

A Journey Of Love

The story of Jesus being born into this world is truly a story of a journey of love. I'd like to share with you another love story that closely resembles the story of our God who becomes man. There's a fascinating movie called "March of the Penguins" that I saw, which impressed me a great deal. Like most love stories, this story begins with an act of unbelievable, utter foolishness – folly, to many people who may not even avert to God becoming man.

Each year, at the end of summer, the emperor penguin begins a journey because it has the need to do so – for the purpose of bringing new life on the earth. Even though the emperor penguin is a bird, it won't, and can't fly – it walks. Even though its most comfortable living space is in the sea, it goes on land to make its journey. The penguins have been feeding now for three months. With their bellies full, they know it's time to make their journey back to where they began – inland, away from the sea where it's safe from predators, and where the ice is thicker – to begin the miracle of life over again. When the last of the thousands of the family clan have emerged from the sea onto the frozen wasteland of the Antarctic, they begin their dangerous, extremely difficult journey – guided by some kind of invisible compass within them. The path is never the same each year because of the changing ice floes. When their legs get tired, they slide on their bellies, pushing themselves with their feet and wings. The weather becomes fierce – 80 degrees below zero, with winds up to 100 miles per hour. They walk over 70 miles for a week, until they arrive at the place where each and every one of them was born. It is there that they search out a mate, becoming fiercely loyal to each other, and to the new life that will eventually come from their partnership. No one knows what attracts them to each other, but they become bonded.

As the weather becomes more violent, the penguins huddle closely together for warmth and protection; they become, as it were, a totally new organism. They actually become ONE BODY – struggling together for a common goal – life itself.

The eggs have now been laid, and with great care and gentleness, they are placed on top of the mother penguin's feet and kept warm under her furry flap. The egg cannot be exposed to the ice and elements for more than a minute. Otherwise, it will freeze, and the life in it will die. The penguins now take turns going to the center of the huddle, where it's warmer and more protected. Each one contributes to the good and safety of the other.

Finally, the eggs hatch; and it's time for the mother to make the long, even more difficult journey back to the sea for food. She has now lost more than a third of her body weight, and ice shore has expanded because of additional freezing. In the meantime, the father is now keeping the chick warm – all the while listening to his child's chirping voice, and singing to it - creating a magical bond.

The chicks are now hungry, and the mothers must return soon with food, or else the chicks will die. The father has run out of food himself. It's now four months since he has eaten. But there is one final act of nourishment he can give his child. He coughs up a milky substance that has remained in a crease in his throat – and feeds his child. It's enough for 2 days' nourishment, at most. The mothers realize the urgency now, and pick up their pace. They arrive; and in the midst of a deafening sound of calling and trumpeting, they find their mates – not by sight, but by the familiar sound of their voices. Families are united, and bonds are renewed.

The fathers then make the same arduous journey for food. And they come back to give nourishment to their children. How can they find their child from among the thousands? All penguins look alike to us. The only way they can recognize their child – is from the unique sound of their peeping chick, and the song that was exchanged between them before he left.

And the love story goes on. The chicks are carefully nurtured – still kept warm and fed by loving parents until they can be on their own. The journey for food is completed several times before winter ends. And finally, the march back to the sea begins. The chicks come to the water, and slowly enter it – there to live and grow and mature for five years, until that time when they will be ready to return – from the water – to the place where they began – to begin the cycle of life once more.

What sacrifice! What faithfulness! The total giving of these creatures of God makes us pause in wonder! Animals can teach us something about ourselves, and about the God who created all of nature. Everything God created is meant to be a reflection of God. Can you see the connection between the parent penguins and the sacrifices of Jesus Himself?

The story of Jesus coming to earth is a love story. It's a story that even St. Paul says is utter folly to those who don't believe. First of all, Jesus came from what we might describe as the waters of eternity. He chose to make His difficult journey in the oftentimes dark, cold atmosphere of our world. He came to give life, new life, to us, His family. He gives birth to us from the waters of baptism; He knows us personally by our voice; He sings a love song to us, and we to Him – as we pray,

and worship Him. That's how He recognizes us. We are never lost. He keeps us warm and protected; He feeds us with the choicest food – His own Body and Blood. He loves us so much, He was ready to make the ultimate sacrifice – and He did - He gave up His life. What kind of God would ever do that for mere human beings?

Jesus started the march. And even today, He still keeps marching and sacrificing. He keeps teaching us; keeps feeding us; keeps walking with us so that we won't be on our own. He shows us how we should huddle together and form a new Body – His Body, the Church - to help each other arrive home. Hopefully, we'll learn our lessons well. We'll make our difficult journey together – back to the waters of eternity, where we came from, and where we will be MOST at home. We began in the watery womb of God; and that's where we desire to return. The desire is an intrinsic part of us – like some kind of invisible compass guiding us.

Yes, His is a Journey of Love. And so is ours. So, let's keep on – boldly marching on with a purpose - following our Leader!

As a side note – there's another feathered creature of God that is traditionally a symbol of the Eucharist. Painted on walls of churches and printed on holy cards it also represents the sacrificial giving of Jesus. Perhaps you've seen pictures of a large bird with her young, hungry mouths open, waiting to be fed. There is an open wound in the breast of the mother. That's the pelican. In nature, when the pelican has no food for her young, she wounds herself, and feeds her children with her own blood. Pelicans; penguins; JESUS!