

The Christmas Pageant

Luke 2:8-20

12 13 2009 Sam Jones Memorial United Methodist Church

I. The Father of the Virgin Mary

In 1995, I unexpectedly became **the father of the Virgin Mary**. I did not seek the honor—it was thrust upon me. Despite all the preparations and expectations, nothing could have quite prepared me for the experience.

The bishop assigned me to the First United Methodist Church of West Point in 1995. During a fall staff meeting, I casually asked who was directing the children's **Christmas pageant** that year. Silence filled the room as everyone studied the table top. I finally "volunteered" the Director of Christian Education.

With equal parts mirth and malice, the staff member chose our daughter to play the role of **Mary**. Katie was only five years old at the time and very shy in front of crowds. However, she seemed excited about the part. Since our daughter didn't have any spoken lines, I thought it would be all right.

I was all wrong.

The first hint of trouble came an hour before the play. Mary's costume was a simple gown cinched with a sash. However, Katie refused to wear what she considered to be pajamas in public. Then she announced that her husband, Joseph, was a gross boy infected with cooties. With a parental mix of bribes and threats, we finally convinced her that the show must go on.

Except it didn't.

Midway through the performance, the script called for Mary to place the baby Jesus into the manger. However, Katie had grown quite attached to the baby doll who was substituting for our Savior. She stubbornly shook her head, refusing to release the baby Jesus from a headlock.

A few minutes later she fled the stage and sat in my lap—the baby Jesus still firmly tucked under one arm. After five minutes of whispered encouragement, she finally returned to the stage. However, she refused to go alone.

The Gospels say nothing about the father of the Virgin Mary accompanying the Holy Couple to Bethlehem. However, I unexpectedly found myself as a cast member in the nativity. The closing scene portrayed the family in the stable. Jesus never did make it into the manger. Joseph appeared totally confused. And Mary sat in my lap with her face buried in my shoulder.

After the play, I greeted the congregation at the back door with a fixed smile on my face. Some grinned and others muttered sympathetically. Then an older member paused and said, "You know, preacher, if everyone held on to Jesus as tightly as your daughter did, then we all might appreciate Christmas a little bit more."

II. Christmas Pageants

Christmas pageants are a sacred tradition in church life. Children of all ages look forward to the holiday play. The programs feature angels in tennis shoes with pipe cleaner halos. The shepherds wear bathrobes with dishtowel headdresses. The wise men

appear in cardboard crowns decorated with rhinestone jewels. Despite missed cues and botched lines, everyone always enjoys the program.

Behind the scenes, however, Christmas pageants are quite a different reality. They are equal parts, confusion, hysteria, anarchy, chaos, and tears. And THAT just describes the adult leaders!

Barbara Robinson wrote a book (later made into a movie in 1983) entitled ***The Best Christmas Pageant Ever***. It does a terrific job of capturing the holy chaos of children's programs. The plot revolves around a family of children with the last name of **Herdman**. In the *Introduction*, the narrator says:

The Herdmans are the worst kids in the history of the world. They lie, steal, smoke cigars, swear, and hit little kids. So no one is prepared when this outlaw family invades church one Sunday and decides to take over the annual Christmas pageant.

None of the Herdmans has ever heard the Christmas story before. Their interpretation of the tale (the Wise Men are a bunch of dirty spies and Herod needs a good beating) has a lot of people up in arms. But it will make this year's pageant the most unusual anyone has seen and, just possibly, the best one ever.

If you've never read the book or seen the movie, give yourself a Christmas gift this season by doing so. Through the Herdmans, we have the chance to hear the story of Christ's birth as if for the first time.

Barbara Robinson's book also reminds us that Christmas pageants are a lot of work and worry. It's a challenge to recruit leaders and involve children. Rehearsals are shoehorned into busy schedules. Costumes are hit and miss. And you never know if children will remember the lines of the play or the words of the carols.

So why do we bother? What is it about Christmas pageants that cause us to repeat the scared ordeal year after year? I suppose there are a variety of answers. A soap-opera-type amnesia from one year to the next would explain it! Of course, the kids are just so cute in their oversized costumes and creative lines. For parents with adult children, the children remind us of when our sons and daughters were younger. We may even recall our own childhood from Christmases past.

But it's more than that. At their best, Christmas pageants serve an **educational function**. Boys and girls are immersed in the Christmas story in a way that engages all five senses. The drama allows the boys and girls to experience the story firsthand. It also gives children of all ages an opportunity to hear the good news once again.

