

Bedbug epiphany: A Three Kings pageant

The frankincense gift needs to be taped back together. So does the stable wall.

Sunday's Coming Premium

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Inside the plastic baggie I see a paper towel and a dead bedbug. The bearer of this gift asks me if I want to have it for evidence. Not really. The young people in our shelter for homeless LGBTQ youth view me as an authority in such matters and want me to see the source of their distress with my own eyes. Yes, I am concerned and distressed. It reminds me of when I make a hospital visit and a patient wants to pull off sheets and lift bandages so I can see an incision, staple, stitch or wound. Words are not enough. I am called to be a witness of these things.

I think of the time an after-school program director found a “used and full condom” on the floor while she was setting up for the children. She too asked if I would like to have the bag as evidence. (It appears that I have become an ecclesiastical CSI.) Fortunately, it was not entirely up to me to remedy this situation. I sent an e-mail to our ever-thorough shelter director and immediately received the following:

Staff will need to serve as “daily condom patrol.” Quick question, does “used” and “full” mean there was semen visible inside the condom . . . or does “used” simply mean opened and not in the package? We discussed this matter last

night, and several residents use condoms as homemade, free hair bands to tie their hair back.

Maybe I did need to bag the evidence.

I am happy to report that the condom trouble was resolved. Peer pressure can be a good thing. As I guessed from its location, the item was tossed there from a bed after solitary use. Now that the light of day has shone on this nighttime habit, the offender is not likely to repeat.

Unfortunately, bedbugs are better at evading that light and require a flurry of effort, expense and changed plans. This bedbug was discovered as I was in the midst of organizing costumes and props for the Three Kings pageant:

- Need to get bobby pins for the haloes.
- Yes, that is a bedbug.
- The frankincense gift needs to be taped back together. So does the stable wall, but that will require electrical tape, preferably brown.
- Yes, I am calling the exterminator.

Were there bedbugs in the stable?

The children are now arriving and the bedbugs will have to wait. Johanna is the lead angel. She will guide last-minute angelic arrivals in their routine. She hopes she'll be expected to get the other angels lined up and then show them what to do. She is six but a pageant director in the making.

Then there is our little lamb, Hendrica, who spent the first months of her life in the prickly manger of a neonatal intensive care unit. She was lifted from a crimson sea as her mother bled out, but through a miracle of medical perfection and divine mystery, they passed together from death to life. Her mother is now adjusting her lamb's woolly ears. I think of Blake:

Little lamb who made thee
Dost thou know who made thee
Gave thee life & bid thee feed.
By the stream & o'er the mead;
Gave thee clothing of delight,
Softest clothing wooly bright;

Gave thee such a tender voice,
Making all the vales rejoice!
Little lamb who made thee
Dost thou know who made thee

Hendrica will know. I feel certain of it as she rests in her mother's arms and our organist begins to play the opening hymn. I ache for the lambs that are torn from their mothers' sides by Herod's minions, the lambs deprived of stream and mead. I ache for the children in our pageant whose mother is in Mexico and who some weeks weep in church with longing.

I ache for the youths in our shelter, for the lesbian daughter whose mother refused to take her call at Christmas. I ache for my powerlessness to impart a convincing faith to my own youngest lamb, now a young adult. Could I have done something differently?

Hendrica's father is assisting in worship today and leads the entrance procession as we sing:

O Morning Star, how fair and bright!
You shine with God's own truth
and light,
aglow with grace and mercy!
In Your one body let us be
as living branches of a tree,
Your life our lives supplying.

Era is the star. She's been asking me about this role for months and arrived an hour early to get ready in her shiny yellow robe. She is nearly seven decades older than the baby lamb and had also come through a harrowing birth. Her sister told me that the flow of oxygen to Era's brain was cut off at one point in the birth canal. This has dimmed some areas of Era's functional capacity but sharpened others.

One Sunday when Era came up for communion she pointed at the bread and asked, "Is there forgiveness in there?" Yes, there is. "That's good because I sure need some."

Then there was the Bible study when Era announced that although she believes in Jesus and in life after death she is afraid to die. "Is anyone else here afraid to die?"

Era searched the faces around the table. "Who else is afraid to die?" Those who presumably had had their full share of oxygen at birth sat in uncomfortable silence trying to decide what to say. No one wanted to make Era feel stranded with her question, but no one was quite ready to enter the rarefied air of her honesty.

The moment Era has been waiting for arrives, and she carefully carries the star to the front and takes up her position behind the altar that is now behind the manger wall. As the three kings make their way forward, we are singing:

Star of wonder, star of night,
Star with royal beauty bright,
Westward leading, still proceeding,
Guide us to Thy perfect light.

Era waves the glittery star back and forth on its pole. Later, I will find flecks of gold on the altar linens and one floating in the wine. After the last of the kings has made his way forward and we are singing, "Glorious now behold him arise," the girl playing Mary raises the baby Jesus doll high for all to see. Her brother sulks and refuses to participate because he is angry at their father's drinking. This father is undocumented, like the shepherds who apparently were not expected to join in the census. He works hard for too little money and no respect.

Joseph is from the African Garifuna community in Honduras. The three kings hail from Mexico, Puerto Rico and Portugal. Gabriel was born in Germany. The other angels come from the four cardinal points, shining in perfect light. One of our little lambs is wailing. The other has fallen asleep. Mine is home watching football. I pray that his own epiphany is on the horizon.

After church we have a fiesta downstairs. The person who was supposed to bring a hundred tamales never shows, so we make do. At least the three kings came through with candy, and now Mary's brother is happy to hand out the bags of sweets. Later the tables will be folded up and the beds will come out. The shelter youth and staff will launch their laundry marathon in preparation for the exterminator's arrival on Monday. The social worker on duty writes: "We'll be dining on two different birthday cakes tonight to celebrate Victoria and Che! The birthday sweetness will really be welcome, and the exercise we'll get from the cleanup will be much needed!"

This is the kind of radiant cheer you want when bedbugs are afoot. We'll take the trees outside to be picked up for chipping and recycling into compost for city parks. We'll pack away the costumes and star, the gold and frankincense and myrrh.

But first, after the prayers are prayed and the peace is shared, we'll receive communion. There is forgiveness in there, and we need it. I am called to be a witness of these things.