that I have just learned, is that my father, my mainstay, my captain, knower of all things nautical, cannot help me. He is old, has a weak heart, and had a long bout with a kidney stone before we left port and is now exhausted. "I can't seem to get up," he says in a trembling whisper from his bunk. "I can't do it alone! We won't make it!" I scream. Our other crew member, strong and sturdy, had been throwing up since we left port the night before. Before the storm, I'd been feeding him spoonfuls of water to keep him hydrated. He is flat on his back, nearly delirious.

I stare at my father's closed eyes and ashen face in shock because I know. I *know* he can't get up. I race back up on deck and am instantly thrown to lee rail, my face inches from black water rushing past. On instinct, I roll over and with two hands yank the rope that controls the sail out of its jam cleat to let the sail fly, spilling the wind and righting the boat. Then I have but seconds to start hauling the massive, wildly flapping sail back in, hand over hand, hand over hand, steering the boat with back of my leg, to regain forward momentum. Understand this: there is no reverse on a sailboat. Unless it goes forward, it will stall, turn side-to the swells, roll over and sink. Just one of the ways a boat goes down in a storm.

Back on course, a wave leaps up from behind and crashes over my head. Water in the cockpit is up to my knees for what seems hours before it drains off the open stern. But terror has only begun. A swell lifts the stern out of the water, threatening to pull the bow under into the wave, pitch-poling the boat to a watery grave. Another way a boat goes down in a storm. Let me count the ways . . . for I know them all.

Through my tears, I'm cursing a blue streak, as all good sailors do, raising my fist to the sky, raging at what God has wrought, if there even *is* a God. Give me light, I shout, my words whipped away in the wind. I *need light* to see up ahead, to anticipate the seas. Come out! I cry to the moon. Please, please please come out.

The boat pounds down. Green water pours off the bow as she rises up from a trough before slamming down again. *Eternal Father, strong to save whose arm doth bind the restless wave . . . Oh hear us when we cry to thee for those in peril on the sea . . . Oh hear us. . .* but there is no answer, and I abandon prayer.

The name of our boat, by the way? Pecusa. That's P E C U S A, for Protestant Episcopal Church of the United States of America. Oh, the irony! I remind myself that I'm a good heavy weather sailor (which I am). "Focus!" I say over and over. "Focus on what's right in front of you. The next wave. The next gust. *Not* the big picture."

With the boat healed over at a steep angle, steering with two hands, foot on the leeward seat for balance, I thread through seas in the dark. It takes all my strength and all my wits to keep us upright and on our compass heading. I am alone in the world. An hour goes by. Another. And another. I am alone with the wind and the seas and the boat. I am alone with my ropes and the whipping sail and tiny running lights. I'm not just a *good* sailor; I am amazing. I am invincible. Bring it on, I say to the howling wind, to the churning seas. Bring it on!

And then. And then the clouds part. God said let there be light and there was light! A full moon! Brilliant. Illuminating *everything*. There is a God! Thank you, God! I stand up. Turn all around. At the top of a swell, my jaw falls open. For as far the eye can see, in every direction, jagged waves are colliding, their roiling white foam held in suspension before crashing down. Endless, infinite — a sea so wild, so chaotic, so at war with itself as to defy description. *THIS* is what I'd been sailing through?? Oh my God oh my God. How small my boat; how vast your ocean. I fall to my knees. Crouch down to hide from the light. Head bowed, I can't move. I can't breathe. I can't think straight. I can't think at all. And in my paralysis, the boat begins to founder, and I am powerless to stop it . . .

And then it comes to me. A revelation. I am *not* alone. *I am not alone!* And I had not been alone all these hours. God had put his power and might on display all around me, but the *light* revealed His love. For how else had I found the will, the drive, the quick reactions, the sheer physical strength to keep us afloat? I stood up, let the mainsail fly, and somehow got the boat back on course. The moon slipped back behind the clouds, but the light? The light was all around me, was with me, was in me.

And all through the night until dawn broke and the gale blew itself out, and the seas calmed and the crew recovered, I kept us upright, kept us moving forward in the renewed strength of my own epiphany. *Emmanuel*. God with us. God with me on this speck of a boat. God with *me*. With *me*. The wonder of it. The absolute knowing of it.

These 40 years later, I remember as if it were yesterday. Who wouldn't? And yet, I also forget. Time and again the light of my *faith* flickers and dims, and the darkness *does* seem to overcome it. Yet, the light of Christ shines on, even through the tiniest crack between the world we know and the one beyond our knowing. But we forget to look for it. Or we look and can't see it. We grow weary and cynical, feel abandoned and lost.

The path to the God is illuminated by humility. Wisemen and shepherds fall to their knees. Sailors fall to their knees. Here, now, in this beautiful church, *we* fall to our knees.

Out there, in the ordinary world, we must humble ourselves enough to sense the light, to open our hearts and know that we are *not* alone. God is with us in times of blessing, times of terror when the world seems upside down, times of isolation and misfortune, and times of laughter and of peaceful contemplation at the end of a good day. We are loved. Even when we feel we don't deserve it, we are loved. Epiphany — the revelation that we are one with God's eternal light. There is no hiding from it.

Let us pray.

Almighty God, as we journey through the ups and downs of this uncertain life, open us to the light of your presence, around us and within us in the here and now and all the unknowns to come.

Let us take a moment of silence now to breathe in Your eternal light as we gaze at the candle before us, right over there above the manger, a beacon in the tumult, a steady presence, and a quiet peace in the heart of darkness. Amen.

--Penny Duffy