

"OF PAGEANTS AND SUCH"

A Sermon By

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### INTRODUCTION

I have a friend who looks upon children's Christmas pageants as dull and boring. He prefers to have nothing to do with them. They try his patience. Actually, he feels that way only about those pageants that feature the children of other parents. But mind you, those Christmas pageants that feature his children are always milestones of dramatic achievement and he's usually up front with camera in hand.

### DEVELOPMENT

I came across a book some years ago that's becoming something of a classic Christmas story. Both children and adults seem to enjoy it. It's funny, it's touching and also slightly irreverent. And if you read it, you'll have a new perspective on all those Christmas pageants that feature the children of other parents. Called, The Best Christmas Pageant Ever, it's worthy of a sermon and it's a sermon that can't be preached after Christmas.

The story is about a family of wild children called the Herdmans who take over a church's Christmas pageant and what happens. The Herdmans are described (by the author, Barbara Robinson) as just about the worst kids in the history of the world.

"They lied, they stole, they smoked cigars (even the girls), they talked dirty and hit little kids and cussed their teachers and took the name of the Lord in vain and set fire to Fred Shoemaker's old broken-down tool house."

There were six Herdman children. They lived over a garage at the bottom of Sproul Hill. One gets the impression that that's on the wrong side of town. Their father got on a train several years back and never returned, which you could understand if you knew the Herdman kids. Now their mother works both night and day trying to keep the family together....so the children have a lot of time on their own. And they're uncontrollable, at school or anywhere else. They never study and they're always passed on to the next grade because no teacher in her right mind would ever hold a Herdman back. Selfish, mean, violent kids. They were extortioners. They used either violence or secret information that they had stolen from school files in order to extort food or money from the other children. The narrator of the story describes them this way,

"We figured they were headed straight for hell by way of the penitentiary..."

Sunday School was one place where the Herdman children had never attended, and it was not likely that they would ever be seen in Sunday School. So Sunday School was eagerly anticipated as one place you could go without getting poked or rabbit punched when the teacher wasn't looking. It was that way, that is, until one day the brother of the girl who narrates this story tells one of the Herdman boys about the free ice cream you get - and cake, too - at Sunday School. Actually they didn't get free ice cream and cake in Sunday School, but he lied in an attempt to hold on to some dignity when a Herdman boy took his dessert off his school lunch tray. His response to this affront to his dignity was to say,

"Go ahead and take it. I get all the ice cream and cake I want FREE in Sunday School!"

That's all it took. The next Sunday all six Herdman kids were there at Sunday School, asking, "Where's the ice cream and the cake?" There was no cake, but when they passed the offering plate they helped themselves to that instead. It just so happened that on that Sunday Mrs. Grady, head of the Christmas pageant committee, went around to the Sunday School classes and announced that the rehearsals were soon to begin for the annual Sunday School Christmas pageant. Imogene Herdman punched her neighbor and asked, "What's a pageant?" and was told it's like a play. And for the first time since the plate was passed, Imogene paid attention.

Every year the Christmas pageant was the same in that church. Every year Alice Wendleken played Mary because she was so beautiful and clean and pure. As the narrator said,

"She had antiseptic hands by the time she was four years old, and her mother never let play at a house where they had two rabbits."

And Joseph was always played by the minister's son because the minister told his son that he had to play the part and that's the way it was!

It never changed. Every year it was the same - the same kids, the same sets, the same music, the same stage direction, the same bathrobes. And what they hadn't counted on was that the Herdman kids showed up at the first rehearsal, all six of them. When the mother in charge of the drama read the story of the Nativity from the Gospels of Matthew and Luke about the trip to Bethlehem and about Mary and Joseph and the baby and the shepherds and the Angel Gabriel and the wise men and Herod, the Herdmans decided that they were going to play the principal parts. And nobody else dared volunteer for fear of getting beat up.

So Imogene was Mary and Ralph Herdman was Joseph, and Leroy, Claude and Ollie were the three Wise Men. And Gladys Herdman was the Angel Gabriel. And there they sat, the narrator says,

"The closest things to criminals that we knew anything about, and they were going to represent the best and most beautiful thing that the world had ever seen."

I'll come back to the story and tell you how it ends. But first, I want to point out what Christmas pageants tell us about the Nativity, about the first Christmas...and also about the world we live in.

#### SURPRISES IN THOSE PAGEANTS

There are always surprises in those pageants. They are never the way we want them to be. Something always goes wrong. The Herdmans get the principal parts, for instance, not the perfect kids, the ones that the directors had in mind for the parts. So many things seem to go wrong.

The angels don't come out on time, one of the shepherds has to go to the bathroom. Mary keeps looking down at the director to see what she is supposed to do next. And some people stay away from church school Christmas pageants for that reason. They's so amateurish. They'd rather stay at home, watch a slick TV production, a Christmas special, where everything is done professionally and everything comes off without a hitch.

But if you read the story in the Gospels, read it with a little imagination, I think you'll discover that if anything, that first Christmas was not that slick. The angels probably got their directions straight. It's hard to imagine angels fouling anything up. But you wonder, since they made their announcement to shepherds and not to those who could make a difference with that kinds of "good news". And the shepherds, when they entered the stable, I imagine they came stumbling in awkwardly, shyly, even rowdily, like the Herdman boys. Because that's what the shepherds were - herdsmen...the kids who couldn't make it in Hebrew School, yes...the dropouts. And then Mary, who traditionally in these pageants is played by pretty girls who sit there in blue capes,

"Looking like they had never washed a dish or cooked a meal or done anything at all except have Jesus on Christmas Eve."

