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Feeding our Wolf

Am I 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 could have been if nothing had ever gone wrong, if we had never went astray.

There is a Christmas story that gets at this better than I can. It's 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.

But one night, out of the woods just outside of Gubbio, some caught sight of a shadowy figure stalking the town streets. The next morning the citizens of Gubbio came upon a dead, mangled body. A crowd 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.

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

Now everyone was terrified. A wolf in Gubbio! They assembled in the piazza in the center of the city to make a plan. 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 commerce, our tourism will be hurt." Many recognized the wisdom of this and a hush fell. In the silence a small girl spoke. She said she had heard of a holy man, by the name of Francis, 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 Francis 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 it if the wolf went to Rome."

So a delegation set off. But the man they found was wore a soiled brown robe and lived on the outskirts of town. He was also a young man, far *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, to keep Christ's great commandments of loving God and neighbor, and to go to Rome. They had settled on Rome as the best place for him to go.

The holy man listened and told them he would do what he could. So the delegation returned. That night everyone in Gubbio locked their doors and stayed inside.

As the sun set, the holy man arrived at Gubbio and stood at the edge of the woods. Once 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 began.

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 Rome?" 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 town.

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 taken a turn in feeding 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, to become whole we must accept those parts of 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 recognize our dark side and ask ourselves what hunger drives it. We must then tend to what has been starved and neglected in our own story. Some things we *can* wash out, others leave a stain we must learn to live with. Some wounds can be healed, others will leave a scar. Some illness we can recover from, other leave us weak and vulnerable. And of course something, sooner or later, is going to kill us.

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. Catholic charities operates a wide network of services and offers housing for hundreds and hundreds who would otherwise be homeless, giving give the help they need to offer a realistic chance for them to work their way up and out. Not that the goal of Catholic charities is to eliminate the poor and the needy. There will always be those whose lives run into ruts that are just too muddy for them to ever gain traction, or into holes too deep to ever climb out of. And of course bad luck can devastate anyone. In the words of our own Francis, the Pope, Catholic Charities is a 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 out.

Just as our parish gives monthly in your name and on your behalf, to those in need both in our own community and to dalit kids on the other side of the world in India, so too a donation the Christmas to Catholic Charities enables *them* to work on your behalf to feed the hungry of the Spokane diocese. To feed them, to house them, to teach them life skills, to counsel them, to pray for them and with them. For as Catholics, heck, as fellow human beings, that is who we are and aspire to become ever more, companions, helping Christ to help us all.