

“The best thing about church is that there are no Herdmans.” Now, if you’ve seen or read *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*, you know exactly what that sentence means. If you haven’t, you have no clue what I’m talking about. For *years*, Carol has been aiming to get me to read this book, and while I still haven’t, I did finally see the movie this year, and in that moment I finally understood why she had been pushing me on this, because, it isn’t just the best Christmas pageant ever...it’s...Christmas.. At it’s core, this story is the story of exactly what Christmas is meant to be, and all the ways in which we absolutely rail against that.

So what in the world am I talking about? The center of this story is about a church group putting on their famous Christmas pageant, and this year it’s the 75th and so it has to be *the best*. A mom has volunteered to take over directing when the usual director gets hurt and the pressure is just immense, and then...well, everything goes Herdman. The Herdman’s are the kids no one wants to be around. There are a fleet of them, they’re rough and tumble, from the wrong side of the tracks, they bully kids and act up, and everyone is afraid of them, but no one really *knows* anything about them. The Herdman’s find out that at this church, there are snacks, and so one Sunday, they show up, and everyone is *aghast*, because what are *they* doing here? It only gets worse when all five of them volunteer for the lead

roles in the Christmas pageant. All three wise men, the angel, and Mary and Joseph, all Herdman's. People are *livid*. They're going to ruin everything! Mary is supposed to be cast as the picture perfect, blonde, angelic girl who knows all of her lines. The Herdman's *don't fit the part*.

Even the kids of the director are skeptical. Mom, the Herdman's are a mess, we avoid them at school, this is why we like church, there are no Herdman's. It's all very close to spelling disaster. And then...their dad takes them on a trip. A trip to deliver Christmas meals, and he tells them, every year, the Herdman's are on his list. He brings them their Christmas meal and the kids exclaim, "The Ham Man!" and they are so excited because for once, they get to have something to enjoy. The kids find out...the Herdman's are on their own. Their dad is gone, their mom is never around, they have nothing and no one, and they're just trying to survive, and when life is that hard, you're going to be just a wee bit rough around the edges.

The day of the pageant arrives and everyone is convinced it's going to be a disaster. Even Imogene, the oldest Herdman, who has become convinced from all the noise that she isn't special enough, pretty enough, meek and mild enough to play Mary, but she still does it, with tears in her eyes, staring down at the little baby Jesus, because in that moment she realizes that Mary wasn't perfect, nothing about the actual Christmas story

was perfect, and maybe she was exactly who Jesus came into the world for. Gladys the Herdman angel, announces Jesus' birth by shouting, "Hey!" at the shepherds, like dudes pay attention! A child was born for *you*, get moving! And if all of that wasn't emotional or funny enough, here come the Herdman wise men. But instead of carrying gold, frankincense, and myrrh...they're carrying...a ham. Their ham. The thing they look forward to the most all year. The one gift they get. They're bringing it to Jesus. Imogene later says it was all of their idea, a gift from the boys. They wanted Jesus to have what they could give, their most precious gift, their ham. And just like that ham, a food I detest, left me in tears, because who knew that what truly made for the best Christmas pageant ever was a Herdman ham?

Y'all...we spend so much time trying to make Christmas perfect. We want it to be just right. The perfectly wrapped gift. The perfectly thought out present. The perfectly baked ham. The perfectly positioned Christmas photo. The perfect reaction. The perfect cookies. The perfect schedule. The perfectly fitting Christmas pjs. Perfect perfect perfect. And yet, that word is nowhere in the Christmas story, because nothing about the Christmas story is perfect, at no point has it ever been perfect.

What does the best Christmas story look like? In reality? It looks like two kids walking a very dusty road, just trying to get to a town they don't

even live in. Like every good road trip, someone fought with someone along the way. Mary is nine months pregnant so they are no making good time because there would have to be a lot of bathroom breaks. They're trying to get to a town where they have nowhere to stay, no family to claim them, to open their doors to them, because who wants the unwed pregnant kids in their house? The Christmas story is slow and plodding and probably filled with a lot of snapping because *I am walking as fast as I can!*

The Christmas story looks like a bunch of shepherds, the most ignored and questionable people of their time because who wants to spend all of their time away from home with sheep? It looks like dozing off in the fields and probably smacking each other with their crooks to keep one another awake or just to pass the time. It looks like an angel probably needing to shout "Hey! I have an announcement if you can hear me over all of the baa-ing!" It looks like fear and trembling because, umm, angels in the sky talking. It looks like incredulity because who is talking about peace on earth when the Roman Empire is in charge?

