

The Herdman children were going to ruin Christmas. That was the fear expressed by pretty much every character in southeastern Ohio native Barbara Robinson's much loved children's book *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*, published 50 years ago. For those who are unfamiliar with this classic Christmas story, it is a fictional story about six unruly children – the Herdmans - who were so disruptive and destructive they terrified all the other children in town. The Herdmans were not only bullies who took what they wanted from everyone, they set fires, and were just mean.

When one child got fed up with Leroy Herdman for repeatedly stealing deserts from his lunch box, he lied and told Leroy it didn't matter because he got better deserts at church. This set off a series of events that started the next Sunday with all six Herdman children showing up at church for free treats. There were no desserts, but before the service was over the Herdmans had cleaned out the offering plates and scribbled all over the Bibles in the pews. At the end of the service the announcement was made that the annual Christmas pageant auditions were being held and any child who wanted to be in the pageant was invited to come.

The Christmas pageant was an important tradition in that church, and every year great pains were taken to make sure it was repeated exactly as it had been the year the before. The same girl always played Mary and she had come to think of herself as better than others, so much so, she resented any other girl wanting to play the part. But when other children were asked, they didn't really want to be in the pageant, and most parents didn't want to watch it. They all thought they knew the story and only kept participating because it was expected, and because they felt they had to.

The Herdmans invaded the pageant audition and volunteered to play all the lead roles, the ones that got the most attention. In the interests of their own self-preservation, no other child in church dared challenge them. Church members didn't take kindly to the inclusion of the Herdmans in the pageant. They didn't think Imogene Herdman, a girl who smoked cigars, stole, fought, and cussed should play Mary. Nor should her sister Gladys, who was notorious for hitting, play the angel who brings good news to the shepherds. The church folks complained. A lot. To each other. To the director of the pageant. And to the priest. But, because no other child had volunteered, and because the woman who usually ran the pageant was unable to do so that year, the new pageant director said she was going to make room for the Herdmans, and it was going to be the best Christmas pageant ever.

During rehearsals, the Herdmans admitted they had never heard the Christmas story before. So, the pageant director opened the Bible and read the story to everyone, the same one we have for today's Gospel. The church kids were bored, having heard it dozens of times before. But the Herdmans were fascinated. They were appalled to learn Mary had her baby in a stable and made his bed in a food trough for animals. They thought a pregnant woman and a newborn baby should have been treated better. They thought the angel sounded like a superhero. They thought the gifts of the wise men were lame. They wanted to rewrite the pageant and change the things that upset them, but of course were told they couldn't. When they weren't listening to the story, they were fighting, arguing, and causing other disruptions to the rehearsals, which led church members to fear that the Herdmans would ruin their Christmas tradition.

On Christmas Eve, the night of the pageant, the church was packed. Even people who didn't attend that church showed up to see what damage the Herdman children would do. At first there was a lot of judgmentalism as church regulars observed the Herdmans showed up looking messy instead of clean and compared them to refugees. But then the church members realized that the real Mary and Joseph probably were tired and messy from making the journey to Bethlehem, so maybe the Herdmans weren't misrepresenting the roles they were playing. When it was time for the pageant to begin, something happened to both the Herdman children and the church goers. The Herdmans stopped pushing and fighting and let themselves enter the story. Mary's veil may have been crooked, but there was a fierceness in her eyes. The angel of the Lord shouted at the shepherds, "Hey, unto you a child is born, now get up and go see!" When the Wise Men showed up, they didn't have the usual gold boxes to symbolize gold, frankincense, and myrrh, they had a big ham, that came from the Herdman family charity basket. Before that day, no Herdman child had given anything to anyone. And as the congregation sang *Silent Night*, everyone noticed Mary had genuine tears streaming down her face as she stared at what no longer seemed to be a doll, it looked like a real baby. And the congregation found themselves closer to the story of Jesus' birth than ever before. It felt more real and more loving than all the other performances of the past.

