

THE BEST CHRISTMAS PAGEANT EVER

Christmas Eve, December 24, 2004

The Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close

MERRY CHRISTMAS! Welcome this holy night as we celebrate the Feast of the Incarnation! It is the night we remember the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ! God has chosen to live among us as one of us. It is a mystery, a miracle ... for God comes in the gift of a child!

The story of Christmas is so familiar to us. Maybe it's too familiar. We can turn it into just a sentimental event and miss the profound significance of this night. God comes into our lives to transform and change us, to bring us hope, peace, love, justice and more! This night is special ... not because a child is born ... but because a new life is brought within the grasp of each of us.

What would it be like to hear the Christmas story for the first time? What questions would it raise for you? How would we react? How would the story challenge or encourage us? This night I would like to share another story with you. It's called "The Best Christmas Pageant Ever", and it is taken from a story written by Barbara Robinson.

The story takes place in a town not much different from ours. However, in this town lived a family with six children, the Herdmans. They were absolutely the worst kids in the world! There was Ralph, Imogene, Leroy, Claude, Ollie and Gladys. The names alone were ominous. These kids all lied, stole, smoked, cussed and hit the other kids. Rumor has it they burned down a tool shed in town, experimenting with a chemistry kit and matches. They learned at the fire that people provide donuts for the firemen, and the kids made off with all of them. The mother was not around much, she worked two shifts at a local factory. Some claim it was as much as to get away from the kids as to provide for them. As a result, the kids raised themselves. They were extortionists, thieves, and regularly assaulted all the kids at school.

This particular year Barbara's mom was in charge of the Church's Christmas pageant. The director, Mrs. Armstrong, fell and broke her leg. Mom got saddled into doing the play. Her children, Barbara and Charlie were to be in the pageant, as an angel and shepherd, although they didn't want to be. The big accomplishment for mom each year was getting dad to come to church Christmas eve. There was the standard script, with an inn, a stable, a star, shepherds, angles, wise men, Mary, Joseph and Gabriel. Simple, right? All you needed were bathrobes, bed sheets, wings and the kids ...

One Sunday in Advent, the Sunday School was in Church to make a special presentation. They were asked to share what the school means to them. There were the typical responses, "learning about Jesus;" "singing songs;" and so on. Charlie was the last one to share, he said, "What I like most about Sunday School is that the Herdmans aren't here!" Well, you can bet that the only thing the kids remembered was what Charlie said ... because it was true for them too! But Charlie did make a mistake. He bragged to Leroy one day how great Sunday School was and Leroy asked why. He said because of the food they got! Cake, candy and more were served!

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The next Sunday came and guess who showed up? All six of the Herdman kids. They were looking for the food. It just so happens that this was the day they were taking in collections for the local food pantry. What caught their attention, however, was mention of the Christmas pageant. The children were asked to meet in the back of the church after the service. Imogene asked Barbara, "What's the pageant?" She replied that it was a play about the birth of Jesus. After church, the volunteers, children and Herdmans gathered at the back. All six of the Herdmans volunteered for the main roles, Ralph for Joseph, Imogene for Mary, the other boys for the Wise men and Gladys for Gabriel. The rest of the kids were silent. Mom couldn't get any of them to volunteer. The Herdmans were taking over.

You can imagine the parents' reactions! We're letting those kids in the pageant? It'll be a disaster! There was anxiety and fear of beatings for the kids, exasperation for mom, (the director,) and constant complaints to Fr. Hopkins. He finally put an end to all the complaints. He forcefully responded, "And Jesus said, suffer the little children to come to me. That includes the Herdmans."

The first rehearsal was noisy. In came the outlaws, the Herdmans. They were anything but quiet. Kids ears were clipped and back of the heads whacked. There they were, the criminals of the town, representing the best and most beautiful of the story. Mom separated the kids into angels and shepherds. Leroy asked, who are the shepherds? Someone explained they were the poor, working class keepers of the sheep. Imogene asked what was an inn and why wasn't there any room? Barbara said it was a motel where people spend the night. Imogene asked what people? Why for Mary, Joseph and the soon to be born baby Jesus.

Imogene demanded to hear the whole story from the beginning. Some of the kids blanched and thought this meant from Genesis! The Herdmans didn't know the Christmas story. How would they have found out? No one brought them to church and no one socialized with them. They only came to Church when they heard there was food available. Their parents didn't help. The dad was gone and the mom was always working. Mom read the whole story over again. The kids thought it was a pain, because they had heard it all before. The Herdmans fell strangely silent as they listened. When some kids made a fuss, Imogene turned and said, "Shut up! I want to hear this!"

There was no room at the inn, to which Imogene responded, "My God! Not even for Jesus? Ralph wanted to know what a manger was, and then when he learned said, ""Where was DYFS? Aren't they supposed to help?" The others thought the angels were "cool." Ollie wanted to know what the gifts were that the wise men brought. They didn't sound very practical to them. Leroy was indignant that Herod wanted to put the little Jesus to death. "My God!" said Imogene, "He just got born and they want to kill him?" The Herdmans discussed among themselves how they would take care of Herod.