Well, it wasn't that way at all. Mary was probably like all the little girls who play her in church pageants...scared, awkward, holding the baby as if it belonged to somebody else, looking around as if to ask, "Please...somebody tell me what to do next."

Imogene said she modeled her Mary after Mrs. Santoro at the pizza parlor... loud and bossy. She shouted at Joseph, "Get away from the baby!" And she shouted at the shepherds, too, to keep their distance. That's what happens at Christmas pageants. The kids don't look like they really belong there. And some of them obviously don't want to be there. And therefore they give us a pretty clear vision of what really happened two thousand years ago at Bethlehem, where the most common people, some of them just youngsters no older than those you see in Christmas pageants, not knowing what to do or to say...became the leading participants, the leading actors in the most holy drama of world history.

#### GOD COMES UNEXPECTEDLY

And this leads me to a second insight to share. I believe that when God enters our lives and our world He always comes rather unexpectedly and to common people through common events.

One of the mistakes that the people of Jesus' day made was to think that God would come when they got things all ready for Him...when everything was right. In other words, He'd come when all the rehearsing was over, when all the lines were perfectly memorized, the costumes just right...when everything was "letter perfect". Then He would come, so they believed. But He didn't come that way at all. They were wrong. God surprised them. The world wasn't quite ready. I guess you could say they expected Him to come in a television special, and it turned out to be more like a Sunday School pageant.

Jesus came into a world rather unexpectedly that wasn't ready. And part of the message of Christmas is:

"That's the way He'll come to you. You don't have to be beautiful or perfect or professional or self-righteous, with clean hands...before He will come to you"

The only preparation that you have to make is to be yourself, for it to be one of the best Christmas pageants and celebration EVER. In the words of that old Gospel hymn: "Just as I am without one plea, but that Thy blood was shed for me, and that Thou bidest me to come". He comes to us as we are, and bids us to come to Him. That's always been the message of Christmas.

THE NIGHT OF THE PAGEANT

Well, the night of the pageant came. They were afraid that nobody would bother to come because the Herdman children were in it. But it was just the opposite. Everybody in the church and a lot from the community came. They came because the Herdman kids were in it and they wanted to see what would happen. The church was packed, all the candles were lit and the pageant began with the children softly humming, "O Little Town of Bethlehem". And then Ralph and Imogene, playing Joseph and Mary, after a long delay finally came out on the stage. And you could see that they were dazzled by all the candles and all the people out there in front. They just stood there for a minute as if they weren't sure they were in the right place. The book said,

"They looked like people you see on the six o'clock news, like refugees who were sent to wait in some strange, ugly place with all their boxes and sacks around them...."

And the narrator of the story remarked,

"It suddenly occurred to me that this was the way it must have been for the real Holy Family, stuck away in a barn by people who didn't much care what happened to them...."

Then Mary sat down and put the baby Jesus to her shoulder and slapped Him on the back to burp Him. And then the children all sang, "While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks By Night". And the shepherds came in. Then the Angel Gabriel, played by Gladys Herdman, made her entrance...pushing aside the other angels so she could make her way up to center stage - front. She was the only one with a speaking part and she made the most of her one line, shouting, "Hey! Everybody...listen...unto you a child is born!" And she said it as if it were the best news in the world. And all the shepherds trembled and were sore afraid - of Gladys, mainly. But it was realistic.

Then they sang "We Three Kings" and the remaining Herdman boys, playing the Three Kings, came marching up the center aisle of the church. Leroy was carrying their gift. It was not the crystal jar filled with bath salts that the Wise Men had always carried in this pageant. It was a ham - a real ham. Actually, it was the ham that was in the Christmas basket that had been left at their doorstep by the Church people because the Herdmans were known to be among the poor families of town. It still had the ribbon around it saying, "Merry Christmas". They plopped the ham right down in front of the manger.

The pageant concluded with everyone singing "Silent Night". And this is the way the narrator described what happened,

"We sang all the verses, too. When we got to 'Son of God, Love's pure light', I happened to look at Imogene and I almost dropped my hymnbook. Everyone had been waiting and watching all this time for the Herdmans to do something absolutely unexpected. And sure enough - it happened. Imogene was crying. In the candlelight her face all shiny with tears and she didn't even bother to wipe them away. She just sat there - awful Imogene - in her crookedy veil - crying, crying, crying....."

CLOSING

Anyway, it all added up to the best Christmas pageant ever! Because the Herdmans were real. They did it the way they would have done it if they had been there in Bethlehem that night long ago. Imogene burped the baby, Jesus. Her brothers brought the Christmas ham. Not some bath salts. And Imogene, overcome with the meaning of it all...with the whole incredible idea that she, the one that nobody liked, the one that everybody looked down upon in that town, the one that nobody would have ever picked to play the role - yes, awful, old Imogene, was the mother of Jesus.

And so she cried. Just as I'm sure that Mary did, too...long ago in Bethlehem's manger.

PRAYER

As we brush up against eternal truth once again in this celebration of Christmas, remembering the light, the love, the joy that came into our world in the life of Jesus. Give us the grace to trust Him and to find in Him all year long Your power and love, the fullness of Your very Being. We ask this as we remember how You came to us long ago in a tiny baby that made a woman cry. Amen.