

In her book called FAMILY – THE TIES THAT BIND....AND GAG!, Erma Bombeck writes: “It was the end of Christmas day in 1979. I was under the tree and had just opened a box containing 6 shrimp forks. It was a gift to me from Harry. Harry was our puppy. My husband sat in a chair --comatose -- watching “Bowling for Beers.” Tinsel hung from his ears and lights circled his head. We had decided to leave him decorated through New Year’s before we took him down.

A bird that we had plugged in to hear his lighthearted sound chirped every 3 seconds. I grabbed it by the throat and choked it to death. The kids were riding cardboard boxes down the hill in the snow. The expensive new sleds were under the tree.

I asked myself, “Is this what Christmas is all about?” Is Santa Claus just a seasonal pitchman who arrives by helicopter, sells Bud Lite, passes out samples of Monterey Jack in the supermarket, and hustles insurance to those 55 or over without a physical?

Has communicating with friends come down to the Christmas Newsletters Annual Barf-Off? Did I have to know that Elrod was sleeping dry at three weeks or that Estelle’s 90-year-old father just stiffened in her arms and died during dinner last summer?

And what about the fruitcake disciples who come out of the woodwork every December and insist that you taste it, saying with all sincerity, “No, really – you’ll LOVE this one!” NO I WON’T!

Did anyone care that we ran ourselves ragged to compete with the woodworking teacher who lived next door who hoisted a large sleigh on his roof, had 500,000 lights surrounding his house, and was shown on the 11:00 news with traffic snaked back to the freeway? How far would we go to satisfy the Goddess of Greed? Parents are such saps. Every year we gather our children around our knees and inquire, “What do you want for Christmas this year, Sweetheart?”

An infant who has no control over his bladder, is unable to feed himself, and cannot focus both eyes in the same direction says clearly, “I want the Rattell Pirate Ship, Catalog #90456, made of nontoxic superconstructed balsa and equipped with a 2-masted square-rigger, a crew of 14, a dingy, treasure chest, cannons, adjustable sails, working anchor, derrick for hoisting, and a crow’s nest, cost \$285. Do not accept a substitute. Look for the store in your area on Channel 4.”

I remember one year when all about me my friends had goals of working for peace and restoring America to a place of trust. You know what my goal was? Finding a doll for my daughter that drank milk, burped, rolled its eyes, and said “I’m sleepy,” and then deposited something very disgusting in its diaper.....

I grabbed a handful of tinsel and, lifting it with clenched fist, shouted, “I promise by all that is holy, I will never observe another Christmas without meaning.” (adapted, p. 155-157) Good luck – you’ve done the best you could – now sit back, and enjoy the fact that it’s here. It’s arrived. And you can relax. At least until the relatives all descend. Or maybe not.

But you’ve hopefully come here to church for something a little different. This sermon is my feeble attempt to help. Some of you may be aware that there are a number of choices for the readings for the Christmas Masses. There are readings for the evening, midnight, dawn and day masses. These selections have 2 ambitions: to express the truth and meaning of “his appearance among us” and to communicate that truth and meaning to our pondering consciousness in such a way that we might be transformed. If we are to honor

these texts, they will require some personal involvement. The invitation is to move along the continuum of darkness into dawn into day. This is a classic spiritual movement, from darkness to light. But how do we do this?

The Christmas season has a reputation for special experiences. Unexpected reconciliations happen, we find ourselves, after many years of being away from church, somehow strangely moved, we suddenly realize that we are crying and are not quite sure why, we have a deep-seated peace and we don't know where it came from. Christmas is a time when the 9-5, business-as-usual days are supposed to be supplemented by still and bright nights with angelic serenades. If angels can bring good news to shepherds watching flocks on the long-ago hills of Palestine, surely they can manage to gladden stuck-on-I-40 commuters in the Research Triangle Park, North Carolina. We are hopeful for a more-than-ordinary influx of peace, love, and joy. Depending on our circumstances, this type of experience may be desperately needed. Our health may be precarious; our careers or vocations may be under stress; our finances may be dipping badly; our relationships may be in need of repair; we may be mourning someone who is not with us this Christmas; and the larger world, by our humble estimate, may be going more than a little insane. We want relief from worry and assurance of our worth. And we want it to be visited upon us. We want it brought by the "day-Star from on high." And we want it right now.