What if tonight was the first time we ever heard the Christmas story? Pop agreed that it was disgraceful that there was no room for a pregnant woman. Barbara was shocked her

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dad agreed with the Herdmans! The fact is that Mary ended up in a barn, among the poorest and most common of existences. This is how a king was to be born? A savior? Pop also thought the Herdmans had the right instincts about King Herod!

You can imagine what the first rehearsal was like! The Herdmans showed up for all the rehearsals on time. However, the money disappeared from the birthday bank, most of the crayons disappeared from the classrooms and the Herdmans terrorized the kids. Imogene was found in the girls' bathroom in her Mary costume smoking a cigar. It seems no one told Imogene that Mary was to be quiet and dreamy. She sounded more like the lady who ran the pizza shop a few doors down ... loud, hollering, hugging and slapping the kids and being bossy. Leroy, Ollie and Claude were the Wise Men. They pushed, shoved and kept talking about how to get even with Herod. No one dared to volunteer their child for a live baby Jesus this year. The parents were too nervous around the Herdmans. They used a baby doll instead.

The dress rehearsal was a disaster. Imogene constantly barked at the Wise Men. Mom kept frantically telling everyone to be quiet! No one had a speaking part but the Angel Gabriel. Mom had to explain what "unto you a child is born" to Gladys. The words mean that Jesus is for all of us. In the midst of the chaos, mom called for a five-minute break. She hoped to return for a whole rehearsal. It wasn't to be ... The fire department was called when one of the Women's Guild opened the girls bathroom door and smoke poured out (remember Imogene and her cigars?). She shouted fire! Someone called the fire department. Just as the rehearsal resumed, the fire engines came. In all the excitement, the women forgot the cakes baking in the oven. They caught on fire and smoke filled the kitchen. The Herdmans got all the blame.

The whole church was in an uproar. Fr. Hopkins asked mom if they should call off the pageant. NO! She was determined to go forward. The kids were convinced that no one would come. But everyone did come, and then some! They all wanted to see what the Herdmans would do!

Christmas Eve arrived. Mom didn't know what to expect. It felt like a terrible disaster was about to descend. There was the usual chaos as the kids arrived. Little shepherds and angels were crying and cranky. They were all in the wrong place. The lights were dimmed, and the music began. "O Little Town of Bethlehem" was the cue for Mary and Joseph to enter ... but the Herdmans hadn't arrived. They were nowhere in sight. What was the delay? The music ended and humming was put in its place. The anticipation was building. Did the Herdmans bail?

Ralph and Mary suddenly appeared. But there was no shoving or pushing. They just stood there as if they weren't sure they were in the right place. Maybe it was the crowd, or the dimmed lights ... Mary was dressed in her costume, but the veil was crooked and she wore these huge earrings. Ralph looked uncomfortable on the stage. They looked like the refugees we see on the television news. That's what it must have been like for the Holy Family ... feeling lost and out of place, uncertain what will happen next. They were stuck

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out in the barn, no one cared what happened to them. They were not neat or tidy. Perhaps Mary and Joseph looked more like Imogene and Ralph than we care to admit.

Imogene held the baby up as if to burp it on her shoulder. Baby Jesus had colic? Isn't that the whole point, though? Jesus was born, lived and would die. He was a real person. This night the baby seemed more real than most other Christmas eves. Next Gladys stomped in. Her dirty sneakers stuck out from under her robe. Her halo was on crooked. She stepped towards the shepherds and hollered, "Hey! Unto you a child is born!" The shepherds trembled in fear, most likely because of Gladys, but doesn't it say in the Bible that they were afraid? It seemed so real.

Leroy, Claude and Ollie came in. But they didn't have the glass bath bead jars that were used in other years. They came in quietly and placed a ham at the feet of Mary and the baby. Barbara knew where it came from. She had seen her dad work with the Church Christmas committee to prepare family food baskets for the poor. Each basket got a ham ... this was the Herdman's Christmas charity ham. People never knew these kids to give anything away!

When it was time for the cast to exit, the Herdmans must have forgot. They just stayed there. They were quiet, just taking the whole scene in. There was a mysterious serenity that took over the place. The lights dimmed more, and candles were lit by the people in the pews. Everyone began to sing "Silent Night." Barbara looked over at Imogene ... and she was crying. The tears streamed down her face as she tightly clutched the baby doll. Awful old Imogene, with her crooked veil and huge earrings and smudged face ... sitting there crying ... it was the best Christmas pageant ever.

Too often we never understand or appreciate the wonder and mystery of Christmas Eve. Because of the Herdmans, a whole town took on new meaning one night. It's about the love of God. It's about the birth of Jesus. It's about a mother and father, with no money and no place to go. It's about friends from the East and a child that a rich and powerful king wants to kill. It's about love, hope, peace, faith and promise. The Herdman kids left that night. They didn't take the ham, nor the cookies or candy offered afterwards. Imogene asked for a set of the bible pictures offered in class. She found the picture of Mary and tore it, "that will do," she said.

Outside, Gladys strode up and down the streets. Her dirty sneakers stuck out from under her white robe. Her halo was still crooked. She carried a star and shouting, "Hey! Unto you a child is born!" Indeed, unto us this night, a child is born. His name is Jesus. He comes to change the lives of each of us. He comes for all of us, but especially for the Herdmans of this world. May this be the best Christmas ever for you and your loved ones. Merry Christmas!