

On Christmas Day, rather than a regular sermon, we shared our favorite Christmas carols and memories. As part of that I read one of my favorite Christmas stories, "The Christmas Pageant" by Michael L. Lindvall. It comes from his book "Good News From North Haven." I love it not only because it brings to mind some of the many Christmas pageants in my past, but because it is a wonderful comment on how God's grace can cover our human mistakes and turn them into something good. As Lindvall writes, "God accepts our fumbling attempts at performance, at love and fairness, and then covers them with grace." Here is his story, "The Christmas Pageant." I hope you enjoy it.

Pastor Kathy

The Christmas Pageant
by Michael L. Lindvall

The Christmas Pageant is over. It was, in the end, wonderful, and now that it is past, my blood pressure and, in fact, the church's communal blood pressure, has dropped about twenty points. We got through it again without schism and with no divorces. None of the kids got grounded this year, but it was close.

The whole saga of the Christmas Pageant really began precisely forty-seven Christmases ago when Alvina Johnson first directed Second Presbyterian's "Children's Christmas Pageant," something that she continued to do through ten pastors, nine U.S. Presidents, three wars, and who knows how many Christian Education Committees, for the next forty-six years, but not this year, and that's the story. International alliances came and went; wars were fought and peace made; ministers were called and then called away- but Alvina Johnson directing the Children's Christmas Pageant was like a great rock in a turbulent sea.

Alvina is "Mrs. Johnson," although there is no "Mr. Johnson." There was a Mr. Johnson for only three and a half weeks, forty-nine years ago. A few days shy of their month's wedding anniversary, Mr. Johnson (nobody remembers his first name) left, although Alvina never puts it that way. She prefers to say, "He just ran off to Minneapolis," with the accent on Minneapolis, as if it were that notorious place and Mr. Johnson's morally feeble nature that lured him away from wife and home rather than anything having to do with Alvina.

Nobody here ever talks about why he left. They all know, just as they know why rain falls down and grass grows up. One might call Alvina "stubborn," but that word isn't quite enough. Alvina is intractable, intransigent, unmovable. This, everybody assumes, Mr. Johnson easily discovered in the space of three and a half weeks. When folks around here get put out with Alvina, who is disguised as a sweet and demure seventy-year-old lady, they refer to her, under their breath of course, as "the iron butterfly."

But Alvina does what she says, always, exactly, and forever. Forty-seven years ago somebody asked her to do the Christmas Pageant. She said yes. They didn't say, "Would you do the Christmas Pageant this year?" so Alvina, who is a literalist in all things, assumed they they meant forever, and she is a woman of her word. Alvina's Pageants always had precisely nine characters: one Mary, one Joseph, three Wise Men, two Shepherds, one Angel, and one Narrator. The script was simply the Christmas story out of the King James Bible, which meant that two six-year-old shepherds had to learn to say, "Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us."

Auditions for the nine parts were held the last Sunday afternoon in October for forty-six years. Rehearsals for the nine lucky winners were held for the next five Sunday afternoons. Alvina's goal was nothing less than perfection in Christmas pageantry: perfect lines, perfect pacing, blocking, enunciation, perfect everything, which is not easily achieved with little children, even nine carefully selected ones. Critics said that Alvina would have much preferred working with nine midget actors, if she could have gotten away with it.

Time and again people tried to get Alvina to open things up so that every kid who wanted a part could have one. "Alvina," they would say, "Scripture says that there was a heavenly host, not just one lonely angel. Alvina, why not a few more shepherds, then everybody could be in the Pageant?" or "Alvina, if there were shepherds, there had to be sheep, right? We'll make some cute little woolly sheep outfits for the three- and four-year-olds." "Nope," she'd answer, "too many youngsters, too many problems."

Early in the fall, however, something happened that deflected the inertia of nearly half a century of always doing it the way it had always been done. The Christian Education Committee included the three young mothers of last year's rejected Mary, Joseph, and Wise Man Number Two. And these young mothers pulled off what they call in Central America a coup d'etat. At their September meeting they passed the following motion: "Resolved: All children who wish to be in the Christmas Pageant may do so. Parts will be found."

Alvina heard about it that night and was in my office the next morning at nine o'clock sharp. She began by asking me if I thought the decorations on the Christmas tree in the church parlor were appropriate. I had not noticed them, I said. Well, she informed me, they were walnut shells decorated to look like little mice with tiny stocking caps on their heads. "What," she asked, "do mice have to do with the birth of our Lord?"

Now, I knew this wasn't the problem. I, too, had heard about the committee meeting the night before. "What's the matter, Alvina?" I asked. "Young mothers," he said. She spit these two words out as though "young mother" were an illicit occupation. "Young mothers," she continued, "who have no knowledge of or experience in the proper direction of a Christmas Pageant. Young mothers are behind those walnut-shell mice and they are behind the destruction of the Christmas Pageant." She then resigned as director and said, "If these young mothers know so

much, let them try to do it." She was angry, maybe even angry enough to quit the church and become a Methodist, but she didn't. I suspect that she wanted to hang around at least long enough to see the young mothers fall flat on their faces.

