

Feeding our Wolf

"I am baptizing you in water, but there is one to come who will baptize you in fire." What does John mean? John's baptism is a baptism of repentance; its waters are the waters of cleansing, the waters of rebirth. The Baptist calls on us to wash away our sins, to come clean, to finally become the kind of people we have always aspired to be. What then does he mean by calling the coming Gospel of Jesus Christ a baptism of fire? Or to put it another way, if we've been washed clean by John, what's left for Christ to do?

Well, what do we mean by a baptism of fire? Do we not mean a time in which we come face to face with our limits, a time in which we are compelled to recognize that what we have always aspired to be lies forever beyond our grasp. A time in which we are not so much cleansed of our sins, but a time in which our rather grandiose illusions of how sinless and ideal we can really be are burned away. If baptism by water is a time of rebirth, baptism by fire is a burning away of our illusions. If baptism by water is a bath in the idealism of spiritual freedom--the heady recognition that all that holds us back from God's salvation is our own desires and fears, Jesus baptism of fire, his Gospel, involves the searing recognition that nevertheless, if we are to be truly saved, we must accept who we truly are, rather than forever pine after who we would wish to be.

There is a Christmas story that gets at this better than I can. Its a Christmas story about St. Francis of Assisi. So get comfortable. This homily will be a little longer than most.

In thirteenth century Italy there was a small city nestled in the foothills of a great mountain. It was a city of considerable beauty and its citizens were very proud of their home town. Whenever people from this city traveled anywhere--whether to Florence, or Venice or Rome--and people would ask them, "Strangers, where are you from?" they would stand tall, and say, "We? Why we are from Gubbio."

Now one night, out of the woods on one side of Gubbio, there came a shadow. The shadow moved through the city of Gubbio, going up this street and down that alley, until it found someone. The next morning the citizens of Gubbio came upon a dead, mangled body--the bones broken, the clothing in shreds. They gathered around the remains. Many could not even look. One man spoke in anger: "It must have been a stranger, someone passing through who did this horrible thing." Everyone nodded in agreement.

Nevertheless, that night the people of Gubbio locked their doors and stayed inside. No one ventured into the beautiful streets of Gubbio. No one, that is, except for a young woman. And in the morning they found *her* body, mangled, broken, her clothing in shreds.

The people huddled together, fear and anguish in their voices. "How could this happen here?" Again, the answer put forth was, "It must have been a stranger." Then an old woman spoke up. "No," she said, "I saw it. I was at my window and pushed back the curtain. In the dim light of the moon, I saw it loping down the street, blood dripping from its mouth—its a wolf. A large, lean grey wolf."

Now the people of Gubbio were terrified. A wolf in Gubbio! They assembled in the piazza in the center of the city. Many were shouting, their voices climbing over one another. Finally a man was loud enough to silence the others. "We must bring in the soldiers," he said, "they will be able to rid us of this wolf." But the voice of a merchant immediately countered: "Never! If we bring in the army, everyone will know we have a wolf in Gubbio and our prestige, our commerce, our tourism will be hurt." And the people recognized the wisdom of this and fell silent. In the silence a small girl spoke. She said she had heard of a holy man in a neighboring city who spoke to animals. Maybe he could come and speak to the wolf. The people laughed at her. But an old man said that he, too, had heard of this holy man and thought it would be a good idea to ask him what he could do. Besides, did anyone have a better suggestion?

So a delegation was formed to go to the neighboring city and find this holy man and tell the wolf...tell him....tell him what?

"Tell him," said one person, "to remind the wolf to keep the commandments, especially the commandment that says, "Thou shalt not kill." "No," said another, "it is not enough to tell the wolf what not to do. You must appeal to the best in him. The holy man should tell him to keep the great commandments, the ones Christ taught, to love God and neighbor." Then the butcher spoke up and said, "A wolf is a wolf is a wolf. There will be no change. Tell the holy man to tell the wolf to go somewhere else." The people applauded this suggestion and began to shout places where the wolf could go. "Tell the wolf to go to Perugia. Or Rome, they wouldn't even know the wolf was there."