We intuitively understand the need to rehear and rehearse the story of God's love over and over in our lives. Think of all the different ways we retell the Christmas story during the Advent season:

- Children's programs
- Choir musicals
- Christmas songs
- TV specials
- Manger Scenes
- The Living Nativity
- Scripture readings
- Advent devotionals
- The Christmas Eve Service
- Lessons and Carols

Out of the four gospels, only Matthew and Luke include any details about Jesus' birth. The traditional story of the first Christmas blends together both of their accounts. Today I invite you to hear the story once again as if for the very first time.

III. The Christmas Story

The story did not occur “*once upon a time*” or “*in a galaxy far, far away.*” In a particular time and place, God acted. Events foretold by the prophets became a waking dream. The divine plan of salvation unfolded according to a plan in place since the foundations of the world. Two thousand years ago in the nation of Israel God sent his son into the world.

The Lord sent the angel, Gabriel, to a woman named Mary who lived in the town of Nazareth in the region of Galilee. The young virgin was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph. The angel appeared to her and said, “*Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you!*”

Mary was very troubled by his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel rushed ahead, “*Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and you are to name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High God.*”

In great confusion, Mary asked, “*How can this be since I am a virgin?*”

Gabriel answered, “*The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.*”

Mary paused for a moment, and the entire cosmos held its breath, awaiting her answer. Then she said, “*I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said.*”

Neither Matthew nor Luke records the scene when Mary broke the news to Joseph. However, it's clear that he drew the natural, human conclusion. Even in his anger and disappointment, however, Joseph was a righteous man. He did not want to hurt his fiancée more than necessary. So Joseph decided to break the engagement quietly.

However, one evening an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “*Joseph, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.*”

All of this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet Isaiah: “*The virgin will be with child and will birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel—which means, ‘God with us.’*”

When Joseph awoke, he did what the angel had commanded him. He took Mary home as his wife.

In those days, a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that a census should be taken of the entire Roman Empire. Everyone was required to go to his hometown to register. So Joseph went upon from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea, because

he was of the house and lineage of David. He went there to register with Mary who was expecting a child.

While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born. She gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn. They gave him the name that the angel had foretold: “*Jesus*” which means “*God saves.*”

There were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks by night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

But the angel said, “*Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you: Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.*”

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God, and saying: “*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.*”

When the angels had left them, the shepherds said one to the other, “*Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.*”

So they hurried off and found Mary, Joseph, and the baby who was lying in a manger. They spread the word around the region about what had happened, and everyone was amazed. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.

The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen which were just as they had been told.

After Jesus’ birth, time passed—weeks, months, maybe even years. Then Magi from the east came to King Herod’s court in Jerusalem. These astrologers and wise men asked, “*Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.*”

Herod was a paranoid tyrant who eliminated anyone who might become a threat. He was troubled by these words and all of Jerusalem with him. So he gathered the chief priests and teachers of the Jews and asked where the Christ was to be born. They answered, “*In Bethlehem, as the prophets foretold.*”

So Herod called the Magi secretly and asked when the star had first appeared. Then he sent them on to Bethlehem. He said, “*Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me so that I too may go and . . . worship him.*”

So the Magi traveled towards Bethlehem and the eastern star went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, the Magi were overjoyed. They entered the home and saw the child with his mother Mary. They bowed down and worshipped him. Then the Magi opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, incense, and myrrh. Having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Conclusion

You have heard me say before that only Matthew and Luke contain the traditional stories of Christ's birth. Mark begins his gospel 30 years later with the appearance of John the Baptist and the beginning of Jesus' public ministry. However, a strong case can be made that John tells the Christmas story in shorthand. Hear these familiar words from the Gospel according to John:

- ❖ *“In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not overcome it.”*
- ❖ *“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”*
- ❖ *“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son; whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”*

During this holiest of season, I pray that God's grace will enable us to hear the story of Christmas for the first time all over again. May the familiar children's pageants, Scripture lessons, Christmas carols, manger scenes, holiday movies, and family traditions serve as reminders of God's gift of love.

I learned an important lesson as the father of the Virgin Mary. In the midst of the turmoil and chaos of the holiday season, it is still possible to hear the angelic voices proclaim the birth of the Christ child. And if everyone held on to Jesus as tightly as my daughter did, then God will grant us the grace to hear the Christmas story as if for the first time all over again.