

Youth pageant continues tradition begun in 1925

By Tony Anthony

Christmas pageants are a cherished tradition for many churches, including St. Stephen's. In addition to the traditional children's pageant that takes place on the afternoon of the third Sunday in Advent, our parish enjoys a pageant involving youth in middle school and high school which is unusual in our day. Each year on the fourth Sunday in Advent, during the 11:15 a.m. service of Morning Prayer, our youth continue a tradition whose origins go back to medieval times, seasoned with some St. Stephen's traditions going back to the 1920s.



Dressed in elaborate costumes sewn by parishioners, and wearing stage makeup applied by adults who may themselves have taken part during their teenage years, youth depict the Nativity story in tableaux on wooden carts that are moved down the aisles of the church as the appropriate scripture passages are read. The congregation for this highly anticipated occasion is standing room only.

The carts themselves are part of the legacy. After the pageant, they are disassembled for storage, to be brought out again the week before the next pageant, and assembled by youth and adults whose knowledge has been handed down from generation to generation. Tony Anthony, one of three people who have been diligently working on our parish archives since our centennial celebration, did some research on the origins of our youth pageant.

The first printed reference to a youth Christmas pageant at St. Stephen's Church appears in the December 20, 1925 issue of "The Chronicle," the church's bi-weekly newsletter (and the pageant may even precede this reference): "The children of the Sunday School will have their service on the Sunday after Christmas Day.. There will be a short service, followed by a Christmas Pageant, entitled, 'The Manger.'"

With a few gaps, the tradition has continued to the present, but the form and content of the event has changed many times. In 1927, the pageant was titled "Why the Chimes Rang." In 1928, it became "The Pageant of Kings," written by a Dr. Bowie. By 1936, it was again "Why the Chimes Rang." Over time, the pageant appears to have become more elaborate, with the incorporation of music involving the church organist, a choir, and other musicians. In 1942, over 60 youngsters took part.

In the 1940s, with the St. Stephen's family now experiencing personal losses from war, the Chronicle commented, "The drama was enacted with such reverence and dignity that it brought a measure of peace to a capacity congregation." There seems to be no announcement or review of a pageant for 1944 in the Chronicle, but in 1945, the "primary department" had their own somewhat unusual program, a "Pageant of the Holy Grail."

"Against a background of familiar hymns and Wagnerian music, Mrs. Bickel read the story of Arthur's knights on their quest of the Holy Grail, while the children of the third grade enacted the scenes," reports the Chronicle. The older kids presented the usual Pageant of the Nativity in the main church. (Today, we also have two separate pageants—young children take part in an afternoon pageant on the third Sunday of Advent, while middle and high school youth offer the tableaux.)

"I remember having to put all the make-up on and the ugly beards that smelled bad, because I was always a boy (there weren't many girl parts), but my older sister Becca was Mary, and my daughter Mae Wallace was a littlest angel, and it was great to see it all come back around. Having all my siblings and now my children be in it is really great."

—Kathryn Clary Angus, current vestry member, mother of two



"My brother and I participated as children in minor roles, but always looked forward to the tradition, and seeing our friends with fake beards! Having children in the pageant took it to another level. We have had angels of all manner and grades, from the littlest through Gabriel. Now we enjoy our beautiful grandchildren in costumes very similar to what we saw in the '60s. Certainly, it could not be Christmas without our pageant!"

— Richard Clary, retired physician, participant in Dominican Republic medical mission trips, EFM mentor, former vestry member



BARBARA BROWN TAYLOR AT ST. STEPHEN'S

On October 2, writer, theologian and Episcopal priest Barbara Brown Taylor spoke for a standing-room-only audience in the church. Her main focus was *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, the third book in a trilogy that also includes *Leaving Church* and *An Altar in the World*. She explained that learning to walk in the dark is not simply about difficult times, but about mystery. After her presentation and a question-and-answer period moderated by Gary Jones, Barbara signed copies of her books in the library.

Briget Ganske

By December 1946, Reno Harp had become rector. The primary department's Wagnerian quest for the Holy Grail was apparently abandoned, and the entire Sunday school participated in the Nativity pageant, either as spectators or performers. The rector's son, Reno Harp III, recalls being a "cart pusher" at first, before graduating to other parts (though he says he doesn't recall wearing makeup).

