

# “Christmas Eve at Pier 21”

December 30, 2018  
Matthew 2:13-15;19-23; Hebrews 13:1-2; Psalm 19:7-9

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Pier 21 in Halifax has become quite famous. This is what it looks like today on the outside.

Today it is a museum – a place with shopping boutiques and restaurants. Cruise Liners still occasionally dock here, but no other ships.

That is not the way it was for decades. In the post-war years of the 1940’s and 1950’s, Pier 21 was the main entry point into Canada by ships from all over the world – but most especially from Europe. Almost daily, huge passenger liners arrived crowded with refugees seeking a new life in Canada. Pier 21 was the place where tens of thousands of immigrants first saw Canada. This is more what it looked like in those years.



Today I want to tell a story about Pier 21 written by Ron DeBoer. He won the grand prize for it in the Christian Week Writing Contest in 2002. It's a story told by an elderly gentleman in his 90's. He is a long-retired Canadian immigration officer, living out his final years in a senior's home. Sixty years earlier, after the Second World War, he was an Immigration Officer working on Pier 21 in Halifax Harbour. Here is the story told in his words.

*I'll admit I wanted to go home in the worst way that night. We had the two little ones and Christmas Eve was a special time in our house. Elly would bake ginger cookies in the shapes of Christmas trees and reindeer, and the children would stand on kitchen chairs by the counter licking everything they could get their hands on. To me, it was heaven in our house on Christmas Eve.*

*Of course, Pier 21 never really left my mind. Ships were always arriving full of families — men, women, and children with luggage and funny smells. I had to make sure all the "I's" were dotted and the "T's" crossed before stamping "LANDED IMMIGRANT" on their papers. Even on Christmas Eve there was always the possibility that a ship might come in. Big ocean liners would not slow down, let alone stop in mid-Atlantic, just because a Canadian immigration officer wanted to be at home with his family on Christmas Eve.*

*It was mid-afternoon that Christmas Eve when the supervisor strolled in and told us the Samaria was due in anytime.*



*To me this meant one thing — hundreds of refugees from Holland with their families. They would have spent eight or nine days crammed into tiny third-class quarters. Now, you need to know that back then I really didn't believe in God. My wife Elly — well she did. She held fast to the good Word, and took our little ones to church. Yes, and I was made to wait for grace before meals. But I didn't put much stock*

*in any of it. I was too busy with my immigration work. Anyhow I didn't really think about religion much. That is — until that night.*

*Things started out in an unusual way right off the bat. The first family that came in, following their medical, had eight children all lined up from oldest to youngest like they were posing for a picture. You could see the nine days of the Atlantic Ocean in their tired eyes. When the mother put down her little one I noticed she was pregnant. Maybe I should've seen that as a sign, but I was too busy counting heads and pointing to the papers the father had flattened out onto my desk.*

*Then he did something I'd never seen before. He held up a finger as if to tell me to 'hang on for a minute'! I'm telling you, no immigration officer wants to have someone point a finger at him — but before I could protest, the man dropped to his knees and every single member of that family made a circle around him. They bowed their heads and, one by one, said something. I couldn't understand what they were saying — but I could see they were praying. It stopped me in my tracks. I don't know if it was the brandy that some of my buddies had snuck in, or what, but I know I felt something warm stir in my heart right then.*

*Of course the feeling left as soon as the Dutchman stood up and started answering my questions. It was a routine case, a 'rubber stamper' I called it. The Dutch were so organized. They always had their papers and everything in the correct order. It was just then that a soldier knocked on my desk. He was a Canadian — clean cut and smart looking. We saw a lot of them in 1947 on Pier 21. By the red markers on the shoulders of his uniform, I could tell that he was part of the medical corps. He was an officer, and that meant he was a doctor. I was pretty sure that he was looking for his war bride. The reason so many service men came onto Pier 21 was to pick up the girls they'd married overseas.*

*"Has Janneke DeVries come through yet?" he said. I can still see that blond military crew-cut and clear blue eyes. Looking back now, I should have realized something wasn't quite right. For one thing, why didn't he ever go to any of the other immigration officers — to Hal or Frank? He never did. The others all swore they never saw him — only me.*

