

St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven
December 24, 2025

Christmas Eve

It was the night before Christmas Chapel and all through this beautiful place no creature stirred, or at least so we thought as we closed everything up. But in the morning we came to see that a small guest was stirring indeed and had apparently chosen to be with us — a small flying guest with a characteristic wingspan and, let's say, nocturnal predilections who seemed to have found in the organ pipes a temporary *cave*, let's call it. We had to think quickly, and we did, trying as one does in a situation like that to think like the small visitor. It likes the dark, we thought, so let's turn on all the lights and hope it retreats to the dark Lady Chapel. And incredibly, it did. We closed the chapel doors and at least knew the day's events could proceed. Later in the day, our experiment in trying to think like a bat began, unfortunately, to fall short. A faculty member was willing to go in to the Lady Chapel and open a window, on the theory that the bat would surely fly out. It did, but it flew out immediately *into the sanctuary* and found a temporary spot high up on that wall. [point to wall above cranes] And so we needed to bring in the experts. One put up the highest ladder any of us had ever seen and climbed it. When he got to the top he simply reached his gloved hand out, put the bat in a bag and walked back down. He left assuring us that it would be returned to a natural habitat not so close by that it might think to make its temporary cave here at St. Thomas's more permanent.

It's interesting how quickly we wonder, when we see an animal in crisis, if we might be able to enter its mind, to think as it does. I did precisely that once, unsuccessfully, with a chipmunk who wandered into a concert hall hours before I was due to play. We wish we could somehow communicate with it, to let it know it will be OK if it could just follow our guidance and let us lead it toward safety and freedom. After our morning with the bat, I flashed back to a lovely old Christmas story told by a man who lived with his family in the English countryside. It's the story of his own moment wrestling with all of these questions. In his case, it wound up changing his life forever. As he tells it, he had no interest in Christmas and saw it as a sweet old tale but nothing more. And so once again he would see his wife and children off to the Christmas Eve service at the local cathedral before settling in for an evening of catching up on the week's reading. He lived only a block or two from the cathedral and through the window could see a steady stream of folks heading to the service. He was close enough even to hear the occasional strain of an old carol from the cathedral organ.

He had grown up learning about Incarnation and the idea that God had come to dwell among us as Jesus, to live as one of us, to share his essence with us and invite us to share his. A lovely idea, he had thought, not particularly persuasive to him but lovely nonetheless and perfectly harmless and it had always made him feel good that his children so enjoyed the Christmas service along with their mother. But it wasn't for him and so he opened his paper and began to read. It was only a moment before snow began to fall. And in another minute he was startled by a sharp sound, a thud. A bird, looking for shelter, had found a safe spot in, and then fallen straight down, his chimney.

And so he did what I did with the chipmunk and what we all did here. He tried to think like the bird, to enter its mind. He too tried opening a window, but the bird had other ideas. Far from choosing that window, it flew directly and repeatedly into another in the living room and then another in the next room. Might food or cooing draw the bird and coax it to an exit? Nothing seemed to work and the man began to realize why: the bird was frightened and maybe even, he was starting to realize, frightened of him. To the bird, he began to think, I'm big and strange and a threat. If only I could think of some way to let the bird know that it truly can trust me. That I am not trying to hurt it, but to help it. But how? "If only I could *become a bird*," he thought to himself, "and connect with this one, speak her language. Then she would no longer be afraid and I could show her the way to safety. But I would have to become one with her so she could see me for who I am, and hear me for who I am, so she could understand and know me."

And in his own words he stared to weaken in the knees as he heard himself thinking and in a moment it all became clear to him. "My heart had been closed," he said, "but in a moment it opened. My heart had been hardened. But suddenly it softened. In a flash *I saw it*, I saw it all, I threw on my blazer and got myself to the service. The vicar was just starting to read the gospel when I squeezed into the pew next to my family."

He ends his story there but with just the minute or two I have remaining, I'd like to take us back there to that old village cathedral on that snowy night as the people sang and the torchbearers followed the cross and as the words from the gospel were read slowly as candles flickered amid the stillness. I'd like to take us back because I wonder *what else* happened for him that night.

I wonder what he saw that night as he squeezed himself into the very last seat, feeling the warm presence of the 400 or so who could fit into that simple, strong, centuries-old sanctuary, dressed so nicely, smiling softly and expectantly, listening reverently to the wondrous story they'd waited to hear all year, of light breaking into dark and of God, yes, entering our world and becoming one of us so God could think like us and know us, could liberate us and release us to fly again, could show us God, God's own self close up so we could know him for who he is and hear him for who he is? I wonder what he saw that night as music played and pilgrims took that well-trodden walk to the altar to kneel and to *take and eat and drink*, hearts open wide, ready to receive this invitation to share life with the one who had come.

I wonder what he heard that night as they all sang the words we've sung and are yet to sing here in this place tonight, words of the poets and priests and mystics who were somehow able to grasp and then capture in word the uncaptureable. *Mild he lay his glory by*, one of them so memorably wrote. *Born that we no more may die. Born to raise us from the earth. Born to give us second birth.* And all of this to music of such calm assurance, as if to say Yes. Of course. He came to raise us and so we rise. He came to give us new birth and so we breathe and love and live again. He came to us with a gift to give us, and this is the gift! I wonder, with heart newly opened and softened, what he heard that night?

And finally I wonder what he felt and what he came to know that night, on that night of nights as snow fell, as young and old sang, as the story was shared once again of the one who would come and whose heart would be broken just as ours are, yours and mine, the one who would come and be broken by the world that can break us too, you and me, just to able to say to us I walk this with

you, every bit of it, every moment of it, every peak and valley of it. I walk it with you, alongside you, within you. And this blessed company of souls that surround you tonight? They walk it with you too. Today and forever in ways you can and in ways you can't possibly yet even imagine. So don't be afraid. Rise up. Let each and every one of our hearts prepare him room as heaven and nature sing: Joy to the world. The one who sets us free and knows us and loves us and fills our hearts now and forevermore has come.