The Pageant was last week. The young mothers didn't fall flat on their faces, but the Pageant was, well, different from what everybody had come to expect over the last forty-six years. It seemed as though there were a cast of thousands, even though the actual number was fifty or so, which was every kid in the church up to about eighth grade. At this age, they would sooner die than get dressed up in their father's bathrobe and pretend to be a biblical character.

There must have been a dozen shepherds and ten angels (a veritable heavenly host). Then there were the sheep, a couple dozen three-, four-, and five-years-olds who had on woolly, fake-sheepskin vests with woolly hoods and their dads' black socks pulled up on their arms and legs. The Pageant was a lot of things, but smooth it wasn't. And one of the chief problems was these very sheep. Now, in suburban Christmas Pageants, I imagine sheep are well behaved and fairly quiet, but suburban kids have seldom seen real sheep. The only sheep most suburban kids have ever seen are on the front of Sunday church bulletin covers: peaceful, grazing sheep who just stand there and look cute and cuddly.

Half of the kids here live on farms. They've seen real sheep, many of them. They know that sheep don't just stand there. They know that sheep don't often follow directions. They know that sheep are dumb. They know that all sheep want to do is eat.

So, when the young mothers casually instructed the two dozen sheep to act like sheep, they really should have known better. Some of the sheep started to do a remarkable imitation of grazing behind the communion table. Some wandered over by the choir to graze, and others went down the center aisle. Some of them had donuts they found in the church parlor to make their grazing look even more realistic. When one of the shepherds tried to herd them a bit with his shepherd's crook, some of the sheep spooked and started to scatter just like real sheep do. Everybody knows that's how sheep act. It was, in fact, a remarkable imitation of sheep behavior, even though a bit out of the ordinary for a Christmas Pageant.

Now, Alvina was watching all this from the last pew of the sanctuary. I could just see her from where I was sitting. As the sheep spooked and scattered with much imitation bleating, Alvina looked down to hide a smirk. Young mothers, I'm sure she was thinking. If they know so much, let them try to direct the Christmas Pageant. The real climax of imprecision came, however, at the point of high drama when Mary and Joseph enter, Mary clutching a baby doll in a blue blanket. This year's Mary, whose name was actually Mary, was taking her role with an intense and pious seriousness. She looked into the face of the doll in her arms with eyes that really seemed to see the infant Christ. Joseph was another story. He had gotten the part because he had been rejected from Christmas Pageant participation by Alvina Johnson more times than any other kid in church. "With good reason," some might say.

Anyway, Mary and Joseph were to walk on as the Narrator read, "And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem....to be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child." At least this is what the Narrator was supposed to read. It was what the Narrator had read at the rehearsal. But a few hours before the performance, one of the young mothers had observed that none of the children could much understand King James English, so they voted, in their ongoing mood of revolutionary fervor, to switch to the Good News translation of the Bible for the performance. "What kid knows what 'great with child' means?" they asked.

The Good News translation is much more direct at this point. So, as Mary and Joseph entered, the Narrator read, "Joseph went to register with Mary who was promised in marriage to him. She was pregnant."

As that last word echoed from the Narrator through the PA system into the full church, our little Joseph, hearing it, froze in his tracks, gave Mary an incredulous look, peered out at the congregation, and said, "Pregnant? What do you mean, Pregnant?" This, of course, brought down the house. My wife, wiping tears from her eyes, leaned over to me and said, "you know, that may well be just what Joseph actually said."

Alvina was now wearing a look that simply broadcast I told you so. But as the Pageant wound into its closing tableaux and the church lights were dimmed for the singing of "Silent Night," a couple of magical- I would allow, miraculous- things happened. The sheep, when they had finished with their part, bleated their way down the aisle to sit in the last couple of pews to watch the end of the Pageant. Alvina was in the last pew and she suddenly found herself surrounded by a little herd of three-, four-, and five-year-olds in sheep outfits.

It was late, the church was warm, and the sheep were drowsy. I glanced over to Alvina as the Wise Men were exiting and the organ was softly playing the melody of "Silent Night." The sheep in the pew on either side of Alvina had fallen asleep and were resting their fake-wool heads on her shoulders, something they would feel comfortable doing with any grown-up in church. As the church went dark for the singing of "Silent Night," we could see what had been happening outside for the last hour. The first real snow of the winter was falling. Big, fat flakes floated down and covered everything with a white, uniform perfection. As we- little kids and grown-ups- saw it, there was a spontaneous and corporate "ahh."

We sang: "Silent night, holy night, All is calm, all is bright." It was very softly that we sang and all the sheep were quiet, even the ones who were awake, and everybody looked at the snow. It was as if flakes of grace were falling, falling free out of heaven and blessing the muddy earth with purity, a whiteness covering the dirt and the shoddiness with perfection. When the carol was finished, no one stirred for a long time. It wasn't planned, but we all just sat there and watched.

It seemed like an eternity, but it was maybe two minutes. Minnie MacDowell broke the spell. She's hard of hearing and always talks too loud. She meant to whisper to her husband, but everybody heard. "Perfect," she said, "just perfect."

And so it was- not perfect in the way Alvina's Pageants tried to make things perfect, but perfect in the way God makes things perfect. God accepts our fumbling attempts at performance, at love and fairness, and then covers them with grace. I think the moment may have even touched the iron butterfly. Minnie said that Alvina mentioned to her that if they needed any more sheep outfits for next year, she could perhaps find time to make a few.