

The Children's Christmas

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On the Monday evening before Thanksgiving, Matthew Bartholomew caught the phone on the fourth ring. The voice on the other end belonged to Tom Buzza, pastor of the Church of the New Shepherd.

"I was wondering if you have your famous crèche set up," the pastor asked.

"Not yet," Matt answered. "By tradition I set it up the day after Thanksgiving and we turn on the lights at our annual family gathering on Saturday night."

"Perfect," the pastor said. "I called to ask a favor. Our children's Christmas pageant is coming up. Last year, I thought our pageant . . . well let's say our approach could use some freshening up. I especially want to get the older kids more involved. I suggested to Shirley Wright, who volunteered to direct this year, that she show the kids your nativity display, just to give them some images and ideas to work with. I consider you an expert on the subject, after all."

"I'm no expert," Matt said. "But they're welcome to visit. Shirley's okay with this?"

"Absolutely. She thinks the pageant needs improvement, too. That's why she volunteered. She's a big fan of your nativity display. Is it okay for the kids to stop by late Sunday afternoon?"

"We'll be around."

"Don't go to any big trouble, now—just let the kids look and answer any questions they have. Be their advisor during rehearsals."

"Sure, no trouble," Matt said.

"What's no trouble?" his wife asked after Matt hung up.

"Pastor Tom wanted to know if the director of the Christmas pageant could bring the kids by on Sunday to look at the crèche," Matt said.

"Who's the director this year?" Deidre asked.

"Shirley Wright. She volunteered."

"The retired teacher?" Deidre asked. "She had plenty to say about last year's pageant. Maybe she'll learn it's not as easy as it looks."

When their kids Allison and Christopher were young, Deidre had directed the pageant for several years. In the back of Matt's mind, years of New Shepherd children's pageants had fused into a set of indelible images—a prepubescent

Mary and Joseph bending over the manger; giggling angels in white robes and aluminum foil halos; earnest shepherds and their flock of preschoolers with lambs' ears pinned into their hair; solemn wise men in plaid bathrobes and cardboard crowns, bearing gifts. It was all so charming, so clear and simple.

Or was it? One year, the pageant had been short on participating boys and Deidre had pressed Allison into service as one of the Wise Men. The gender swap had scandalized some members of the church.

"Pastor asked me to be their advisor," Matt added.

"Good luck," Deidre said.

"It can't be that bad. Can it?"

* * * *

One of the traditions associated with the Bartholomew crèche was collecting from crèche visitors food donations for Handyman's Open Cupboard Food Shelf. Handyman, a county social worker by day and neighborhood activist by night, ran the food shelf out of his double garage. He was assisted by a handful of volunteers, most of whom were former patrons.

On Tuesday night, Matt stopped at the Open Cupboard on his way home from work. A towering figure with a shaved head and coffee-colored skin, Handyman rose from his desk to shake Matt's hand.

"Same arrangement as last year is okay with me," Handyman said.

As they exchanged recent family news, Matt's gaze roamed about the room. By the door, he noticed a large cardboard box bearing a hand-lettered sign: DONATE CHILDREN'S TOYS HERE.

"Something new this year?"

Handyman nodded. "Been thinking about King Herod lately."

"Come again?"

"Bible says Herod slaughtered innocent children trying to destroy Jesus after he was born because he feared him! Ol' Herod, he'd feel right at home in today's world—Syria, Charleston, Chattanooga, Oregon . . . Paris, Colorado—destroy what you fear or don't understand!"

It was a sober view of the coming holiday, Matt thought, and then he realized he often felt the same way about the state of the world. He looked forward to Christmas every year for the sense of hope he felt.

"Thinking 'bout Herod got me worrying 'bout the kids come in here with their mammas and daddies," Handyman said. "I wanna keep 'em innocent long as possible—before they run into the Herods of the world. Kids are the ones gonna have to fix this miserable world. Who knows, kid born poor might grow up and do something great." He winked. "Happened once before."

Matt smiled. As usual, Handyman had cut right to the quick, putting his finger on one of the ills of the world and had taken a step within his power to address it.

“Well, I’ll try to direct some toys your way,” Matt promised.
“Appreciate it. Can’t let Ol’ Herod win.”

* * * *

At dusk on the Sunday after Thanksgiving, two vans stopped in front of the Bartholomew house. The doors opened and a dozen grade schoolers poured out and gathered on the sidewalk, followed by their drivers. Matt disabled the security system surrounding the yard, pulled on a coat and hurried down the front sidewalk to greet them.

