

A Christmas meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Christmas Eve, 7:30 p.m., December 24, 2011, dedicated to all parents who raise their children with love and devotion, to the cast, organists and crew of the drama of Nativity, who through the years bring Christmas alive in the best Christmas pageant ever, and always to the glory of God!

“For Unto US!”

Luke 2:1-20

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Let us pray: May Christmas come alive for us tonight. In the spirit and the name of the newborn Christ, we pray. Amen.

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“The Herdmans were absolutely the worst kids in the history of the world.” With this definitive first sentence, Barbara Robinson opens her 1972 classic, *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*. She continues, *“(The Herdmans) lied and stole and smoked cigars (even the girls) and talked dirty and hit little kids and cussed their teachers and the took the name of the Lord in vain and set fire to Fred Shoemaker’s old broken-down toolhouse”* (Barbara Robinson, *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*, Harper Collins Publishers, 1972, p.1).

There were six Herdman children altogether: From oldest to youngest, (like a line-up at the police station): Ralph, Imogene, Leroy, Claude, Ollie and Gladys. The big ones raised the little ones right down the line, each one getting meaner than the next. Of course, the meanest of all was Gladys. They terrified all the children on the playgrounds, in school, and everywhere in town. The only safe haven for all

the other kids was church; that was until Leroy Herdman found there were cookies there and they all showed up one Sunday morning just in time to take the leading roles in the annual Christmas pageant. Although they knew nothing about the Christmas story, they raised their hands and volunteered for all the leading parts. No one else dared to raise their hands. Ralph was Joseph; Imogene was Mary; Leroy, Claude and Ollie were the three Kings and Gladys was the angel of the Lord.

In the weeks leading up to Christmas Eve, pageant rehearsals and all of church life changed dramatically. Money disappeared from the offering plates, library books were stolen as the Herdmans researched the evil King Herod and how they might “get even” with him (who they wanted to beat-up in order to protect Jesus). All the shepherds were genuinely filled with fear every time Gladys spoke because they knew she would hit them on the head. No parents were daring enough to offer their newborns to play the role of baby Jesus in the Nativity play and on the night of the dress rehearsal, the women’s room filled with smoke as Imogene puffed her cigars prompting the fire department’s arrival and an abrupt end to the practice. The whole play from beginning to end was never actually rehearsed.

On Christmas Eve, the church was packed to see what would happen to baby doll playing Jesus when held in the hands of the worst kids in the history of the world. What happened was this: the story of Jesus’ birth changed the Herdmans. They were absolutely swept away by the story. And of course they changed the story as well - Mary was burping baby Jesus instead of laying in the manger, Joseph looked menacing in his attempt to protect his son, the three wise men brought a ham instead of gold, frankincense and myrrh and the angel of the Lord with her skinny legs and dirty sneakers waving her star like a weapon and yelling at the top of her lungs: **“Hey, Unto YOU a child is born!”** True and absolute fear filled the shepherds at the sight of Gladys with her waving arms, projectile star and a finger pointing in their

faces. Although it was unorthodox, to say the least, in the end, everyone agreed - it was the best Christmas pageant ever.

Everywhere across the world tonight, Christians of all sizes, shapes, ages and beliefs are attempting to present their best Christmas pageant ever. So are we. Once again, our teens are about to present the drama of nativity, now in its 62nd year of being presented. We have heard Luke's Gospel. Now our drama comes to us with lights, music, movement, stillness and imagination. In the darkness, only shadows, candlelight and silhouettes tell the ancient story as our ears are filled with the powerful music of the Kimball organ.

But, for one minute, let us back up to the *Best Christmas Pageant Ever*, according to Barbara Robinson. I cannot shake the image of Gladys as the angel of the Lord. Skinny legs, scary grimace on her face, halo askew, star taped to the end of stick waving threateningly over the shepherds and everyone else in the crowd, **“Hey, Unto YOU a child is born!”**

I think that might be how it was on the first Christmas night! The Archangel Gabriel had visited Elizabeth and Mary to announce their pregnancies and impending births. He was a powerful angel - not to be messed with or challenged. Remember, he silenced Zechariah when he raised some questions about John's birth. His name literally means, “God ALONE is my strength.” Do not mess with Gabriel whose power and strength comes from God. We need to listen to this angel!

Let us remember, the story of Jesus' birth has changed human history. To this day, the newborn Jesus changes lives!

A child is born for you! You have new life! You have new hope! You have new possibilities opening before you in your life because a child is born for you! Prepare for his coming no longer. He is here! He is here inside of each one of you. He is here in your heart, in your mind, in your soul.

So open up. He is coming into your life - tonight! Now!

Will you make room for him? Amen.

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