

2nd Sunday after Christmas
January 2, 2022
St. Charles Avenue Presbyterian Church
John 1:1-18
Sarah Chancellor-Watson

“Grace Upon Grace”

Happy 2nd Sunday of Christmas. It's our last Sunday of the Christmas season until next year at least. With only 4 more days until the official end of Christmas, many of us taking advantage of the time this weekend to put away the Christmas decorations and transition to that most sacred of seasons – Mardi Gras! This year as I begin to undeck the halls of my own home, finish the last of the Christmas treats still lingering, and begin to look in earnest to the New Year I find myself perhaps more than any other year not ready for Christmas to be over. I think it's because this year it took me awhile to get into the emotions and magic of the season. And now that I've finally gotten there, I'm a little resentful that it's time for it to go. Maybe you too are wondering days where the magic of the Christmas season has gone? Why we can't carry it with us throughout the year? We may wonder just what it was all for?

The beauty of this season and the good news for people like me, and perhaps you, is that for us, as people of faith, as disciples of Christ, Christmas is not just a season of merriment and gift giving. While the wider culture moves on, we move closer to the heart of God, as we continue to unpack the meaning of the great gift we have been given. The gift of Jesus Christ, coming into the world and into our lives - of God becoming flesh and living among us or as the Message Bible translation puts it - “The Word [becoming] flesh and blood, and [moving] into the neighborhood.” Thankfully, we're not yet done with this story of Christmas as it unfolds in our lives, or perhaps the Story of Christmas is not yet done with us.

In my attempts to cling to the last vestiges of this season I found myself once again gravitating to one of my favorites Christmas stories, told by one of my favorite storytellers, radio personality and journalist, Paul Harvey. I've shared this story a couple of times before, so I hope you will indulge me one more reading, of Paul Harvey's most well known stories, a Christmas story that he told often, that first aired on ABC radio on Christmas Eve in 1965.

"Unable to trace its proper parentage, I have designated this as my *"Christmas Story of the Man and the Birds."* You know, THE Christmas Story, the 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.

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. And 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. 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'd 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, galoshes, 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 doorway of the stable. But to his dismay, the birds ignored the bread crumbs, and continued to flap around helplessly in the snow. He tried catching them...He tried shoing them into the barn by walking around them waving his arms...Instead, they scattered in every direction, except into the warm, lighted barn.

And then, he realized that they were afraid of him. To them, he reasoned, I am a strange and terrifying creature. If only I could think of some way to let them know that they can trust me... That I am 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 shoed 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 safe, warm...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. And he stood there listening to the bells – Adeste Fidelis – listening to the bells pealing the glad tidings of Christmas.

And he sank to his knees in the snow."

How many of us, too, question and have our doubts about the incarnation? How ridiculous and impractical does it seem sometimes that God, in all God's power and might, the great I AM, has chosen to save the world by becoming one of us? By becoming en-fleshed, as our scriptures say, in all our human frailties, to come to us as a tiny, vulnerable child. It seems though that this was the only way to get our attention, and scripture also seems to indicate that this was part of the plan all along, from the beginning, that the fullness of God's love should be revealed not just in the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ, but in his life. His life that demonstrates to us in his teachings, healings, and the ways he talked to and included others, again and again, that in God's world - the kingdom of God, power is found in humility and value in the weak, relationships are more important than rules, and that ultimately Love wins the day. God doesn't have to remain this complete and utter mystery to us. And as any good theologian will tell you there is no way we can know all there is to know about God, but we can know some things about God and God's character, because God has revealed God's very self to us in Jesus. Because of who God is, and not by anything we have done, we receive gift after gift after gift.

Peter Wehner, an author and senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, says this about this great gift: "Christmas is a reminder that while moral rules can be issued on stone tablets, grace and redemption are finally and fully found in a story of love, when the divine became human. [We] didn't enter Jesus' world; he entered [ours]."[1] Because God has become one of us and shows us the way to love and the way to redemption and salvation through the life and light of Jesus Christ, we are now able to receive and respond to God's incredible gifts of grace and love with genuine relationship that has the power to transform everything around us.

[1] Peter Wehner. "Humanizing Jesus." *The New York Times*. December, 23. 2016.

http://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/23/opinion/humanizing-jesus.html?_r=0