“Everyone, this is Mr. Bartholomew,” Shirley Wright said. “He’s going to tell us about his beautiful nativity scene.”

“You all know the Christmas story,” Matt said. “Take a second to look at the figures and then we’ll go through the story together. Afterwards, we have cookies and cocoa inside.” The kids leaned on the split rail fence as they studied the figures. Matt couldn’t help but look himself. The sight always inspired him—fifty beautifully-lit life-sized, lifelike figures handmade by his father over a forty-year period. There in the stable was the Holy Family, the donkey and two cows. A host of angels hovered above the stable roof. To his right, almost filling the yard, were the shepherds and their flock. To his left stood the three Wise Men, their camels lined up behind them.

Matt stepped close to the pageant director. “Pastor Tom said he was hoping to get the older kids involved?”

Shirley Wright frowned. “They’re tough to engage. Hopefully they’ll come to rehearsal.” She clapped her hands for attention. “Listen to Mr. Bartholomew now.”

Matt pointed to Mary and Joseph and told how Mary was about to deliver her baby when they came to Bethlehem, how they were forced to stay in the stable because there was no room in the inn and how Mary laid her new baby in a manger. Next, he pointed to an angel and described the angel’s visit to the shepherds and how the shepherds came to visit the infant Jesus.

“This is how it really looked?” a child asked.

“No one knows how it looked,” Matt said. “This is an interpretation based on what the Bible says.”

“But isn’t it beautiful?” Mrs. Wright said. “See how real and authentic the figures look? This is exactly how I want our pageant to look.”

Matt pointed to the star shining above the stable and explained how as much as two years after the shepherds, Wise Men from the East followed the star in search of the newborn Savior.

“Why were there only three Wise Men?” someone asked. “There’s about a million shepherds.”

“That’s a good question,” Matt said. “The Bible doesn’t give an exact number, so we don’t actually know how many Wise Men there were. Tradition says three.”

“Why?” a kid asked.

“One theory,” Matt said, “is because there are three gifts mentioned in the Bible. Anyone remember what they were?”

“Gold,” Mrs. Wright filled in, “frankincense . . . and myrrh”.

“I know what gold is,” a child said, “but what’s frank and cents and—that other thing?”

From years of research, Matt knew the three gifts were heavily weighted with symbolism. Gold symbolized royalty, as the newborn Infant was prophesied to become King of the Jews. Frankincense was associated with priests, symbolizing Jesus’ future as a teacher. Myrrh was a perfume used in the burial process, a reference to his eventual crucifixion. But there was no use getting into those dark details right now, Christmas was supposed to be a celebration. Before he could frame an answer, one of the kids spoke up.

“Are they like those presents Grandma and Grandpa give you that you’re supposed to like when you grow up?”

“Yes,” Matt said, “Like that. Another theory about the number of Wise Men is that the number three symbolized—”

“I think we’re getting off track,” Mrs. Wright broke in.

“Yes, I guess we are,” Matt agreed. “Anyway, the Wise Men sought out King Herod, asking where to find the baby Jesus. On the advice of his priests and scribes, Herod sent the Wise Men to Bethlehem. He asked them to come back and tell him where they found Jesus, because he wanted to worship him, too. But Herod actually wanted to destroy Jesus because—”

“Did you say there were cookies and cocoa inside?” Mrs. Wright interrupted.

Inside as the kids helped themselves to cookies and cocoa, Shirley Wright pulled Matt aside.

“You’re making this far too complicated for children,” she said.

“I’m not trying to,” Matt said, “If they ask me a question, I think I should answer with what I know to be true.”

“What children need is something absolute to believe in,” Mrs. Wright said. “Just stick to the basic facts.”

Matt thought he was.

* * * *

The first pageant rehearsal was scheduled for two o’clock the next Saturday afternoon. The kids straggled into the sanctuary one by one and quickly self-separated into two groups—elementary kids on one side of the aisle, junior

and senior high kids on the other. The older kids looked slightly bored. Matt settled into a pew behind the older kids.

Mrs. Wright mounted the steps of the chancel. Over the chatter, she introduced herself and Matt and the two parent helpers. She expressed delight that so many kids were participating in this year's pageant, declared how much fun they were going to have and how meaningful the pageant would be on the Sunday before Christmas. A cell phone melody interrupted her and she stopped in mid-sentence.

"All right," she said. "Cell phones off!" The kids took their time in stowing their phones in their pockets. "Trevor, that means you, too."

