

Christmas Eve 2015: “The Christmas Goldfinch”

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For a certain number of us, it began with a sign. A hint that there was something more; that this world, in all its wonder and beauty, was part of something more than we could see, or touch, or, with our simple minds, fully understand.

And somehow on Christmas Eve, the wonders of this unknown Creation began to become known to us a little more...

In this time when for just a few moments the veil between heaven and earth becomes a little thinner, it can be a time for stories.

When our guard is down a bit; when it all seems, for a very brief but all so important time, that there is a little more right with the World than otherwise; when the desire for Peace is the Word of the day, rather than vengeance then we might be more open to hearing how it is that the Word became flesh becomes real for us in our lives.

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Christmas is a time of presents; a time of encountering something new in the midst of the tried and true.

So tonight, let me share with you a story, and in particular, a ‘birds-eye’ view of how God would have us live... an ‘orni-theological’ perspective of life as it is meant to be lived; So, if you like, you could call this “Christmas for the Birds.”

We begin with the image on our bulletins tonight, painted by Brian Whelan, a British artist... whose work I discovered over the summer, while at a conference. I’ve had a fair amount of correspondence with him since the summer, and he has allowed us to use this image, as long as I include his website address and mentioned all this in my words... So, that part is done.

As you take a look at the image of the Madonna & child, one thing stands out.... the bird in baby Jesus’ lap; right? Is that a goldfinch? What’s it doing there? What’s it all about- what does it mean?

Well- this is really nothing new. This bright painting is a renewal of a ages-old symbolic

tradition shared of the nativity.

In his seminal book, **Birds and People**, the scholar Mark Cocker makes the important historic notation of how our human views of nature have changed through the centuries. This painting serves as a wonderful illustration. Until relatively recently most people ‘genuinely thought birds existed to fulfill very specific human ends’. He quotes one 16th century author as affirming: ‘Singing birds were undoubtedly designed by the Great Author of Nature on purpose to entertain

and delight mankind’.

Then he quotes no one less than Leonardo da Vinci on the nature of the goldfinch: *The gold-finch is a bird of which it is related that, when it is carried into the presence of a sick person, if the sick man is going to die, the bird turns away its head and never looks at him; but if the sick man is to be saved the bird never loses sight of him but is the cause of curing him of all his sickness.*

Da Vinci did not come up with this elevated view of the goldfinch on his own; his words summarized human understanding about this species up to this point in time. Combined with the powers of healing, the goldfinch also carried with it deep allegorical truth. A goldfinch was not a random bird on a wing, but a font of meaning, insight & revelation. Even its outward appearance was packed with meaning.

What did a medieval person think and feel when they saw a goldfinch? (And here I need to clarify that I’m referring to European goldfinches, which look distinctly different from our North American variety.)

It all began with the bar of gold across the bird’s wings, a color which since the ancient Greeks had been associated with the ability to cure sickness.

There were also legendary and intimate ties to Jesus’ own life and times, which I will share with you shortly.

The goldfinch has been described as ‘a thrice-cursed bird’: the curses being special gifts/talents, separating it from other species. It is once blessed by its beauty, then by its pleasant song (the reason it was captured and held as song birds more than others), and finally by its dexterous coordination of beak and feet. In order to feed off thistle heads, the seeds of which were a staple of its natural diet, the goldfinch developed the ability to hold down an object with its toes while pulling parts toward them with its beak.



Through its association with thistles, the goldfinch came to be seen as a good-luck charm, ‘warding off contagion and bestowing health both upon those who saw them and those who owned them’. Not only did thistles have a symbolic connection with Jesus’ crucifixion, with the crown of thorns placed on his head, the thistles were themselves regarded as curative (long credited as a medicinal ingredient to combat the plague).

The goldfinch gradually came to be a symbol of steady endurance and, in the case of paintings of the Madonna and Child, this symbolism was transferred to the baby Jesus, an allegory of the salvation that Christ would bring through the strength his sacrifice.

With all that as background, does any one know the story of the Christmas Goldfinch?

Well, to get there- we have to go backwards through the goldfinch family.... The average finch has a life span of about 7 years, so we begin with the 4<sup>th</sup> generation after that blessed Christmas finch... and go back from there...

A post-biblical legend developed about a solitary goldfinch being a witness to the humiliating march of Jesus carrying his cross to Calvary.

A goldfinch flew above the staggering Jesus and was upset to see the crown of thorns on his head. As legend tells it, the goldfinch flew down and tried to pluck off the thorns. As the bird plucked, some of Jesus’ blood splattered onto the goldfinch’s beak and cheeks. Ever since, this

was a sign to believers that the bird had acquired blood-colored feathers while attempting to remove Jesus' crown of thorns.

Next, one of the parents of that blessed goldfinch, as legend would have it, happened upon Jesus and his Disciples at the feeding of the 5,000, when more than enough loaves and fish miraculously appeared to feed everyone present. This lucky bird was able to feed off the crumbs of the loaves that were gathered up that day...

And one of the parents of *that* finch, according to another non-Biblical legend, began its life as a clay bird that a young boy Jesus fashioned out mud, and was brought to life with the breath of life blown into him by our 12 year old Lord. (The European finch, by the way, has a brownish body – not the full yellow like the goldfinches we know. They look rather clay-ish, except for their distinctive gold and red markings.)

Which all takes us back to the Christmas goldfinch, who found a special way to bring a gift of kindness to the newborn Jesus. That he was born in a manger is one thing we know about Jesus' birth. Whether this was a cattle stall, grotto, or something else, the bedding for Jesus, and Mary & Joseph, for that matter, was straw. It was the Christmas goldfinch who had the joy of providing the bedding for the new born Jesus, busily fashioning as comfy a sleeping place as he could on that chilly night so long ago.

Each of these members of the finch family played a special role as a follower of Jesus. Whether they knew what they were doing or not didn't matter so much as what they did, to take part in the life of God with us.

Christmas comes for us to recognize the sometimes small but vital things we do, and can do, to participate in God's life in the world with us. And in doing so, we begin to fulfill our role as connecting links between heaven and earth. It's not as hard as you may think.

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I'd like to close with words from another, from a radio script by Paul Harvey, who for many, many years was a newscaster/commentator, whose "The Rest of the Story" feature was a household staple for many for generations. This piece is titled, "The Man and the Birds." Maybe you remember it.

The man to whom I'm going to introduce you was not a scrooge. He was a kind, decent, good man, generous to his family, upright in his dealings with others. But he just didn't believe all the incarnation stuff that churches proclaim at Christmas Time. It just didn't make sense to him and he was too honest to pretend otherwise. He just couldn't swallow the Jesus Story, about God coming to Earth as human.

"I'm truly sorry to tell you," he would tell his wife, every year, this night, "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 evening candlelight 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 shooining 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 shoosed 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 safety, warmth...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, O Come All Ye Faithful—listening to the bells pealing the glad tidings of Christmas.

And he sank to his knees in the snow. Amen.