

Octave of Christmas
January 1, 2012 - Cycle B

“Bow the Head in Homage and in Praise”

It is believed that it happened in 1223. In that year, in a town called Gubbio, something wrong was happening, something terribly wrong. When the citizens of Gubbio awoke in early December of 1223, lo and behold, there was nothing left of the night travelers. And there was not one victim, but many victims around the town of Gubbio. Those who ventured out at night were suddenly and viciously reduced to a bag of bones.

Well, the town of Gubbio, was filled with merchants and businessmen. “This must stop,” said the mayor of Gubbio, “we cannot afford to have our businesses interrupted by some phantom monster reducing our citizens to a pile of bones during the night.” So the mayor of Gubbio, the town council, and a group of businessmen decided that they should keep watch over the town during those cold, cold nights of early December in 1223. So the

mayor appointed special guards. But all the guards proved to be failures. The phantom still attacked; and where it attacked, there was only a bag of bones of what was a human being.

Well, the town council, the mayor, and all the businessmen were in quite a quandry over what to do. Until, until a little woman in the corner of the council chamber spoke up. She was an old, old woman, a merchant woman, wise in her business but also holy. She had a “spiritual” connection to things. And so this old, old, wise woman told the proud mayor, the town council, and the business representatives that they should watch at the entrance of the city. “Look for the orange/yellow eyes. The eyes will appear across the field, a distance from the city,” she said. “Watch carefully.” So the mayor and the town council all took up positions on the city wall at the front gate. And, lo and behold, sure enough, at midnight from the

forest beyond came the terrible looking
orange/yellow

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eyes. Out of the woods, across the field, up to the wall, up and over the city wall, into Gubbio went the eyes; and the shadow of the phantom disappeared into its streets.

The next morning all gathered at the town hall. And once again the town police reported to the mayor, the town council, and the business representatives that sure enough there was a bag of bones of some poor person who had been destroyed by this phantom.

“Phantom?” cried the old, wise woman, “it is no phantom. In your history it has happened before, it is the wolf of the night,” she said, “it is the wolf of Gubbio.”

All of the town council, the mayor, and the business people looked at her in amazement, with eyes wide open! “What shall we do?” questioned the mayor of Gubbio.

The wise old woman said that they must talk to the wolf and persuade it from devouring the citizens of Gubbio.

“How can we do that?” questioned the mayor.

“Go over to the town of Perugia,” she said, “there in the town of Perugia is a man who can talk to animals. Get the man and bring him to Gubbio and have him talk to the wolf so that the wolf will not devour the citizens of Gubbio.”

The proud mayor, the town council and a delegation of businessmen decided they would visit Perugia to find the man who could talk to animals.

When the delegation arrived at Perugia, they asked, “Where is the man who speaks to animals?” The citizens of Perugia knew about the man who spoke to animals and pointed him out. “There he is, that little man laying brick on the wall of the old church.”

So the proud mayor of Gubbio persuaded the little, unassuming man to travel to Gubbio and to talk to the wolf.

That same evening, deep in December, on the darkest night, December 21, 1223, the little man was asked to go across the field into the woods and talk to the wolf.

The little man did as they requested.

It was midnight and the little man walked across the field and into the woods. It was so dark that the poor little man could see nothing. So the little man closed his eyes, stretched out his hands and walked forward. Then, suddenly, the little man could sense with his hands the presence of the large, black wolf with orange/yellow eyes. The wolf was snarling and angry and ready to pounce on the little man.

But the little man spoke, “Brother wolf; brother wolf, the people of Gubbio have sent me to talk to you; to remind you not to kill; to keep God’s

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commandments and to be a good loving creature of God.”

The wolf snarled and blinked. Then the wolf spoke, “They have taken my land and I am hungry. They have taken my hills and pasture and so I have no food. They have fenced in the stream and so I have no water to drink. No food, no water, and no place to live except to hide in these woods. I am forced to visit the city and eat what I can find.” “I will speak to the mayor and to the people. I will tell them to feed you,” said the little man. “But you must promise not to break the commandments. You must promise never to kill again in the city of Gubbio.” “Yes,” said the wolf, “I promise.” The little man returned to the city of Gubbio. It was early in the

morning. The proud mayor was anxiously waiting the return of the little man. “What do you have to say?” questioned the proud mayor. “Feed your wolf,” said the little man. “What? What does that mean?” questioned the proud mayor.

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The little man told the proud mayor that the wolf promised never to kill a human being; but that you must promise to feed him. “Feed your wolf each night,” said the little man.

“Feed the wolf, our wolf? That is not our wolf and I’ll not feed it,” cried the proud mayor. But that night in December, the darkest time of the year, other citizens had other ideas. Beginning with the wise old woman and continuing with many more wise people, they fed the wolf, the wolf of Gubbio. Yes, late in the evening, close to midnight, one door opened in a house with the light of a candle. A hand reached out of the door holding a dish of food. Then another door and then another. That night at midnight, the phantom wolf with eyes of

yellow/orange, that night, a wolf was tamed and fed, and at the break of morning, there was not a bag of bones to be seen in all of Gubbio, and every citizen was safe.

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A few days later, so the legend goes, on the 24th of December, in the region of Assisi, in the town of Greccio, right before the stroke of midnight, the first live nativity scene was on display. It was a fascinating sight. There were real people portraying the persons of St. Joseph and the Blessed Virgin Mary; and there were sheep, an ox, a donkey, shepherds, and, oh yes, the little man from Perugia was there. His name was Francis; Francis of Assisi. But that's not all: Out of the woods and up over the city walls came a phantom, with yellow/orange eyes. It was the wolf. But this time it crept close to Francis. They knew each other. Then the wolf went toward the Nativity Scene, the first live one since Christ was born. The wolf came close to one of the shepherds,

and the shepherd put his arm around the wolf and the wolf bowed its head in adoration of the Christ Child, Jesus. St. Francis was there and made it happen. And in nativity scenes all over the world, from that time onward, we will see a shepherd with a

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dog. But citizens of Gubbio will say differently. “That is not the shepherd’s dog, it is the Wolf of Gubbio.”

The point of our story is to say that Francis was chosen to teach the citizens of Gubbio to bring a holy balance to nature. The field, the forest, the land and the stream were all selfishly commandeered by humans.

The citizens of Gubbio had to make up for their selfish sins instead of blaming the phantom wolf. But long before Francis, there was Christ, foretold by prophets, announced by John the Baptist, and born of the Virgin Mary. Jesus tamed the wolf of impaired human behavior, the wolf of evil begetting evil inside each of us. These evils are the sins of pride, selfishness, and greed, at the expense of all

other creatures. The cycle of taking and hurting seemed to continue without end by the citizens of this world, until, until at the right moment, the Son of God became flesh. In him there was no sin, no guile, no greed, and no selfishness. Rather, there was

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balance, and beauty, truth, wisdom, understanding, care and unreserved love; in Him was the active concern of giving of one's self without unwarranted taking. In the Christ Child was the balance and proportion of all nature and all humanity.

So we pray: *Lord Jesus, You came to restore balance and unity to all creation. Lord Jesus, curb our inclinations to hurt each other. Let us not cause others to become evil because of our evil. Teach us to live with each other, to seek the common good and to love unselfishly just as You unselfishly loved us. We ask this in Your name for you live forever and ever. Amen.*

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