

As many of you know, three weeks ago I celebrated my first ever Christmas at Disney. It was a long time wish that I finally made happen this year, but I have to say, it surprised me a little bit. When I was anticipating what my favorite part of the whole experience would be, I figured it would be the Christmas parade or all the cookies or seeing all the decorations, but instead, my favorite part crept up on me a bit. One of the hallmarks of EPCOT is obviously, World Showcase, where you can travel around to all the different countries and experience different food and adventures from around the world. Well, during the holidays, you can travel around and hear all of their different Christmas and New Year's traditions, from unique kinds of Santas to music to special celebrations. This was hands down my favorite part of my whole trip because it was so unique and different and you got to see Christmas through the eyes of other people and I was just enraptured. From Barn Santa in Norway to the Daruma dolls in Japan, it was fascinating, but one in particular stood out more than the rest and I haven't been able to stop thinking about her since I left.

I wish you a Buon Natale from Italy on behalf of La Befana. La Befana is a witch, she would want me to make sure that you know she is a *good* witch. The *other* witches make fun of her because she's a little old and a little messy and not quite put together, but La Befana doesn't care because

her story is *special*. She became the gift giver of Italy through the magic of a star. Back when Rome and thus Italy were the center of the universe, a star lit up the sky so brightly that it illuminated everything in La Befana's life. People started telling stories of a town called Bethlehem, pondering what this random town could have to do with this massive star in the sky. One night, led by the star, three men on camels approached La Befana asking for directions. Does *she* know how to get to Bethlehem? She tells them no, but is so curious why they are going.

The three men tell her they are following the star to find the Gesu Bambino, the baby born to change the whole world. La Befana is amazed; *that* is why people are talking about this town? A baby? Born to be a king? A savior? *The* Savior? The Wise Men ask her, well, La Befana, would you want to come with us to find the baby? You are welcome to join the journey. But...well...La Befana considering the camels, the strange men, the oddity of it all, says no. She will stay home. They depart and suddenly everyone in town is asking her, La Befana, why didn't you go with them? Why did you pass up the chance to meet the bambino? And she realizes she has made a huge mistake, so she rushes inside to pack her things and prepare to go find the baby. Only...when she gets back outside...the star is gone. The sky is dark and she has no way to get to Bethlehem. She's heartbroken.

She's missed her chance. So now, every January 5, Epiphany Eve, La Befana goes from house to house looking for the Gesu Bambino, and she leaves gifts behind for the children whose houses she visits.

She closes her story by reflecting that you might find her story to be a sad one. She missed her chance, she didn't get to meet the baby Jesus, *but* she says, this is not a sad story, because Christmas is about joy and finding joy in every moment and she says that every face of every child that she sees is a reminder of the miracle of the star and every face of every child could be the Gesu Bambino. Every face carries the spark of the divine, a reminder that God is here, that God brings joy, even when we think we missed our chance. Somehow, some way, God arrives and so she keeps visiting the little children, because she knows that in some way, here is her opportunity to meet the baby Jesus over and over again.

It was such a small moment, but it was so profound, standing there, surrounded by all of these people, total strangers, and here is this woman, pretending to be a 2,000 year old witch reminding each of us that the person we were standing next to was a sign of God's love, a spark of the divine, that the mere act of looking in their eyes was a moment of joy, because here was God coming down and meeting us where we were. It was Christmas, right there in the middle of EPCOT when it was 85 degrees out. But it was also a

reminder that sometimes we miss our opportunities to see Jesus, even when it's right there in front of us.

