

On the day after Christmas Day, it might be difficult to wrap our heads around the poetic, dramatic words of John's Gospel we just heard about what we celebrate throughout the season of Christmas: the Mystery of the Incarnation. The Word, as the author of John's Gospel puts it, that became flesh and lived among us. The Incarnation is a holy mystery, it is not the kind of mystery we solve like a puzzle. Instead, the Incarnation is the type of mystery we can only get close to, and if we are fortunate, enter into. Getting close to a holy mystery isn't an exercise of the intellect, it is something that requires our whole person: our heart, mind, soul and strength. That might be why Jesus told stories or parables when he wanted to teach.

Following his example, today, I'd like to share with you one of my favorite Christmas stories. I've shared it before, but this seems like one of those years when it can be a comfort to visit a story we have heard before. It is a story about the Incarnation, how Jesus is born into a world that is deeply hurting from sin, from loss, and grief and how the love of God born in the world through Jesus can heal and restore all people and the world to wholeness when we receive the love of God and love God and our neighbors. The story is called *The Christmas Miracle of Jonathan Toomey* by Susan Wojciechowski.

Behind his back, he was called Mr. Gloomy by the children in the village. Because since the day he arrived Jonathan Toomey never smiled, never laughed. He spoke in short, sharp sentences and he was usually complaining that the church bells were too loud, the bird songs were too shrill, and the children playing outside were a nuisance. You couldn't tell his age by the way he walked, hunched over, head down. No one ever noticed his eyes were the blue of an August day.

Jonathan Toomey was a woodcarver by trade and was the best in the whole valley. He worked long hours at his workbench in front of the window in his shop. Every day he worked until the church bells rang at six o'clock. Then he ate a simple meal of boiled potatoes, sat in his straight-backed chair, smoking his pipe, and gazed into the fire in his fireplace.

No one knew there was a reason for Jonathan's gloomy demeanor. Some years earlier, Jonathan's wife and infant son died from sickness only three days apart. In his immense grief at the loss of his family, Jonathan Toomey packed his things and left, traveling until his tears ran out. He settled at the edge of a small village to do his woodcarving.

One day in early December, there was a knock at Jonathan's door. Mumbling and complaining, he went to answer it. There stood a woman and a young boy. The woman introduced herself as the widow McDowell and said she had moved to the village with her seven-year-old son Thomas. She explained the reason for their visit and told Jonathan about a very special set of Christmas figures her grandfather had made for her when she was a little girl. "After I moved her, I discovered they had been lost," she said. "I had hoped by some miracle they would turn up, but they haven't."

"There's no such thing as miracles," Jonathan said. "Can you describe the figures to me?"

The widow described two sheep, “happy sheep with curly wool” her son Thomas chimed in. An angel, Joseph, Mary, and the baby Jesus. The woodcarver agreed to take the job. When the widow asked if he’d have them ready by Christmas he replied: “They will be ready when they are ready.” And shut the door.

The next week there was a knock at Jonathan Toomey’s door. Grumbling and complaining he got up to answer it. There stood the widow McDowell and her son Thomas. The widow explained Thomas wanted to come and watch Mr. Toomey work, as he wanted to be a woodcarver one day. “I’ll be quiet and sit very still.” Thomas promised. With a grumble, Jonathan let them in. He pointed to a stool next to his workbench and instructed Thomas not to make a sound. The widow handed Jonathan warm corn bread fresh from the oven, took out her knitting, and sat down on a rocking chair in the corner. But when Jonathan saw where she was sitting, he barked at the widow, “Not there! No one sits in that chair!” She moved to the straight-backed chair by the fire where Jonathan sat when he wasn’t at his workbench.

It isn’t easy for a seven-year-old to sit still, but Thomas managed pretty well. He stifled a sneeze and refrained from swinging his legs. After several hours, Thomas timidly cleared his throat and said, “Mr. Toomey, may I ask a question?” The woodcarver glared at Thomas but shrugged his shoulders, and Thomas asked, “Are those my sheep you are carving?”. Jonathan grunted and nodded. After another hour or so, Thomas whispered, “Mr. Toomey, you are carving my sheep all wrong.”

The widow’s knitting needles stopped clicking and Jonathan’s carving knife stopped. Thomas took a breath and continued: “They are beautiful sheep, but my sheep were happy.” “That’s ridiculous,” Jonathan huffed, “Sheep are sheep. They aren’t happy.”

“Mine were,” said Thomas. They knew they were with baby Jesus, so they were happy.” After that Thomas didn’t say any more. When the church bells chimed six o’clock, Mr. Toomey complained about the noise. The widow said it was time to go. That evening, after a supper of boiled potatoes and corn bread, Johnathan Toomey picked up his carving knife and worked on the sheep until his eyes closed.

