

The Arrival

Homily for Advent Sunday 2023
December 2 and 3rd

It was November 6th at exactly 1:05 PM. I was sitting at the Shoppers Drug Mart waiting for my flu shot when my phone announced an incoming text. It was from my wife Peggy. It read:

Baby Vera was born at 1:14 PM!

That's 1:14 PM Ottawa time in case you were wondering how I knew of her birth at 1:05 PM.

Her due date was November 11th and while we knew she would soon arrive, we didn't know for sure the day or the hour. But we were expectant, we were waiting as we turned the calendar to November. Vera has been with us a month and not a day, not an hour goes by when I don't think of her and eagerly await pictures and videos from her home in Ottawa.

As we enter into this season of Advent the Church invites us to ponder this word "Arrival" This is what the word Advent means. The arrival of a baby is Good News and I thank all of you who have been so celebratory in your response to the good news of Vera's birth.

I have been pondering this week the arrival of another baby.

How strange it is to remember the arrival of a baby born more than 2000 years ago in Bethlehem of Judea. Now think about this with me. Because we are so familiar with this story we can easily take it for granted. But how peculiar, a Jewish boy born to a teenage mother is remembered 2 millennia later. It is remembered in music with masterpieces like Handel's Messiah. It is remembered in story. For those old enough to recall, Linus from the Christmas Special "A Charlie Brown's Christmas" this gentle heart retells Luke's account of Jesus' birth as they gather around the spindly Christmas tree. Then there is Rembrandt's depiction of the manger scene in art. St Francis who lived in the 12th century inspiring the first Christmas Crèche.

Even though lost to many today, the trees, lights, gifts, parties, are all in ways inspired by this birth from so long ago and so far away. Take this tree for instance, perhaps the most famous Christmas tree in the world. It is the one in Rockefeller Center in New York City. It has 50,000 lights, weighs 12 tons and is 43 feet wide. The star weighs approximately 900 pounds (408.23 kg) and features 70 spikes covered in 3 million crystals.

No baby in Bethlehem, likely no Christmas tree in Rockefeller Center.

This is the thing about babies..... They change everything. Babies not only change the character of the home, but when they are truly loved they change the character of the adults.

And this is the thing about this Baby, Jesus: He changed everything. But I want you to keep this in mind. His arrival can only change us when we come to realize his significance. This is why on Advent Sunday we think of three arrivals. His arrival 2000 years ago; His arrival that will happen in the future, - what we call the 2nd Coming. These arrivals bookmark the third arrival.

That is his arrival in our lives. It is only when we consider his coming in the past and his return in the future that we can in turn allow this baby to change us in the present.

In our first reading from Isaiah we have the only prophetic writing in the Old Testament that refers to God as Father.

It begins with this statement:

“You O Lord, are our father”

and ends with the reiteration of these words:

“Yet, O Lord, you are our father”.

The passage highlights two things. Our tendency to be wayward kids who forget to whom we belong and where we belong and God’s steadfast fatherly love. That is why it ends with the insertion of the word “yet”. Even though we are wayward, “yet” you are our father.

The passage speaks about our straying from God’s ways because it is so easy for us to forget our Father in heaven. So Isaiah shouts:

“O that you would tear the heavens and come down”

These words are one of the most heartfelt cries in all of the prophets. God we need your arrival. How we need God to come down because without hope in God we are:

like a filthy cloth, we fade like a leaf, and our inequities like the wind take us away.

Without the arrival of God we feel that God has hidden his face from us. And yet because this baby Jesus has arrived he changes everything and so Isaiah ends by declaring

“Yet, Lord you are our father; we are the clay, and you are the potter, we are all the work of your hand.”

Again I think of a baby. How much the hands have to work with a new born. All the cuddling, changing, rocking, feeding, the hands are always at play to lovingly nurture this new life.

There is also the teaching of Jesus about his Second Coming. In the Gospel for today he calls us to stay alert because Jesus will come at a time we do not expect. For those who celebrate Jesus’ first arrival we are to be attentive to his future arrival. This is why he ends by saying: “

“And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake!”

While on a South Pole expedition, in the early 20th century British explorer Sir Ernest Shackleton left a few men on Elephant Island, promising that he would return. Later, when he tried to go back, huge icebergs blocked the way. But suddenly, as if by a miracle, an avenue opened in the ice and Shackleton was able to get through. His men, ready and waiting, quickly scrambled aboard. No sooner had the ship cleared the island than the ice crashed together behind them. Contemplating their narrow escape, the explorer said to his men, "It was fortunate you were all

packed and ready to go!" They replied, "We never gave up hope. Whenever the sea was clear of ice, we rolled up our sleeping bags and reminded each other, 'He may come today.'"

This is the attitude of those who in remembering his first coming are expectant as to Jesus' return. We never give up hope.

It is these two arrivals that then inspire us to welcome Jesus into our homes and lives in the present. Consider the following:

Salmon do it. Hummingbirds do it. Butterflies do it. Turtles do it. All these creatures, and many more: they all . . . go home again.

Salmon find their way from the vast ocean back to whatever tiny tributary in which they were hatched. Hummingbirds fly over 6000 miles to find their nesting sites. Butterflies congregate in the same trees, generation after generation. Migrating turtles closed down whole runways during the summer 2011 at JFK Airport in New York as they made their way back to home ground.

The instinct to "go home" is world-wide, widespread in creation and often times unstoppable. There is in each of us a "homing instinct" that Advent draws out of us. Why?

There is, for each of us, a "homey place" where some part of our soul and psyche long to return, year after year. We all get a bit homesick in December even if we are "home." We get homesick for our childhood homes. We get homesick for our own homes filled with our children. We get homesick for homes we never had. Home sick for loved one who have died. We get homesick for the homes we left behind.

Did you hear about the teary kindergartner on the first day of school: "You aren't homesick already, are you?" the teacher asked. "No, I'm here sick."

And this is where the Church comes into play. The family of God, gathered together by the potter who is fashioning us calls St Peter's to be a place where people feel at home, cared for, belong. One of the people who is preparing for Baptism at Easter invited her husband to Church three weeks ago. He had never been before. She said I want you to come to the place where I have experiencing such love.

When we understand what the first and third arrivals of Jesus signify it allows us to say Jesus I want you in my life. I want to make my home with you. St Paul speaks of this in today's reading from 1st Corinthians. Jesus so wants to work in our lives today says Paul so you will

"not be lacking in any spiritual gift as you await for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ".

What does this mean? When we are welcoming to Jesus and want his arrival in our lives today then like the potter with his clay, he can fashion us into those who lives are reflections of his life. As we intentionally remember Jesus, worship Jesus and love Jesus. Then it is not the baby but the Lord Jesus Christ whose arrival into our lives that we celebrate.

With a deepening understanding of Jesus' arrival we can in turn celebrate the goodness of baby Vera's arrival and all of our arrivals into this world. For you see our very existence is a gift from God and to him we want then offer all that we have and all that we are.