The Christmas story looks like cows and sheep and donkeys all jockeying for space in a stall, hay flying everywhere and lots of mooing. It looks like a young girl scared out of her mind that she has to give birth, no doctor, no epidural, no midwife, just her, her fiancée, and the animals. It

looks like a piece of hay sticking through the swaddling clothes, and tiny baby fists fighting their first swaddle, and trying to breastfeed when you're exhausted and just want to sleep. It's relief that the baby is here, but oh my God the baby is here, and he's the Messiah, and we have to like...keep him alive and functioning. It's panic and joy and exhaustion and happiness and fear and tension and wondering how in the world these shepherds got here? The only thing perfect about the Christmas story is Jesus, and even he probably cried and fussed and got cranky. Frankly, if Christmas was perfect, if we were perfect, we wouldn't need Christmas or Jesus in the first place, so why do we keep trying to make it happen like that?

Jesus wasn't born because the world was perfect. Jesus wasn't born to *make* us perfect. Jesus was born because God loves us, plain and simple. God loves us and wanted us to know so fully and completely that we are beloved that there was no choice but to send Jesus. A tiny little baby who was going to cry and squeeze his parents' fingers, a perfect little package in an imperfect, fragile human body. Jesus coming to us like this is the promise that we don't have to try so hard. It doesn't have to be perfect. *You* don't have to be perfect. You just have to be... Be open to being loved and cherished and seen. You don't have to bring the right gift. You don't have to have everything just right. You don't have to sugar coat the fact that the

holidays are messy. Jesus is coming anyway. You can't stop him. So instead of rushing around trying to make it perfect for his arrival, why don't we just stop...and let him come...and see us in all of our messy, human craziness? Because he's going to love us no matter what, especially when we're messy.

So here's what's going to happen tomorrow...someone's pjs are going to be too tight or too short. You're going to leave something in the oven too long or forget to set the timer. The dog is going to eat a cookie. Someone may end up crying. Your in-laws will show up an hour early and your hair isn't going to be done. Someone may double up a gift. You're going to get some weird thing that you have no idea what to do with but *it looked just like you*, and you're going to wonder *why*? It's going to be chaos and it's going to be wonderful and it's going to be a miracle and no matter what. Jesus is going to show up. You don't have to do anything. You don't have to be anything. Jesus is going to show up for you and your kids and your grandkids and your in-laws. Jesus is going to show up for the addicts and the depressed and the anxious and the lonely and the refugees who look just like his parents. Jesus is going to show up for the people who think all of this Jesus stuff is ridiculous and for the people who are going to be ansty and angry when *Silent Night* doesn't go perfectly. Jesus is going to show up for

all of us, no matter what, so maybe...just maybe this year...we can just stop. Stop trying to make this *the best Christmas ever*, because it already is and it always has been by the simple fact that Jesus shows up.

Jesus doesn't need our perfectly posed pictures or our perfectly wrapped presents. Jesus doesn't need a perfectly baked pie or the perfectly fitted pajamas. Jesus needs us. Jesus needs our hearts. Jesus needs us to be open to the fact that he's coming precisely because we aren't perfect. Jesus needs us to be open to the fact that he's coming for everyone, even those you hate, even those you don't want darkening the doors of your perfectly arranged church. Jesus needs us to be open to the fact that he is coming, coming for the broken, the messy, the not put together. Jesus is coming for people just like the Herdman's. People we ignore, people we forget, people we judge. Jesus is coming for all of us, y'all, and that is perfect. You don't need to bring gold or jewelry or a VR headset to the manger. You don't need to bring anything other than yourself, perfectly imperfect. Jesus doesn't need anything, just you...exactly as you are...maybe you come bearing burned cookies or the fruitcake you thought you'd try for once...maybe you come with a ham...maybe you come with a heart yearning to be whole...however you come...know the manger is big enough, Jesus is here...perfection not required for the best Christmas ever. **AMEN!!**