*Each time I finished with a family, there he was, asking for Janneke DeVries. When I finished with the Bos family, "Has Janneke DeVries arrived yet?" When I shook the hand of the Zylstra's, – the same question.*

*Hours passed and things finally started to quieten down. I looked at my watch and saw that it was already Christmas morning. A few nuns, who were always on Pier 21 greeting the newcomers, were praying with some of the families. The soldier seemed to have gone. Such was life on Pier 21, people constantly coming in and going out of your life.*

*Suddenly I heard a woman cry. A man ran into the immigration hall waving his arms and yelling. Behind him was a woman clutching her swollen abdomen. It was clear that her baby was about to arrive. Two of the nuns and several Red Cross workers got to her just before she collapsed on the floor. Hal and I made sure everyone else kept far away.*

*For the next several minutes there was just a lot of groaning, crying and gasping. I'll never forget it. The whole of Pier 21 seemed to stop. It looked just like a picture – people frozen in time. The woman let out another anguished cry and then stopped. There was a silence, a big silence, a loud silence. Then I could see the woman holding her baby, hugging it like somebody was going to take it away. Yet even in the dim light of Pier 21, I could see something was wrong. The baby didn't seem to be breathing. It was lifeless and grey. Her husband was a mess. The Red Cross aids were working on her and the baby frantically. A number started praying over them. I can see it so vividly.*

*That was when the soldier reappeared. He came pushing his way through the crowd. When I thought about it later, I realized he never hesitated. It was like he'd been waiting all night for that woman's arrival. He put his hand on that Red Cross worker's shoulder, then knelt beside the woman and took over.*

*Now, unless I missed something, or the brandy was playing tricks on my mind, I would swear that baby started to cry just a moment or two later. Everyone stared at the soldier like he was an angel. It felt like a scene in a church play. He looked*

*embarrassed and then, just like that, he slipped away amidst all the commotion. I never saw him again.*

*It wasn't until all the immigrants had been placed on trains or in other accommodations, and we got the place cleaned up, that I finally had a moment to talk to Hal. He was the one who had processed the young husband whose wife had just given birth to Canada's newest citizen. "Hal," I said, "what was the name of that young woman who became a mother tonight?" Hal looked down to check his papers, looked up and said, "Janneke DeVries."*

*I must have stared at him like he had two heads, because he stared back and said, "What about it? What's wrong?"*

*"Well," I stammered, "that young soldier who brought that baby back to life, who was he?" Then it was Hal's turn to look at me very strangely like I was crazy. "Quit fooling with me!" he said. He said he was tired and wanted to go home. When he looked at me again and saw I wasn't fooling, he just shook his head and said, "You better go home to Elly. You need some sleep too. We all do"*

*I don't know if you believe in miracles, but as I sit here today in the lounge of this old nursing home waiting for my granddaughter to pick me up for Christmas dinner, I'm telling you as God is my witness that soldier at Pier 21 had to have been an angel sent by God to save that little boy. His father, James DeVries, and his mother, Janneke DeVries, arrived December 24, 1947 in Halifax, Nova Scotia. It was all there in the newspaper this past week. Their son, Dr. James DeVries, born on Christmas Day, 1947, grew up to study medicine at McGill and had just received the Nobel Prize for his work in cancer research. They say he's saved a lot of people by his work. The paper even had his picture.*

*Some might say that my tale is ridiculous, but I believe I witnessed a miracle birth that Christmas Eve fifty-seven years ago. You're the first people besides my Elly I've told this story to, and since I know I won't be here much longer, you have my permission to share it, if you like. But if you do, tell people that not one but two miracles occurred on that far-off Christmas morning. For when God breathed life into that little baby before my eyes on Christmas day, He also breathed life into me.*

So it is I wish you a blessed Christmas season and a wonderful New Year in the name of Christ our Lord." Amen

Told by the Reverend Dr. Alan Bennett

Written by Ron DeBoer

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