"From now on," Mrs. Wright said, "leave your electronics at home. This means phones, iPods, everything. Now, I have assigned your roles. Mary will be played by Zoe. Ryan will be Joseph. The three Wise Men will be Brandon, Justin and Hunter. The lead angel will be—"

"Why do you get to just choose?" Trevor challenged.

"Because I'm the director," Mrs. Wright said. "That's what directors do."

"He told the younger kids no one knows how many Wise Men there were." Trevor pointed over his shoulder at Matt. "So why does it have to be three?"

"It's tradition," Mrs. Wright answered.

"We could write our own version," Trevor argued. "Update it."

"I don't think so, Trevor."

"Why not?" Trevor pressed.

"Why do we have to carry those boring gifts?" Justin asked.

"Because that's what it says in the scripture," the director said, answering one question and ignoring the other.

Matt felt the resistance building in the room. He knew Trevor to be an intense young man, concerned about world issues, a leader among the church youth. If they lost Trevor, they would lose most of the older kids.

"So, Justin," Matt said to lighten the mood, "as one of the Wise Men, if you could choose a gift what would you give Him?"

"We're getting off point," Mrs. Wright interrupted. "The Bible says, gold, frankincense and myrrh, and that's what our *three* Wise Men will be carrying."

"I still think we should write our own version," Trevor grumbled.

Mrs. Wright spent a half hour blocking out the stage movements of Mary and Joseph, the angels, the shepherds and the Wise Men. Everyone was growing restless. "We're done for today," she said. "Next Saturday two o'clock. Sharp."

"What about the part with King Herod?" Trevor asked.

"That's covered in the reading," Mrs. Wright said. She passed out an information sheet. "This has guidelines for your costumes. No plaid robes this year!"

As everyone filed up the center aisle to leave, the director asked Matt to wait.

“Look,” she said, “I know you’re some kind of advisor, but I’m the director. I can’t do my job if you keep undermining me.”

“I’m sorry. That’s not my intention.”

“With such a realistic, beautiful nativity scene in your yard, I wouldn’t have pegged you for some kind of . . . modernist.”

“It’s just an interpretation,” Matt said. “The Bible doesn’t say three wise men. The number of wise men doesn’t really change the meaning, does it?”

“If you take all the tradition away, then what is there left?”

It was a good question and Matt sensed that Shirley Wright wouldn’t like his answer. The meaning of the Christmas story, he had discovered over the years, was not in the individual details, but in acceptance on faith of the story as a whole.

“If you don’t need me, just say so,” Matt said. “I’m only here because Pastor asked me.”

The director frowned at the mention of the pastor. She gathered her materials together. Her expression tightened as if she were weighing her thoughts.

“No,” she said decisively, “You’ll be needed next week.”

On Monday evening, the phone rang as Matt and Deidre were finishing supper. Deidre answered and handed the phone to Matt. “Pastor Buzza,” she whispered.

“We have a small problem,” the pastor said. “Shirley Wright called me. She has a conflict and can’t continue as the pageant director.”

“What kind of conflict?”

“She wasn’t specific.”

“It was probably me,” Matt confessed. He told the pastor about the tense rehearsal, the near rebellion among the older kids.

“Who’s the ringleader?”

“Trevor.”

“He’s a handful sometimes,” the pastor agreed.

“He thought the kids should write their own version.”

“Really?” The pastor was silent for a moment. “The purpose of the children’s pageant is to get kids involved in their faith. Why don’t you turn them loose and see what they come up with?”

“Me?”

“Why not? You’re my expert. The two parent volunteers will help you.”

“What if the kids do something really crazy?”

“Well,” the pastor said, “When you make an omelet you have to be willing to break a few eggs. As long as they read the scriptures from Matthew and Luke, it’ll be okay.”

“You’re sure?” Matt tried not to sound skeptical.

“Look, the church is two thousand years old. It’ll survive the imaginations of a group of kids. I’ll owe you one, okay?”

Matt wondered what he had gotten himself into. “Well,” he said, “I’ll collect my IOU right now. Open Cupboard is collecting toys for kids this year. Can we invite the congregation to bring toys to the pageant and drop them off?”
“Done.”

* * * *

Matt arranged for an email to be sent to parents announcing he was replacing Shirley Wright as pageant director and the kids would be writing their own pageant. Rehearsals were scheduled for each Wednesday night and Saturday afternoon until the day of the pageant.