There are so many opportunities for the Christmas story as we know it, as we cherish it, to go wrong, to be that moment where La Befana says, no, I'm going to stay home, safe and quiet, no matter what that star says. What if Mary, this teenager, this *kid* who thought she knew what kind of future lie before her said no? No thank you to this crazy angel plan. What if Joseph had said you can tell me not to be afraid but I'm not risking my reputation, my future, my standing in society on the off-chance a dream means something? What if the shepherds decided this was not the night to abandon their flocks, that they were hallucinating from exhaustion and there was no way there were angels? Who needs to go to some stable in Bethlehem anyway? What if the Wise Men followed the star somewhere else? What if they went back to Herod as opposed to traveling by another road? What if the world didn't change tonight? Can we even fathom that? We don't want to, but the reality is, it took two scared kids, a star in just the right place, and shepherds crazy enough to hear the message to make tonight happen, and if we were writing this story, there's no way this is the version we would go with. A story laced with danger, poverty, shame, and a bunch of dudes who smell like sheep. If we wrote the story it would be riddled

with all the places we think Jesus should be, as opposed to all the places we forget to actually go looking for him.

We spend so much time...searching. Searching for where we think we're going to find Jesus, searching for how we think Jesus should show up in the world. We go searching for him in consumerism and lies. We search for him in false idols and in all the bright and shiny places we think good things should show up. Sometimes, though we are loathe to admit it, we go searching for him in hatred and prejudice, judgment and violence. We go looking for him in our own justified attitudes and opinions. We go searching in all of the places that are safe and comfortable and don't require us to leave the safety of our own front yards with some weird dudes on camels. We think we're only going to find Jesus in places that make sense, in moments that are joyful, big and bold; in places overflowing with strength and power and happiness. We search and we search and we search and we wonder why we don't find what we're looking for...

Because what the Christmas story, what the La Befana story reminds us of is that Jesus is always going to be in all of the places we don't think we should look. In cold, cramped stables that smell like cows. In the poverty riddled pockets of two scared kids. In the least likely of messengers. In the faces of strangers. In the faces of...everyone. Where is Jesus? He's in

homeless shelters and under cardboard tents. He's with those who have been told they can't go home for Christmas because who they are isn't acceptable. He's in prisons and recovery centers. He's in ICUs and recovery rooms. And yes, he is here, within us and around us. You might not feel like your best self this Christmas, something might have already gone wrong, maybe you're anxious, maybe your family is fighting, maybe you just got bad news that you thought couldn't possibly come because ya know *Christmas*, but that doesn't mean Jesus doesn't show up, that Jesus can't be found. It is precisely in those moments where Jesus dwells, in pain and heartbreak, in wonder and joy. Jesus dwells in all the places of the human heart and human existence even when we try to box him into one kind of way to be present in the world.

We spend so much time searching that we sometimes simply forget to *look*. Did La Befana see the Gesu Bambino? No, not that night with the Wise Men, but yes she did, every night from then on because while she searched she *saw*, she saw Jesus in the face of every child, in the walls of every home. Jesus is sitting right here with you tonight, in the eyes of the people around you, in the family that will gather around your table even if they're annoying you. Jesus is dwelling within you even if tonight feels hard or is laced with hurt. We do not have search far and wide to find the

Christ child, but we do have to *look*, within our hearts and within the eyes of those around us.

Jesus isn't going to come in some big, fancy, frilly package with a bow on top. Jesus is going to be present in the burned rolls and the sweater that doesn't fit. Jesus is going to be present in the family member you wished had skipped this year. And Jesus is going to be present in the perfect moments, the biggest smile at the most amazing gift, in the hands held around the table in thanks. The time for searching is over. The time for *seeing* is now. Open your eyes to the light of the world that is piercing every darkness, every corner of your heart, ever hope in your soul. Open your eyes to the people God has placed before you to love. Open your eyes to the corners of the world you usually ignore and dare to see Jesus there.

Every day, every moment of our lives, not just on Christmas, weird dudes on camels roll into our lives and ask, hey, do you want to go find Jesus? And so often we instinctively say no, because how could these guys know where Jesus is and how could he be where some star is? But may today be the day we start saying, yes, I will go, I will not just search but see, because I know, I trust that Jesus comes in the most unexpected of places, and I don't want to miss him this time. Open your eyes to the presence of God, dare to say, I will go and find you where I least expect. **AMEN!!!**