

CHRISTMAS EVE
Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14 (15-20)
The Rev. Danáe Ashley
December 24, 2015, 9:00 pm

Merry Christmas! How many Christmases do you think we've seen between us all? 800? 900? 1000? Even though we know the story, something keeps us coming to church on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day over and over again, like a child reading a favorite book. What is it about this story of God's love that makes us want to hear it again and again?

As I was reflecting on this question, I kept remembering a Christmas parable that radio broadcaster Paul Harvey once told. He didn't remember where he got it, but he called it "The Man and the Birds." Birds as in animals, not as in lady-friends ☺ He told it like this:

You know, "The" Christmas story, "God born a man in a manger", and all that, escapes some moderns. Mostly I think because they seek complex answers to their questions, and this one is so utterly simple. So for the cynics and the skeptics and the unconvinced, I submit a modern parable.

Now the man to whom I'm going to introduce you was not a scrooge, he was a kind, decent, mostly good man. Generous to his family, upright in his dealings with other men, but he just didn't believe all that incarnation stuff which the churches proclaim at Christmas time. It just didn't make sense, and he was too honest to pretend otherwise. He just couldn't swallow the Jesus story about God coming to earth as a man.

"I'm truly sorry to distress you", he told his wife, "but I'm not going with you to church this Christmas Eve." He said he'd feel like a hypocrite, that he'd much rather just stay at home, but that he would wait up for them. So he stayed and they went to the midnight service.

Shortly after the family drove away in the car, snow began to fall. He went to the window to watch the flurries getting heavier and heavier and then went back to his fireside chair and began to read his newspaper, while listening to the radio. [Soft Christmas music playing and he had a cup of hot chocolate in hand. Life was good.] Minutes later, he was startled by a thudding sound. Then another. And then another; sort of a thump or a thud. At first, he thought someone must be throwing snowballs against his living room window. But when he went to the front door to investigate, he found a flock of birds huddled miserably in the snow. They had been caught in the storm and in a desperate search for shelter, had tried to fly through his large landscape window.

Well, he couldn't let the poor creatures lie there and freeze, so he remembered the barn where his children stabled their pony. That would provide a warm shelter if he could direct the birds to it. Quickly, he put on a coat and goulashes, and tramped through the deepening snow to the barn.

He opened the doors wide and turned on a light. But the birds did not come in. He figured food would entice them in. So he hurried back to the house, fetched bread crumbs, sprinkled them on the snow making a trail to the yellow lighted, wide open door to the stable. But to his dismay, the birds ignored the bread crumbs and continued to flop around helplessly in the snow. He tried catching them. He tried "shooing" them into the

barn by walking around them waving his arms. Instead, they scattered in every direction except into the warm lighted barn.

Then he realized that they were afraid of him. To them, he reasoned, I am a strange and terrifying creature. If only I could let them know that they can trust me. That I'm not trying to hurt them, but to help them. But how? Because any move he made tended to frighten them, confuse them. They just would not follow. They would not be led, or "shooed" because they feared him.

"If only I could be a bird", he thought to himself "and mingle with them and speak their language. Then I could tell them not to be afraid. Then I could show them the way to the safe warm -----

(Sudden recognition)

---- to the safe warm barn, but I would have to be one of them so they could see and hear, and understand."

At that moment the church bells began to ring. The sound reached his ears above the sounds of the wind. He stood there listening to the bells, [and from inside he could hear a choir on the radio singing "Hark! The herald angels sing/glory to the newborn king." Listening to the bells pealing the glad tidings of Christmas and the choir's voices swelling as they sang the end of the second verse, "...Jesus, our Emmanuel. Hark! The herald angels sing/glory to the newborn king." Jesus. Our Emmanuel. God with us. If only he could be a bird. God became flesh. And the man sank to his knees in the snow.]

This is what God has done for us at Christmas. God has come to be with us. To know us, to speak our language, to do what we do, so that we can know God. No wonder this is our favorite story that we want to hear year after year. May we carry it with us in our hearts and share it with others as we leave this place to go out with joy into our world. AMEN.

Christmas

The following excerpt originally appeared in *Whistling in the Dark*, and later in *Beyond Words*.

The lovely old carols played and replayed till their effect is like a dentist's drill or a jack hammer, the bathetic banalities of the pulpit and the chilling commercialism of almost everything else, people spending money they can't afford on presents you neither need nor want, "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer," the plastic tree, the cornball creche, the Hallmark Virgin. Yet for all our efforts, we've never quite managed to ruin it. That in itself is part of the miracle, a part you can see. Most of the miracle you can't see, or don't. The young clergyman and his wife do all the things you do on Christmas Eve. They string the lights and hang the ornaments. They supervise the hanging of the stockings. They tuck in the children. They lug the presents down out of hiding and pile them under the tree. Just as they're about to fall exhausted into bed, the husband remembers his neighbor's sheep. The man asked him to feed them for him while he was away, and in the press of other matters that night he forgot all about them. So down the hill he goes through knee-deep snow. He gets two bales of hay from the barn and carries them out to the shed. There's a forty-watt bulb hanging by its cord from the low roof, and he lights it. The sheep huddle in a corner watching as he snaps the baling twine, shakes the squares of hay apart and starts scattering it. Then they come bumbling and shoving to get at it with their foolish, mild faces, the puffs of their breath showing in the air. He is reaching to turn off the bulb and leave when suddenly he realizes where he is. The winter darkness. The glimmer of light. The smell of the hay and the sound of the animals eating. Where he is, of course, is the manger.

He only just saw it. He whose business it is above everything else to have an eye for such things is all but blind in that eye. He who on his best days believes that everything that is most precious anywhere comes from that manger might easily have gone home to bed never knowing that he had himself just been in the manger. The world is the manger. It is only by grace that he happens to see this other part of the miracle. Christmas itself is by grace. It could never have survived our own blindness and depredations otherwise. It could never have happened otherwise. Perhaps it is the very wildness and strangeness of the grace that has led us to try to tame it. We have tried to make it habitable. We have roofed it in and furnished it. We have reduced it to an occasion we feel at home with, at best a touching and beautiful occasion, at worst a trite and cloying one. But if the Christmas event in itself is indeed—as a matter of cold, hard fact all it's cracked up to be, then even at best our efforts are misleading.

The Word become flesh. Ultimate Mystery born with a skull you could crush one-handed. Incarnation. It is not tame. It is not touching. It is not beautiful. It is uninhabitable terror. It is unthinkable darkness riven with unbearable light. Agonized laboring led to it, vast upheavals of intergalactic space, time split apart, a wrenching and tearing of the very sinews of reality itself. You can only cover your eyes and shudder before it, before this: "God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God . . . who for us and for our salvation," as the Nicene Creed puts it, "came down from heaven."

Came down. Only then do we dare uncover our eyes and see what we can see. It is the Resurrection and the Life she holds in her arms. It is the bitterness of death he takes at her breast.

Frederick Buechner