Except for a revival of the old "Why the Chimes Rang" Christmas play in 1948, with music supplied by Granville Munson, for the next few years the traditional Nativity pageant was performed.

Christmas 1953 saw a major departure from "tradition"—at least, St. Stephen's tradition. It was the first production of "The Children's Miracle Play," written and directed by G. Mallory Freeman for St. Stephen's. The play told the story of the "wondrous thing" that happened to six children gathered on the steps of a cathedral at Christmas, and miraculously created a nativity scene there. The pageant included live tableaux of traditional medieval life, such as the blessing of the Yule Log, as well as the Nativity events, culminating with the "cathedral" doors swinging open to reveal a Heavenly Host singing "Glory to God." The tableaux were drawn down the main aisle on the now-familiar wagons, escorted by retinues of young people in medieval costumes bearing colorful banners.

Parishioner Ben Emerson, who has been involved in the pageant for many years, recalls seeing a version of the Freeman play performed as late as the 1980s or early '90s when his children were young. He reports that the church rented stage lights from Backstage, Incorporated—a company formed by some of his friends when they all attended the University of Richmond. Backstage also built the current wagons and hangings, and constructed the original costumes. When those costumes "disintegrated," says Ben, they were replaced with the help of parishioners with sewing skills. Ben has repaired the wagons as the need has arisen.

Ben notes, "It is not by accident that Mallory Freeman called his play 'The Children's Miracle Play' and used wagons to move the actors around the nave. In the medieval period, many such productions were mounted on wagons which traveled from place to place in a town, each wagon bearing actors portraying a scene in the story, sort of like our parades today.

"These productions were called miracle plays or mystery plays, and had allegorical stories as well as telling the actual Nativity story," says Ben, who was part of the Wakefield Mystery Cycle when it was performed by the University of Richmond Theatre Department in the early '70s.

The 1954 Chronicle described the production as follows: "The fanfare of trumpets, a breathtaking modulation of colorful costumes sparkling in the projected lights, fresh young voices caroling Christmas music – all this centered in adoration around a Nativity scene..." For a number of years as many as 200 St. Stephen's children and youth participated. The play was featured in a full page display in the Richmond Times-Dispatch in 1959 (on the left). Still directed by Mallory Freeman, it ran as originally written until 1961. In 1962 it was revised and directed



Youth stage scenes from the nativity story, moving down the center aisle of the church on carts as the scripture is read.

"Of all the memories I cherish of the Christmas season, the St. Stephen's Christmas Pageant is one of my favorites. It is a tradition that is incredibly special to me. I can remember as a young child participating as as an angel, while my brothers were 'Wise Men' and Kings. Now I enjoy seeing my children, nieces and nephews, godchildren and friends being rolled down the long aisle as the story of Christ is retold and the full congregation sings the favorite hymns of the season. The pageant always brings me great joy and peace during the busy season."

— Donnan O'Keefe, current vestry member, mother of two

by Vienna Cobb Anderson, an accomplished actress who attended St. Stephen's and was later ordained an Episcopal priest. In 1963 it was revised again and incorporated into a regular service of "Lessons, Pageants and Carols."

Since no scripts or outlines for the Freeman play, the Anderson revisions, or for the other older versions of the pageant are found in our archives, current productions are based on institutional memory and recollections of adults who were cast members in their youth. The current youth pageant is the familiar Nativity story, with the wagons as the only vestiges of the Freeman production.

Nevertheless, the Christmas pageant, whatever its form, has since early days been a cherished celebration of the Nativity at St. Stephen's, a source of joy and inspiration, and a legacy lovingly passed from generation to generation.

"I have been involved with the pageant at St. Stephen's for about 15 years, ever since my children participated in it as young teens. I love the opportunity to continue to work in a small way with the youth of the parish, to hear their banter back and forth while working on the pageant and to have a small place in helping to continue this historic production, which is important to so many members of the congregation."

— Ben Emerson, parishioner, attorney, and a stalwart pageant volunteer, assisting with cart-building, repair, and make-up

"It is always wonderful to see how the Christmas pageant brings the whole community together."

— Margaret Clary, lifelong parishioner, youth ministry volunteer, past youth ministry intern



The cast of the 2013 youth pageant, costumed, made-up, and ready to roll.