

“It’s for the Birds” / Luke 12:6 & Matthew 6:26 / 23 December 2012

On a cold winter’s day, some years ago, a farmer came in from clearing the snow off his long, gravel driveway. It was one of those bitter cold days, the likes of which we haven’t seen in recent winters. A gray morning light was just beginning to appear as he finished up the job. The farmer slammed the kitchen door behind him and collapsed into a chair by the stove. The biscuits were done baking, and he asked his wife just to leave the oven door standing open, so he could warm his hands in the heat. As the farmer sat there doing nothing, warming himself by the stove, he stared vacantly out the kitchen window and noticed about half a dozen little sparrows trying to get inside. Six little birds stood on the windowsill, staring through the glass into the warm, bright house, and every once in a while, one of the birds would try to leap from the sill onto the windowpane, in hopes of making it out of that terrible cold and into the warmth of the kitchen. There was a faint tapping noise when the bird’s beak hit the glass, and the cold sparrow would drop back down to the windowsill, disappointed but unharmed.

The farmer was a gentle man, and he couldn’t stand the sight of six sparrows freezing to death. His wife had hurried off to another room, and he knew she wouldn’t want birds in her kitchen, but drastic times call for drastic measures. He rose from his chair and approached the window as softly as he could, so as not to frighten the little birds. He undid the clasp and slowly, slowly opened the window to let the birds in. It was no use. As soon as the windowpane budged, all the birds flew off in a twitter, only to settle on the bare branch of a wintry tree, some ten feet away. “I can’t take it,” the man thought to himself. “They’re freezing out there, and I have warmth to spare.” So he threw the window open wide and ran out into the yard to chase them into the house. The poor birds scattered in every direction, but not a one of them flew in through the window.

The farmer wouldn’t rest until he’d brought salvation to this flock of dying sparrows, so he went back inside and put all his snowy gear back on: gloves, and hat, scarf, and boots. Then he trudged back out into the snow to rescue the birds. He turned on the big space heater in the barn and tried to chase them through the barn door. He tried standing inside the barn and whistling like some kind of bird, in hopes that they would follow. But the only kind of bird he could imitate was a crow, or an owl, both of which scared the sparrows even further away. He tried spreading a trail of grain to lead them into the barn, but nothing worked. After about two hours, his wife noticed that he hadn’t eaten his breakfast, and she came outside to find him...sitting on a snow bank, with his head in his hands.

When he looked up at her, she was astonished. “Have you been crying? I don’t know if I’ve ever seen you cry. You didn’t cry at our wedding. You didn’t cry when any of the kids was born. You didn’t cry when Max the dog died. You sure didn’t cry for me when I...oh, never mind! And yet, you’re crying for a band of birds too stupid to save themselves from the cold?” The man didn’t know what to say. “I’m not sure why I’m crying. I don’t think it’s about the birds, really. I just realized that it doesn’t matter how much I want to help these dumb birds; they’ll never trust me until I become one of them.”

What does it mean that, “The Word became flesh and dwelled among us”? What does it mean that, “God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Godself”? What does it mean when we say that God somehow comes to us in this humble peasant child, Jesus of Nazareth, teacher of parables, who shares our life, its joys and sorrows, and whose life itself becomes our parable, for how to live, and how to die, and how to live again?

What does it mean? Well, people have been excommunicated or worse trying to answer that question. But what it all comes down to is this: When the words of the prophets were not enough to shoe us poor birds into the barn, when all the good rules of Mount Sinai proved insufficient to the task, when rites, and rituals, and recitations all did their work, but left us cold, we at last found shelter in the person of Jesus: a life flooded with the divine presence, a human life in which we see the very face of God. God does not remain aloof and far-off. When faced with human brokenness and need, God sent not words, but a child. God is not far, but near. God is not above us, but around us and within us. The word is made flesh, and dwells among us.

Did you see in the news last Christmas that there was a broomstick battle in the Church of the Nativity? The Church that stands on the spot where Jesus was supposedly born is shared by the Roman Catholic, Greek Orthodox, and Armenian Orthodox churches. Each denomination has its own little segment of the church, and as the Eastern Orthodox celebration of Christmas approached—on January 7—the priests wanted to clean the place up in preparation. But the Greek clergy kept stepping out-of-bounds into the parts of the church that were claimed by the Armenians. Some name-calling ensued. Then somebody threw a broom. And within minutes, the bearded priests in their robes and golden crosses were attacking each other with broomsticks and mops. And all of this took place in Bethlehem, a city where to be a Christian is to live in danger of persecution from both Muslims extremists and right wing Jews. Without mentioning the obvious fact that no one knows where exactly Jesus was born, is it really worth fighting over? But the animosity between the Greeks and the Armenians is so old and deep that it takes very little to bring it to the surface. All those silly birds, right there in the safety of the barn where Jesus was born, and still behaving as if this world's chill would freeze them to death. You know what they say: You can lead a bird to shelter...

One of the most touching Christmas memories I have is of a soprano, long ago, singing those lines from an old carol that I had never quite noticed until she sang them. "His law is love, and his gospel is peace. He frees the slave, for the slave is our brother, and in his name all oppression shall cease." And that is the message of this sentimental occasion that we call Christmas: "His law is love, and his gospel is peace." The Babe of Bethlehem grew up to say, "Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And yet not one of them is forgotten in God's sight." If God loves even the birds, then how much more does God love you, you who are worth more even than those precious sparrows. Christ's birth in Bethlehem is for the birds. It's for the raccoons, and for the deer. Christ's birth in a manger is for the waters and for the trees. It's for the cities and for the fields. Christ's birth in Bethlehem is for this weary world all around, to make it a better place. His birth is for you and for me, so that we might find shelter in "his law of love and his gospel of peace." Amen.