That's why it really was the best Christmas ever. Somewhere in the telling of the same story we all hear or read every year, everyone forgot about how rotten the Herdmans had been, stopped judging them, and stopped worrying about what they might do and entered more deeply into what Christmas is: the Incarnation. Of God dwelling with us just as we are, where we are. Not because of what we do, not because of what we think we deserve, not because we earned God's love or presence, but simply because God loves us.

I recently read an article by a Franciscan brother and theologian that asked the question: Did the Incarnation happen because humanity is a bunch of unredeemable sinners in need of correction? Or did God choose to come and dwell with us because God loves us, and wanted to restore the relationship that had been broken?

It's a deep question, one that has been asked by theologians for over a thousand years. There are those who believe it is because of sin that God became Flesh. They argue you don't have to look far to notice sin and its harm. Like the Herdman children and all the destruction they caused, and the church members who responded to their presence with judgementalism and self-righteousness. Others say God wanted to be with humanity because God loves us. These folks argue when God made the world and everything in it, God proclaimed it good and even made humankind in God's image. God, they say, believes we need love.

I wonder if the answer could be both/and. Like what happened when the Herdman children, who first went to church to take advantage of the generosity of others and wanted to be in the Christmas pageant to get attention realized Christmas isn't about them, it is about God's love incarnate in Jesus. And the church members realized Christmas isn't about preserving pristine traditions, it is about a love that does something to sin, transforms sin into repentance. A love that loves us despite the worst thing anyone of us has ever done. A love that is as vulnerable as a newborn baby. A love that somehow is large enough to make room for everyone, forgives, renews life, and gives hope.

Perhaps we need to step back and consider Jesus' whole life, death, and resurrection, to get a clearer picture of the Incarnation. All of Jesus' teachings, parables, healings, and miracles are about restoring relationship with God and others. When he encountered sin Jesus did not punish, nor did he condemn. Jesus forgave. Even when he was crucified, Jesus did not ask God to punish those who tortured and killed him, he forgave them. When Jesus was raised from the dead, he didn't return to his followers who had run away and chastise them. Instead, his first words to them were words of peace and forgiveness.

Jesus gives us a picture of God's response to sin as one that refuses to let humanity cast God in the role of the angry and vengeful deity that wants to make people suffer. Instead, through the Incarnation, through Jesus, God shows us God's nature and being is one of unconditional love. This love of course is not romance or sentiment or even the love of parent and child. Those might give us a glimpse, but the love I am talking about is God which is why it is stronger and bigger and more powerful than sin and anger and sorrow and death and life. Such a love might be difficult to believe in because there is so much sin, which might be why we return to

the story of Jesus' birth every year. To remember and to share the story with those who may not know it. This story both helps us recognize when God's love manifests in the world today and reminds us, all of us can tell that story by sharing God's love with others. You don't have to be in a Christmas pageant to embody God's love. You only need to become vulnerable enough to come close to the love of God to realize everything isn't always about you. That is what the pageant director did by including the Herdmans in the Christmas pageant and told them the story of Jesus' birth which helped them experience and share God's love when they acted out the story.

We may not be characters in a fictional children's book, but tonight we are given the same invitation to come close to the love of God incarnate – embodied- in the birth of Jesus, who came to us not as a judge or punisher, but as a baby. An infant full of the same possibility, vulnerability, fragility, hope and promise as all infants and at the same an embodiment of God's love for us all.

Every Christmas we all have the same opportunity to come close to the story of Jesus' birth. To sit with the parts of the story that can cause discomfort, that point to the sin and injustice in the world and in ourselves and realize even if we try, we can't erase those parts of the story, just like we can't solve or fix sin or the problems of sin by ourselves. We can instead, let those parts guide us to the beauty and miracle that resides in the midst of the story: God's love transcends our sins to reside among us. Sin can't ruin Christmas, any more than the Herdmans could have ruined the Christmas pageant. Nothing can ruin what God loves, because through the love of God all is redeemed, renewed, and restored. That is why there is hope and what makes any and every Christmas a Merry Christmas.