A few days later, there was a knock at the woodcarver’s door. There again were the widow McDowell and Thomas, asking if Thomas could watch again. Jonathan let them in, and the widow handed him a plate of freshly baked molasses cookies. Thomas took his place on the stool and quietly watched the woodcarver. After several hours, Thomas asked, “Mr. Toomey, is that my angel you are carving?” “Yes, it is,” Jonathan replied, “And perhaps you would like to tell me what I am doing wrong?” Without missing a beat, Thomas replied, “Well, my angel looked like one of God’s most important angels because it was sent to Jesus.” “And how does one make an angel look important?” asked the woodcarver. Thomas replied, “I don’t know but you’ll do it because you are the best woodcarver in the valley.”

After a while, Thomas spoke up again, “Mr. Toomey, may I ask a question?” “Do you ever stop talking?” the woodcarver huffed. “My mother says I don’t,” Thomas replied, “She says I could learn a lot from you about the virtue of silence.” Under his long, shaggy beard Jonathan turned pink and the widow McDowell turned as bright red as her knitting. “Well, what is your question?” he asked, and Thomas answered, “Will you teach me how to carve?” After complaining that he was a busy man, Jonathan took

a block of wood and traced the shape of a bird on it. He showed Thomas how to take off the corners and smooth the edges of the wood into curves. Thomas concentrated and copied the woodworker's strokes as he carved a bird.

When the church bells chimed six o'clock, Jonathan Toomey was holding Thomas's hand, guiding the knife along the edge of a bird's wing. After the widow and Thomas left, he had a dinner of boiled potatoes and molasses cookies. Then he picked up his carving knife and the angel and worked until his eyelids grew heavy.

A few days later, there was a knock at the woodcarver's door. Jonathan jumped up to answer it. There was the widow and Thomas. They had brought a bouquet of pine boughs and holly branches with bright red berries. The widow put the bouquet in a jar of water and put it on the table on a lovely tablecloth she found in a drawer.

"I am about to carve Joseph," Jonathan told Thomas. "Before I start, you will tell me the mistakes I am going to make." "Well," said Thomas, "my Joseph was leaning over baby Jesus like he was protecting him, he looked very caring." It wasn't until the church bells chimed and the widow and her son were getting ready to leave that Jonathan noticed the tablecloth on the table. "I found it in a drawer," the widow explained, "I thought it looked nice on the table." "Never open that drawer!" Jonathan barked. After they left, Jonathan put the tablecloth away. That evening after a supper of boiled potatoes, the woodcarver worked on a caring Joseph until his eyelids drooped shut.

A few days later there was a knock at the woodcarver's door. He dusted woodchips from his beard and his shirt and went to answer it. There was the widow and Thomas, who watched Jonathan work all day. When it was time to leave, Jonathan asked Thomas, "Can you tell me about Mary and the baby Jesus?" "They were the most special of all," Thomas replied, "Jesus was smiling and reaching up to Mary who looked at him with love." "Thank you, Thomas," Jonathan said.

When the widow asked if the figures would be ready by the next day, which was Christmas Day, Jonathan replied, "they will be ready when they are ready." The widow handed him two packages tied with red ribbon. "I don't want any presents," the woodcarver huffed. "That is why we are giving them," the widow replied and left.

Slowly, Jonathan opened the first package. It contained a bright red scarf knitted by hand. The other contained a bird, crudely carved from pine. He tied the scarf around his neck and set the bird on his mantle.

The woodcarver didn't eat supper that night. He tried to sketch Mary and the baby Jesus figures. But nothing he did was right, and he tossed page after crumpled page of poor attempts into the fire. When the church bells announced the start of the Christmas Eve service, Jonathan went to the drawer, the one he told the widow not to open. He took out the tablecloth, a shawl, a pair of baby shoes, and a sketch of a woman sitting in a rocking chair holding her baby in a beautiful wooden frame. The baby was reaching up to his mother who looked back at him with love. With tears streaming down his eyes, Jonathan picked up his knife and began to carve.

On Christmas Day there was a knock at the widow McDowell's door. When she opened it, there stood Jonathan Toomey wearing a bright red scarf and holding a wooden box stuffed with straw. "Mr. Toomey!" the widow explained, "What a nice surprise. Merry Christmas." "The figures are ready," he said as he stepped inside

where he unpacked two happy sheep, an important angel, a caring Joseph, and Mary wearing a shawl looking lovingly at her baby son who smiled as he reached for her.

Then Jonathan went to the Christmas church service with the widow McDowell and Thomas. That day the people of the village saw Jonathan walk tall, with a smile on his face, and eyes as blue as an August sky. No one ever called him Mr. Gloomy again, for he had learned Christ comes to us in our most vulnerable hearts, to shine light where there is pain and loss, to heal us, to love us so that we will learn to love God and each other.