However, this way of thinking puts all the weight on heavenly intervention. We will be grateful receivers of whatever gifts miraculously appear, but we do not see ourselves as active participants in bringing about the inner states that can bless our lives. We have our hands out, but our minds are minimally engaged. We think our only task is to passively wait for the arrival of a package, rip open the wrapping, and grab what lies inside. Shirts and blouses, sweaters, coats and ties may be available in this way, but inner states of peace, love, and joy do not arrive ribbon wrapped. When we think they do, we set ourselves up for disenchantment. Many Christmas curmudgeons are only people disappointed by their own expectations.

However, the darkness-dawn-day pattern suggests another sequence, a sequence in which arrival from beyond and attentiveness within play complementary roles. Most likely, an initially darkened state (night) will become aware of a glimmer of light. It's there in those beautifully poetic opening words of Isaiah: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. On those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shone." (Is 9:1) Dawn begins with only a streak. In other words, we see a sight or hear a word. On the surface it may be an ordinary sight or word. It may be the sight of a child with mouth open and tongue out, trying to catch falling snowflakes; it may be a word from our grandmother about how much she misses grandpa this time of year; it may be a phrase from an old carol; it might be the sight of a 'Charlie Brown' Christmas tree. We cannot predict the sights and words that will make an impact and open darkness to the possibility of dawn. But for some reason these sights and words attract us, call us to pause and to ponder. On a level deeper than rationality, we intuit that what we have seen and heard holds the promise of hidden gifts.

And so we are at a crossroads. We can ignore the glimmer of dawn and continue on with the tasks that claim our immediate attention. If we do, darkness remains. But if we take the invitation and open the gift that has been given, we begin a process that leads to the positive inner states of Christmas. We hold the sight or word in memory, act like Mary and ponder, connect it to other things we know and feel, and talk to friends about it, whisper the best simple prayer we can come up with, even if we haven't tried to pray in many a year. As we do this, the beginning of dawn unfolds into day. We pursue the attractive sight and word until we understand why we are attracted. In this process of understanding, we come to realization, a further stage of consciousness, more maturity, even a taste of holiness. In realization a truth comes home to us in a way that includes our identity and destiny. We grasp the essential, and the essential is more beautiful than we had

ever imagined. G.K. Chesterton was on to it when he suggested that Christmas was like finding a room in the back of our heart that betrayed us into good. Isn't that a great image? We get BETRAYED into good. Or, as C. S. Lewis otherwise titled his book – SURPRISED BY JOY. This finding, or something like it, may be the full sun of Christmas Day, but it will only be ours if we freely and persistently engage the revelatory process of darkness-dawn-day.

Once the darkness-dawn-day process of Christmas begins, it has a momentum that we must attend to and cooperate with. But the previous question is: How does it start? How do sights and words leap out at us and make a claim on our attention? Although there is no way of telling what sights and words will have our name on them, there is a way to prepare to see and hear them. If we create and cultivate antennae, they will eventually pick up signals. The way to do this is to engage in a spiritual practice that is designed to establish the necessary eyes and ears. What John Shea suggests is to say this prayer for attention every morning, midday, and night: "Lord, I know I have eyes that see not and ears that hear not. Today, something I see may cause me to pause: something I hear may invite me to ponder. Keep my eyes and ears open so I may follow what calls to me into the grace of Christmas where darkness unfolds into dawn and dawn into day. Amen. (Let it be!)"

And so I invite us to be open – and attentive – to stay awake to the unpredictability of God and His ever amazing and bountiful grace. This is the wager of Christmas. And we are invited to bet on it once again. HODIE CHRISTUS NATUS EST! ALLELUIA! ALLELUIA! Today Christ is born for us! Alleluia! Alleluia! HODIE SALVATOR APPARUIT! ALLELUIA! ALLELUIA! Today the Savior has appeared! Alleluia! Alleluia! Thank you all for coming! Merry Christmas! (Homily adapted from John Shea's FOLLOWING LOVE INTO MYSTERY, p. 9-14)