

12.29.2024 First Sunday after Christmas (Matthew 1:18-25)

Paul Harvey used to tell a story about a family who had a fallen into a routine on Christmas Eve of the mother and children attending the traditional Christmas Eve service, while the father would stay home. Later, when his family returned home from church, they'd all gather and open their presents. The father in this story was by no means a scrooge. He was kind, a good husband and father, he just no longer believed what he considered to be a childhood story about Jesus, the story of God coming to this earth as a babe laid in a manger, and so, as his family left for church on that cold, stormy winter night, he sat down by the warmth of the fire and began to read the evening paper.

As he read, he was startled by the sound of something hitting the window next to him. At first, he thought someone must be throwing snowballs against the living room window, but when he went to the front door to investigate, he found a flock of birds huddled outside, half frozen in the snow. The birds had been caught in the storm, and in a desperate search for shelter they'd tried to fly right through the window, making a terrible sound.

Seeing the birds, the man was moved with compassion. He couldn't just let the poor creatures lay there and freeze, and then he remembered the barn where his children stabled their pony. The barn would provide a warm shelter, he just needed to direct the birds toward it. So he put on a heavy coat, walked through the deepening snow, opened the doors wide, and turned on a light so the birds would know the way in, but they didn't come. He came up with an idea to entice them with food, sprinkling bread crumbs on the snow, making a trail directly to the safety of the barn, but to his dismay, the birds ignored the crumbs.

The man tried to catch them, but couldn't. He tried waving his arms to get them headed in the right direction, but the birds scattered. He finally came to the conclusion, that to a bird, he was just a strange, terrifying creature. He found himself wishing that there was some way to let these birds know they could trust him, that he wasn't out to hurt them, but to help them. Then, he thought to himself, if only I could become a bird, and mingle with them, and speak their language. If that were possible, I could tell them not to be afraid,

and lead them to the safety and warmth of the barn, but again, he thought, to do so I would have to be one of them, so that they could see, hear, and understand. At that moment the church bells rang with glad tidings of Christmas, and as the man stood there and listened, at last he began to see, hear, and understand, and he fell to his knees in the snow.

The season of Christmas offers us the opportunity to carefully reflect on the Incarnation of our Lord. As St. John testified, “*the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth*” (John 1:14). The only-begotten Son of God, the Divine Second Person of the Holy Trinity, the Word who was God in the beginning, was manifest in human flesh, and this story Paul Harvey loved to share is a beautiful illustration that concludes by pointing us toward three reasons God became man - that we may see, and hear, and understand. That we may see our pitiful condition as people who have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23), that we may hear the Good News of our Redemption proclaimed in an earthly language by the New Adam, the God-man, our Savior Christ, and that we may understand, through His life, death, resurrection, and ascension, that our Lord leads us not to the warmth and safety of a barn, but rather to the eternal glory of the place He has prepared for us in the kingdom of God (John 14:2).

This story, through a beautiful analogy, communicates the truth that the Son of God “*came to seek and to save the lost*” (Luke 19:10), and that He came in human flesh to the end that we may see, hear, and understand, but let me ask you, when we reached the end of that story, did you happen to actually picture the man becoming a bird? Did you imagine, if it were possible, how he might choose to do so, and if you did, did the thought ever cross your mind that this man would choose to become, not a fully grown, adult bird, but instead a path that would involve him being made into a single-cell organism that would reflect the first stage of a bird’s life, an organism that would develop inside an egg, and grow into a tiny, naked hatchling with closed eyes and a mouth open wide at the sound of the mother returning to the nest, or even a small fledgling, now covered with feathers but still completely dependent on its parents for food and care?

As I listened to this story, I did picture the man becoming a bird, but never

for a moment considered that he would choose to be made into a helpless baby bird. In my mind's eye, this man would've chosen to become an adult bird that would be fully able to mingle with the others, speak their language, and lead them to safety. After all, if his desire was simply that they would see, hear, and understand, then why would he choose a more complicated, difficult path, filled with uncertainty, to accomplish that goal? The shortest distance between two points is a straight line, and therefore wouldn't it make sense, from a practical standpoint for the man to be made into a fully grown bird who could just come to this flock, lead them to safety, and then return? This seems to be the most sensible option, and since this story is meant to direct our thoughts toward the Son of God being made into the likeness of human flesh, in order to lead us to safety, we might ask, why did our Lord choose to become a baby? Why didn't He just come to this world as an adult?

Again, to the Omnipotent Creator of Heaven and Earth, to who every option is available, wouldn't that seem to be the most sensible choice? The Gospels may even lead us to believe so, because of the way they all focus almost entirely on the last three years of His earthly life, with St. John devoting six chapters to the last twenty-four hours of our Lord's life here on this earth. Almost everything recorded about Jesus, His life and ministry, is an account of Him as an adult, and while God only knows why He would choose to become a baby, here's one answer to consider: Our Lord came not only that we may see, and hear, and understand, but also to experience and to redeem every aspect of humanity.

From the womb of His virgin mother, to the tomb of Joseph of Arimathea, God, in the Person of Jesus Christ, experienced everything it is to be human. He was a helpless baby, a toddler, a child, and an adult. As a man, Scripture records moments when He was *tired* and *thirsty* (John 4:6; 19:28), *grieved* and *angry* (John 11:35; Mark 3:5), *sorrowful* and *troubled* (Matthew 26:37), and the Gospels provide us with historical evidence that in His suffering and crucifixion, He experienced the worst form of torture and death.

By taking on a human nature, clothing Himself in human flesh, and experiencing every aspect of humanity, the Son of God not only brought light and life to everything that had been touched by darkness and death, in doing so He also became the only One who can truly know what you and I know

about this world, the only One who can feel all that we feel. The author of Hebrews tells us that Jesus is able “*to sympathize with our weaknesses,*” for “*He was tempted in every way that we are, yet was without sin*” (Hebrews 4:15).

Jesus not only redeems us, He sympathizes with us, He understands us. If we were to consider Paul Harvey’s story once more, Jesus would not be the man who sees a flock of birds caught in a storm, and in that moment simply becomes one of them in order to lead them to safety. Instead, He would be the One who knew from the beginning that the storm was coming, and that becoming a bird in order to save the flock would cost Him - His life. Still, even knowing the end from the beginning, He would choose to save them, and not only save them, but truly come to know them intimately, by becoming a bird embryo, a tiny, naked hatchling, a small fledgling, and an adult bird who was caught in the storm with the others; a bird who *wept* as other birds suffered and died in the storm (John 11:35); a bird who humbled Himself, suffered, died, and rose again to lead the flock to safety.

To a people trapped in darkness and the shadow of death, our Savior said, “*Come, follow Me*” (Mark 10:21), and we see, hear, and understand Him so well, not only because He speaks to us in an earthly language, but also because He speaks those words as One who knows the difficulty of the path we tread, One who has personally experienced the trials, sorrows, and sufferings of humanity. In Christ, God knows what you’ve been through, and He has come to lead you home.