

Christmas Eve 2024

It's been a long time since I've had a baby in my life—eighteen years ago my youngest was born. It's been a long time since I've even *held* a baby, though not eighteen years long. Maybe a few months?

We're at a strange moment in human history and in a strange region for the human story where that isn't so unusual a situation, that an encounter with a baby should be a rare treat. I imagine there are places, and have been times, where you couldn't avoid a baby if you wanted to. Not so now. Not so around here.

To notice all this is to risk being taken as making a political statement, a provocative partisan statement. Pro-natalism has become an ideology of the political hard right, which is a bummer because it means publicly declaring the pleasure of having or knowing babies, the silly, scary pleasure of having them in your life, these beings most astonishing and commonplace, demanding and enchanting, might all just come off as a political statement.

But that's what happens when politics veer into the oppressive. Suddenly, there's nothing that isn't political.

A couple weeks ago I was with a woman who recently, in May, gave birth to her second child. I was trying to have a conversation with her, but her baby was asleep in the car parked just a sidewalk away and she was so distracted.

Eventually she apologized. "He's asleep in the car," she explained, "in case he wakes up."
"No problem," I assured her. "It is Advent, after all," was my thought.

Or it was then, Advent, when we're to allow ourselves such a sense of distraction, to cultivate in ourselves a sense of expectation: at any moment, everything could change. At any moment, the coming one might arrive, or the sleeping one might awake; and it will utterly change what we're doing, it will, or it should, utterly change what we're attending to.

It's hard to live like that.

But it's worth trying.

One of the things our secular age has determined for us is that all the players of history's playing out are already here. There is nothing above and beyond the roof of the world that we've insisted is there, built into our several and quite insistent social machines. There is nothing of the sustaining and mysterious that we can keep watch for, that might arrive, break in, strike a hole in that darkening roof, and reveal some new glimmer of possibility, some new truth, like a wandering star homing in to shine new light.

No, rather we are in a closed system of recycling possibilities, an eternal return of what already has been. We are out of options, is what it looks like in playing out history—and we only had a few of those to begin with. We are out of ideas, so we slot in the handful of old ones, which we've imagined and relied on as we try to punch our way out of this paper bag that is history, this *plastic* bag that is the self-contained, pre-determined world.

Or *shoot* our way out of it.

Christmas comes to urge upon us that something new is being born, that we must not lose hope because something new is always being born.

This is one of Hannah Arendt's great ideas, her concept of natality as explored in her great book *The Human Condition*. She understands that, by virtue of the fact that we are each born, we are each therefore ontologically free and surprising. We are, by nature, we are indeed at the root of our being, capable of acting and acting together to create something new and surprising and possibly even good.

This is an albeit obtuse philosophical notion that though a new baby makes shockingly clear, whether or not you have doctoral degree, which I for one don't have. This one, this *baby*: this is not you. Even if you helped make this little one, even if you bore her and now nurture him and are constantly distracted by the fact of their being, this one is not you, is rather someone new. Neither is this one a computer you might program or a menu of traits you might tinker with so to create something that perfectly reflects your likes and dislikes. This is a free and full being whose freedom and fullness it comes to you to protect and to love. And in this lies the world's hope. In free beings, in free societies: in this lies the world's hope.

Funny thing: Arendt was often criticized for being covertly messianic in her thinking, sneaking in to the known world a new presence, a newly born possibility. Mid-century philosopher that she was, she wrote from high within the secular age at its apotheosis, when the smart thinking of the world had already agreed that nothing new would be revealed, no one unexpected was to come. Secularism established that there was no transcendent spark or sustaining being to refer to, nothing to watch for, no eventually-to-be revealed one to hope in or to be open to. So, Arendt sneaking such semi-transcendent hope that into her world-perceiving: this was a no-no.

But here I am in this pulpit and here you are in this sanctuary, here we are gathered to be a people fully free to let our hearts hope, fully free to imagine that something new is coming into this tired old world. We don't need to bow to the heavy roof otherwise laid upon us, under which we are either consumers or revolutionaries, institutionalists or reactionaries. We don't need to

assent to this thing above which there is nothing to ascend to. Rather we can know in our hearts that someone new has come and is coming again, in our expectation and our active remembrance, our reenacting; and in this we hope, in this also we act, creatively and surprisingly and lovingly we take action.

Is it possible that you might live your days open to God who is at any moment waking up and, in all grace and love, all freedom and beauty, crying out, crying out to you? Is it possible that we might live our lives ourselves awake to the possibility of God, to the faithful reliability of something surprising and good, something that arrives gentle as a new idea, or forceful as an urgent need, or insistent as a running out of the old now exhausted of promise, or enchanting as a baby smiling at the sight of you—

(—smiling at *you*.

Smile back.

You can't help yourself.)

The conversation I had late last week, that distracted mother who couldn't pay her full attention to me: funny to run into Mary on streets of Lenox. How good it is to join her in her wakeful hope.

Thanks be to God.