At Wednesday’s rehearsal, Trevor produced a script he had already written. The script’s concept was that Jesus was being born today. As the script was read aloud, the kids quickly got behind the idea and Matt saw their enthusiasm level pick up. He was impressed by Trevor’s take on the Christmas story and at the same time troubled by parts of the story the boy emphasized. One part in particular concerned him, though he said nothing. After rehearsal, he described the scene in a phone call to Pastor Buzza.

“In for a penny,” the pastor said, “in for a pound.”

At Saturday’s rehearsal, roles were assigned. Anyone who so desired could be a wise man. Flexible sets and sign posts were designed. Costumes were discussed.

With Trevor now serving as director, subsequent rehearsals went smoothly, even the portions with all of the electronics included in the script. When Trevor learned that toys were being collected for the Open Cupboard, he suggested that they substitute toys for the traditional gifts. Matt reminded him that they had to use the words from the Bible.

As word about the pageant spread, Matt fielded a few calls from concerned parents. He assured them that the kids were excited and that the congregation was in for a passionate, if unusual Christmas pageant.

The word on Facebook and Twitter was that New Shepherd’s children’s pageant was going to be very different this year, filled with new twists. In official church releases about the pageant, members were encouraged to bring toys and other children’s Christmas gifts which would be given to the Open Cupboard toy drive.

On the day of the pageant, after Sunday services, the altar and lectern were removed from the chancel, the pulpit set off to one side, turning the space into an open, mostly bare stage. In the choir loft, a single chair was placed on the left side, a makeshift living room set up on the right. The stable was placed center stage.

The pews began to fill long before the pageant’s starting time. Matt, Deidre, Allison and Christopher, both home for the holidays, took seats in a front

row pew. Matt observed that Shirley Wright was not in the audience. At the last moment, Handyman slid into the pew beside Matt.

At four o'clock, Trevor took his position at the pulpit. Without introduction Trevor read the familiar words from the Gospel of Luke. *"In those days,"* he read, *"a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled. This was the first enrollment, when Quirin'—us was governor of Syria. And all went to be enrolled, each to his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house of David, to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child."*

As Trevor read, Mary and Joseph, dressed in jeans, snow boots and winter coats walked tentatively up the center aisle from the back of the nave. They looked like they had wandered in from the street. Mary was conspicuously pregnant. Hand in hand, they seemed so young and innocent, so vulnerable.

One of the side doors in the choir loft opened and an aproned innkeeper appeared. He shook his head and sent them away. The couple looked around uneasily. Mary put her hands over her middle. They made their way toward the stable.

"And while they were there," Trevor read, *"the time came for her to be delivered."*

Mary and Joseph passed behind the stable and when they emerged on the other side, Mary was carrying an infant.

And she gave birth to her first-born son," Trevor read, *"and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn."*

Mary attended to the baby. Joseph stood protectively beside her. A mixed group of about a dozen older and younger kids came up the aisle on the audience's right and collected at the foot of the stage. The older kids carried shepherd's crooks. The younger kids had lambs ears pinned in their hair. A girl crossed the stage bearing a sign that read OUT IN THE FIELDS.

Some of the shepherds tended the flock while others bent over their phones and tablets. One of them suddenly held his phone out so the other shepherds could watch the little screen. An electronic voice said. *"I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger."*

And suddenly, everyone's phone started ringing, and each one that was answered played the same message: *"Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased."*

One of the shepherds said *"Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us."* Another shepherd

tapped letters into his phone and then pointed toward an outside aisle. “That way.”

The shepherds herded their flock up the left side aisle toward the back of the nave. They looped around the last pew and came up the center aisle, making their way to the manger and the Holy Family.

In excited voices, the shepherds told Mary and Joseph about the divine message they had received on their phones. They admired the baby in the manger. Most of the shepherds snapped pictures of the Holy Family with their phones. One shepherd even posed with Mary, Joseph and the baby and took a selfie.

In the audience, whispers and chuckles broke out, punctuated with a few outright guffaws. Matt appreciated the self-mocking humor.

The shepherds posted notes about their visit on Twitter and Facebook and then took their leave. Alone, Mary tapped a note on her own Facebook page, saying the words aloud as she typed: “Shepherds came to see baby. Said Angel told them my baby was the Savior. Must be true then. Wow.”

During a pause in the action, Matt heard whispers among the audience. A girl crossed the stage carrying a sign that read ABOUT 2 YEARS LATER. She was followed by a boy who placed on the right side of the stage a signpost bearing three labeled arrows. One arrow pointed across the stage toward JERUSALEM. Pointing the opposite direction, the other two arrows read CHICAGO and HOME.

