

Christmas Eve - 2024 - “the (un)-Friendly Beasts...”

It had been a day to forget...

Not that it started that way, mind you. I woke up to a manger full of fresh hay... the sun shining through the open stable doors... Bert was out and about doing whatever it was that sheep do (they're not very bright, you know, so I never delved too deeply into his day to day activities)... and the two doves that had found their way onto our rafters were winging their way about in the early morning skies - probably looking for bugs or worms (Yuk...!).

So there I was - a peaceful morning to spend over my breakfast.

And then - the donkey arrived. He said his name was Herbie. Fine. Whatever. There was an empty corner he could have. But stay away from my hay. I may look like a sweet, demur cow (Cuddles, if you must know, is my name. And I pity the fool that tries to make an issue of that...) - but beneath this white and red exterior beats the heart of rampaging lioness. After I finish the hay, that is...

But wait a minute - that donkey brought people. And they were not just making sure he got settled (into his corner, I'm relieved to say) - they looked like they were staying. What is this!?

Bert came back just then. Turns out that corner was his favorite spot. Who knew...? He looked not quite sure how to deal with that, so he came over to me, and had the nerve to dip into my manger. How dare he!?

But when he asked me about the donkey, I put aside my annoyance at Bert's crossing the line when it came to my breakfast (it was not quite “the last straw...”) but it could wait until we dealt with the more pressing matter of -

“Just who does this donkey think he is?” Dumb sheep or not - we at least had history, and this newcomer was - well - a newcomer.

Dove 1 and Dove 2 came back at just this time (I never bothered to learn their names, and just assigned number 1 or number 2 depending on who spoke first...). So they joined in our little “tete-a-tete” as we considered what to do about this unwelcome development - a strange donkey, two people, and - unless my “motherly intuition” has failed me - a little noise-maker on the way.

Now - I suppose I should say here that our little “confab” was not something that happened very often. When your stablemates are as annoying as mine are, you would keep your distance as well. But desperate times (and - crowded stables) call for desperate measures. So I invited Bert, Doves 1 and 2 into the privileged place of my presence...

But Bert - apparently not fully respecting the privilege that had been given to him - spoke up. I’ll overlook it once, but got ready to stomp on his hoof if it happened again...

“Who’s that...? What are they doing there...? Why are they in my corner...? Did they bring a dessert...?”

It was obvious to me that I needed to take charge here, so I told the others to stay where they were, be quiet, and I’d find out what was up.

Strolling over to the corner, I got Herbie’s attention and asked, in my warmest and most welcoming manner (widely acknowledged around our little town of Bethlehem as among the most friendly “cow faces” - voted “top 10” in the last poll I conducted...) - I asked him:

“What are you doing here?”

(It's possible that I may have kicked him to get his attention, which might help explain his surly response, but really - accidents happen, and newcomers need to just get over it...).

Herbie looked down his nose at me (maybe - it was up his nose, since I'm bigger, but it carried that insolent look in a way that he never should have done) - and he said:

“I carried Mary, who is about to bring God into the world.”

(whatever *that* means...)

And then, he turned his back on me and - wait - is that *my* hay he was eating!?

Dove 1 and Dove 2 offered to dive bomb him.

Bert suggested we forget where the bathroom was (Bert never remembers where the bathroom is, so...).

I thought something more insidious was called for. But first, I needed to tell Bert what “insidious” means (a subtle plan of retribution, that builds up over time into a glorious denouement of letting our displeasure be fully known - if that helps... - it didn't help Bert, but you're not sheep...).

I welcomed them to gather around my manger, and even let Bert have a nibble, and the doves perch upon its rim (ahh... the things we must do when dealing with our inferiors...). We bandied about ideas. We drew up plans. We strategized. We broke for lunch.

An after-lunch nap crept up on us, so we lay down to ruminate on what we planned to do. When we had finished with these interlopers, they would never dare intrude on our sanctuary again. And with that, I nodded off...

... and had the most vivid of dreams.

Now - I'm not sure if you know this, but cows don't dream. It's not that we can't, mind you - because we can do most anything we put our minds to. It's just that when there is so much depth and importance to what is running through our minds - minute by minute, all day long - that when we sleep, well... our incredible brains need a rest. You probably can't fully relate to this, but then - not everyone can be a cow...

But this dream...

Well, it made me wonder if there was something in this world - or, something about to be in this world - more wonderful... more important... *even* than being a cow.

I almost can't believe I'm even giving voice to those words... to that idea. But this dream was - light... and wonder... and warmth... and love. But to enter into that - and, I really wanted to - more than anything else in the world - to enter into that, I had to open my heart...

... and, I had to understand that up until this point, my heart had not been very open.