So a delegation set off to find the holy man. But they did not go the short way through the woods...they took the long way around.

When they arrived in the city of the holy man who had the reputation of talking to animals, they were told that they would find him on the outskirts of the city, fixing up an old church that had fallen into disrepair.

The delegation went and found a man in a soiled brown robe. A young man. Much too young to be a holy man. But they had come this far, so they told him their tale of terror. They pleaded with him to come to Gubbio and tell the wolf to keep the commandments, especially the one that said, "Thou shalt not kill," and to keep Christ's great commandments of loving God and neighbor, and to go off to Perugia.

The holy man listened and told them to go home. He would see what he could do. So the delegation returned. And that night everyone locked their doors and stayed inside.

As the last rays of the sun left the sky, the holy man arrived at Gubbio and stood at the edge of the woods. When it was dark, he began to walk deep into the heart of the woods. There was no light at all there and since he could not see with his eyes, he simply closed them and continued forward. Finally, he stopped. He knew that if he put out his hand in front of him he would touch the wolf. "Brother wolf," he said.

In the morning, the people found the holy man in the piazza next to the fountain. They quickly assembled and began to call out to him. "Did you tell the wolf to keep God's commandments? Did you tell the wolf to go to Perugia?" The crowd was so big that the holy man had to climb up the steps of the fountain so that he could be seen. Finally the people quieted down and he spoke. "Good people of Gubbio," he said, "the answer to your troubles is very simple. You must feed your wolf." With that, he stepped down, walked through their midst and returned to his own city.

The people of Gubbio were furious. "What does he mean, *our* wolf? This is not *our* wolf. We did not ask for this wolf to come to Gubbio!" All day long, in the fields, in the streets, in the churches, in the homes, they grumbled. "What does he mean, 'We must feed our wolf'?" When night came they locked their doors and stayed inside.

That night, out of the woods, came the shadow. It prowled down this street and up that alley. Then it disappeared under an archway and turned down a narrow lane. Suddenly a door opened and light streamed out into the darkness. A hand pushed a platter of food into the light. The shadow came to the offering, looked up into the light with burning eyes, and ate the food.

The next night the same thing happened. It was not long before every man, woman and child in Gubbio had fed their wolf.

Afterwards, whenever the people of Gubbio traveled to a city in Italy and were asked "Where are you from?" they would reply simply "We are from Gubbio." The retort would be quick in coming, "Gubbio? We hear you have a wolf in Gubbio." Then they would smile and say, "Yes, we do. And we feed our wolf."

If we are to be holy we must be whole. And to be whole is not a matter of scrubbing our souls clean till they glisten bright like the sun, but to accept about ourselves what we would rather keep hidden in the shadows. We must come to recognize that the lust and fear, the despondency and the anger we harbor within our hearts cannot be fully washed away, that their fury comes not from without but from what we have neglected and starved within ourselves. We must come to recognize our place among the poor and the despised, among those broken in spirit and bound captive to sin. We must recognize our own darker side and ask ourselves what feeds it and tend to what has been starved and neglected in our own story. Some things we can wash clean. For others a stain remains. Some wounds can be healed, some will leave a scar.

After communion we will hear our annual update from Catholic charities. Catholic charities feeds our community's wolf. Not because those they serve are Catholic, though many are, but because we are Catholic, and so they are all part of us. Wherever they may lurk. We may wish for a Spokane in which there are no poor or needy, but as we age we come to recognize that such a lofty ideal lies beyond our grasp, and only starves those who continue to fall short, or whose lives and prospects continue to be cut short by others, or be circumstances beyond anyone's control. In the words of our own Francis, our Pope, Catholic Charities is our field hospital, healing those who can be healed, but also tending to those who can't and whose lives we can only accompany as they bleed away.