“*Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king,*” Trevor read from Matthew, “*behold wise ones from the East came to Jerusalem—*” Matt took notice of the gender-neutral words.

A boy bearing a star on a pole walked up the right side aisle. He was followed by eleven Wise Ones, five boys and six girls, dressed in identical shirts, as if a team. The caravan marched passed the sign pointing the way to Jerusalem.

In the choir loft, King Herod emerged from a side door and sat down in the lone chair. A quartet of attendants gathered behind him. The Wise Ones assembled before Herod.

“*Where is he who is born king of the Jews?*” one asked, “*For we have seen his star in the East, and have come to worship him.*”

“I’ll find out and let you know,” Herod said. “Go now.” The Wise Ones moved away to the far side of the stage. Herod looked troubled and turned to his attendants. “Where is this King of the Jews to be born?” he asked.

“*In Bethlehem of Judea;*” they replied, “*for so it is written by the prophet.*”

Herod dismissed his attendants and summoned the Wise Ones. “*Go and search diligently for the child,* he said, “*and when you have found him bring me word that I too may come and worship him.*”

The Star reappeared and traveled across the stage, passing a sign post pointing the way to BETHLEHEM. The Wise Ones followed as Trevor read. “*When they had heard the king they went their way; and lo, the star which they*

had seen in the East went before them, till it came to rest over the place where the child was.”

In the choir loft, the Star came to rest beside the living room where the Holy Family had appeared.

“When they saw the star,” Trevor read, “they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy; and going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh.”

Three Wise Ones knelt and presented the traditional gifts to the Child. After a moment, they moved aside. One by one, the other Wise Ones knelt and presented toys and gifts to the Child that Matt knew were eventually bound for Open Cupboard. Then they took their leave.

One of the Wise Ones reached into his pocket and retrieved his phone and studied the screen. “Do not return to Herod,” he read. “Go home by another way.”

They set out. The signpost with the three arrows had been altered. One arrow pointed to BETHLEHEM, the direction from which they were coming. The other two arrows, pointing in the direction the Wise Ones were headed, now read ST. LOUIS and HOME.” The Wise Ones followed the side aisle toward the back of the nave.

In the living room, Joseph received a text, which he read aloud to Mary. *“Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there till I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child to destroy him.”* Joseph hastily gathered up his family and they fled like refugees, passing a sign on the wall that pointed to EGYPT.

In the choir loft, Herod returned to his throne. He watched the Wise Ones make their way home without coming to see him, as Trevor read: *“Then, Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise ones, was in a furious rage, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or younger, according to the time which he had ascertained from the wise ones.”*

On center stage, a group of the older kids, dressed as soldiers, began to slaughter the younger kids, some still wearing their lambs’ ears. It was a horrifying scene, something Matt had never before visualized, though he had read over those very words countless times through the years. Around him, the audience gasped.

“Then” Trevor read, “was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah: A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled because they were no more.”

On the opposite side of the stage, Mary and Joseph, dressed differently, appeared from a side door, each holding the hand of a child.

“But when Herod died,” Trevor read, “behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt, saying, ‘Rise, take the child and his

mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the child's life are dead.' And he rose and took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. On the stage, Joseph in Egypt gathered his family together and set out on a journey. They passed a sign that pointed to NAZARETH and disappeared through a side door, leaving the stage empty. The sign girl crossed the stage holding a sign that read TO BE CONTINUED FOR 2,000 YEARS.

There was a moment of silence before applause broke out, followed by a buzz of voices. Around him, Matt heard snatches of conversation expressing shock and delight, of approval and disapproval. There would be plenty of discussion downstairs in the community room. It was, he guessed, to be expected.

As for himself, Matt suddenly felt like he had been looking at the Christmas story through the wrong end of the binoculars all these years, which placed the events and their importance in the distant past. Trevor's contemporary interpretation had breathed life into the iconic figures and the story in a way no inanimate display could. Matt felt like he could leave the church and run into the shepherds at the hardware store, or the Wise Ones at the local coffee shop. Trevor's emphasis on Herod's ugly deeds had somehow taken the ugliness of today's world into account and yet, through divine action, good and hope had still triumphed. He could feel Jesus among them, salvation just around the corner.

Matt shot Trevor a thumbs up. From the pulpit, the boy smiled and wiped imaginary sweat from his brow. Beside Matt, Handyman nodded his approval. "I'd score this 'Children one, Herod nothing!'"

With hope warming the air around them, Matt and Handyman mounted the chancel steps to gather up the toys and gifts the children had presented.