

Christmas Pageant

As the new pastor at our small church, I'd decided I needed to get more involved in the activities that were so important to our congregation. But my decision to plan and supervise the annual Christmas Pageant may have been reaching a little too far ...

The wonderful elderly woman who usually organized these things had decided to vacation in Florida this year. Did she know something I didn't? In any case, in a moment of magnanimity, I volunteered. I was feeling pretty good about myself for taking on such a big job.

"Allen, are you sure? It's a lot of work!" That was my wife Christine.

"Yes, I want to do this. It will be a lot of fun!"

The Christmas Pageant was a tradition in our church. It told the story of Jesus' birth, with shepherds, the Wise Men, Mary, Joseph, and of course the baby Jesus. I figured that the script would take care of itself ... all I had to do was open the Bible. How hard could this be?

I discovered that the church basement held a variety of costumes from previous years. There were robes of all sizes, shepherds' crooks, a star ... there was even a manger that someone had lovingly created from fine old wood. This was going to be a piece of cake!

That's where I made my mistake. I decided I could improve on tradition.

First, I thought that the baby Jesus should be as realistic as possible. In previous years, I'd been told, one of the kids just brought a doll. I was sure I could do better than that.

So I borrowed a true-to-life newborn baby mannequin from the local high school ... the kind they use in CALM classes to show high school students how much work looking after a baby could be. I was amazed at how lifelike it was. It was a brand new model. I promised them we'd look after it. I was a little puzzled when they reassured me that the batteries were new. Batteries?

I had another good idea. At a meeting of all the cast members, I suggested that we include some real animals in the play. Everyone thought that was a great idea.

By the end of the meeting, we had two baby goats, a large furry white dog that Amber assured us would look just like a sheep after she'd added some horns, and two rabbits.

Were there rabbits at Jesus' birth? I didn't think so. But the kids thought it would be fun. And it was about celebrating Jesus' birth, after all ...

We wanted some cattle too, but that seemed a little unreasonable. Until I remembered the large moth-eaten moose head that had been in the basement of our house when we'd moved in. My wife Christine promised me that if I took the antlers off, she could make it look suitably cattle-like. I had my doubts.

The week before Christmas, the backdrops had all been painted and the star was hung. Our dress rehearsal on Wednesday night went remarkably well. Baby Jesus wasn't dressed yet, so we substituted a small doll. And we did it without the animals.

In hindsight, that may have been a mistake.

I'd always loved the Christmas Story when I was a kid. Our church had put on the play every Christmas, and my brothers and sisters and I had been in it every year. I'd always been a shepherd. I'm not sure why. Personally, I'd always wanted to be one of the Three Wise Men.

And my sisters had been angels. We thought that was pretty funny.

But this year, I was in charge, so I decided that I was going to be one of the Three Wise Men! My wife Christine made me an impressive costume from an old blanket, some sparkly Christmas decorations, and a small box for the gift I was bringing the baby Jesus.

Our moose head really did look like a cow. Or an ox. Or something vaguely bovine. I was amazed. Someone had anchored it to the top of one of the backdrops, and it was looking down on the manger quite respectfully. You could hardly see that it was missing an eye.

On the day of the performance, I couldn't contain my excitement! This would be the best Christmas Pageant ever!

I have to admit, the front of the church looked really beautiful. We had all the cast members pose for a photo after I placed the baby Jesus in the manger. The congregation looked on in anticipation. Then everyone left the stage, ready to return as their place in the story was reached by the narrator.

I think it was about that point that things started to go wrong.

Some of the smaller kids had flower arrangements that they were going to bring out. They'd left them backstage. It wasn't long before Christine discovered them in tatters, along with a pair of baby goats who were looking quite pleased with themselves.

OK, no problem. The flowers were sort of an afterthought, anyway. And maybe a full meal would keep the goats quiet.

Most of the cast and the animals ended up on stage, in more or less the spots that they were supposed to be in. Everything was going just the way we'd planned it.

Until one of the shepherds decided to lean against the backdrop. As the narrator got to the point in the story where the Three Wise Men arrive, the moose head fell to the stage with a huge thud.

Fortunately it didn't land on anyone ... although one of the rabbits was so startled it jumped right into the manger. Christine smiled as she gently lifted it out.

However, our token member of the cattle family now definitely resembled the moose that it was. A very old, antlerless moose with one eye. People pretended not to notice.

The narrator ignored the interruption, and kept reading. She was unflappable.

It was about then that we discovered why baby goats should not be allowed to eat flowers. Apparently flowers act as a laxative in baby goats. Who would have guessed?

The Wise Men were very careful where they stepped as they came onto the stage.

If that had been all there was to go wrong, I think we could have pulled it off. But more surprises were to come.

I was the last of the Three Wise Men to appear, and I was to stand right behind the baby Jesus. As I took my place, I began to realize that we'd made a huge mistake.

We'd forgotten that I was allergic to wool.

For extra realism, I wasn't wearing a shirt under the thick woollen blanket I had wrapped around me. My chest and arms were bare. And rapidly turning bright pink, as I desperately resisted the urge to scratch. Wise Men shouldn't scratch.

The sweat was rolling down my face as I finally had to give in to the urge to relieve the itch. I scratched and scratched. I scratched so much that the two Wise Men next to me began to look at me a little strangely. They even moved away a few steps. Maybe they thought what I had was contagious.

Finally I couldn't stand it any more. I pulled off the blanket and scratched again.

Looking to redeem myself, I made an attempt to stay in character. I bent to wrap my blanket around the baby in the manger, figuring that it would look like I was trying to comfort Him.

Unfortunately when I put the baby down, I must have jarred the on/off switch.

Nothing happened for a few seconds. Then, just as the narrator was describing how the three Wise Men should bow down and worship Him, the baby Jesus woke up.

“Feed me! Feed me!” Then the baby began to cry. And there was more: “Change me! Change me!” And still more crying.

It wouldn't stop. It was also waving its mechanical arms in the air. “Change me!”

The baby Jesus had a most unpleasant whiney voice. I was hearing laughter from the audience.

I was just about to lean over and give it a good whack. I was sure that would have worked. It always worked with the TV.

I think God may have whispered in my ear about then. I'm sure I heard Him say: “That would not be a good idea.”

I hesitated. Perhaps having over a hundred people watch me whack the baby Jesus might not be such a good thing after all.

I was saved from embarrassment when Christine, who was playing Mary, picked up the baby to comfort Him. That was all that was needed, because the baby immediately quieted.

I breathed a sigh of relief.

I was so relieved that I barely reacted when the huge white fluffy dog with the cardboard sheep horns noticed the two rabbits sitting placidly in front of the manger, and decided that they would be fun to chase.

The pageant ended with the final words from the narrator, and as the congregation began to sing ‘Silent Night’, the dog and the rabbits continued to chase each other between the pews. The baby started crying again. One of the baby goats threw up.

When the laughter died down after the singing, we posed for more pictures. Everyone was smiling. Remarkably, the congregation broke out into applause.

People told me afterwards that I'd done a fine job, and they hadn't laughed so hard since ... well, since the Fall Fair.

I had been in charge of that too.

Apparently I had a talent for making people smile.

But I promised myself that from now on I would let others do the organizing, and stick to what I do best. Helping people understand the Word of God. But maybe with a few smiles thrown in.