Now, I know what you're probably thinking - how could a cow, most noble of all creatures, possibly have a fault like a hardened, closed heart... a heart that is not open and warm and welcoming to all around? I mean - when all around are lucky enough to be near to... to be in the orbit of... a cow - well, the world is just naturally a better place.

But in my dream, I saw my heart differently. And I didn't like it.

I saw my heart through Bert's eyes, who just didn't understand why I always turned my back when he came into the stable, and who cried silent tears while I looked away.

I saw my heart through Dove 1's eyes (or - was it Dove 2...?) who longed to come down and perch on the manger - to be a part of more than just the two of them, only to be shooed away by a flick of my tail.

And through the locked door of my heart, there shone a light that overwhelmed me, and made me want to crack open the door, and let that glory in. But cracking open the door meant changing my heart.

And then I woke up...

... to the sound of a baby's cry. After which, all was silent.

Until... I heard the faint sounds of a song coming from outside the door. As it grew in volume, I could make out the beginnings of what was being sung:

Jesus, our brother, strong and good  
Was humbly born, in a stable rude  
And the friendly beasts around him stood.  
Jesus our brother, strong and good.

Now you might think I would take offense at having my stable described as "humble and rude," but... I was more bothered by hearing us described as "the friendly beasts," because... I knew I had been anything but friendly. And was cut to the core by that.

Which was when the door that shut out the light I had felt in my dream - shattered.

And I listened, as Herbie softly sang:

“I,” said the donkey, shaggy and brown,

“I carried his mother up hill and down;

I carried his mother to Bethlehem town.”

“I,” said the donkey, shaggy and brown.

Herbie must have been carrying some issues when he first got here (or - possibly - I was the issue he confronted after he got here...), but he sang this much differently than he spoke it when he first told me what he was doing here.

And - I heard it differently. I bent a knee (no easy feat, even for a cow...). I thanked him. I offered him some hay. In fact - hay all around! It's on me!

But wait - we need to leave some in the manger. Because...

“I,” said the cow, all white and red.

“I gave him my manger for his bed;

I gave him my hay to pillow his head.”

“I,” said the cow, all white and red

(To be clear - that cow was me. A little snooty, I'll admit.

Maybe even - a little full of myself - when you're a cow -  
it's tough not to be...

But that was then -

This is the start of a whole new day.)

And it felt good. It felt wonderful. It felt like “light” to give.... it felt like joy to share... I felt the warmth of being with - instead of feeling over - others...

And then Bert Chimed in:  
“I,” said the sheep with curly horn,  
    “I gave him my wool for his blanket warm;  
    He wore my coat on Christmas morn.”  
“I,” said the sheep with curly horn.

How did he do that...?

One minute, there was Bert - all fluffy and covered in his coat of wool. The next, he was “slimmed down,” and bowing his head over the babe - letting slide gently off his horns the most wondrous of blankets. I definitely have to re-evaluate my previous impressions of sheep in general, and - Bert in particular.

We all stayed close - huddled about the manger - Herbie, Bert, and me - along with the babe’s parents. And from the rafters, we heard the doves offer their song:

“I,” said the dove from the rafters high,  
    “I cooed him to sleep so that he would not cry.  
    We cooed him to sleep, my mate and I.”  
“I,” said the dove from the rafters high.

And they swooped down to find a perch on the manger itself, from which they offered up the most wondrous - yet simple - song of peace and rest. And surrounded by those who found their joy in the gifts they could offer - the babe slept...

Thus every beast by some good spell  
    In the stable dark was glad to tell  
    Of the gift he gave Emmanuel -  
The gifts they gave Emmanuel...

Bert thought I should just end this story here - very dramatic... very compelling (especially given my “moo-lodious” voice...).

But after another confab, he agreed that this epilogue would be helpful.

I don't know how we knew all that we did about this baby - Jesus, the Son of God, Emmanuel - God with us.... but - we did. Maybe it was just being there at the time he was born.... Maybe it was the dream (which - it turns out - we all had...) - maybe it was the obvious change that came over all of us - but

... where we were anything but a warm, friendly, humble group of stable mates - mostly my fault, I will admit -

now - we put aside our differences (again - mostly my problem, I will again admit. Oh, let's admit to almost all the problems, and get it over with...).

We put aside our issues and our insecurities...

We discovered that we had more in common than we ever before owned up to (yeah... yeah... that's on me too - I thought we'd already put that to bed...).

But with the difference it made - that *this* baby was born - not just in our stable, but in the wider world we share with all of you -

With the difference *he* made... the light *he* brought... the wonder *he* elicited... the joy *he* gave... the love *he* made possible...

Well, with all that - we truly became:

the “friendly beasts...”

(I'm just sorry it took so long...

and hope it doesn't take so long for any of you...)