

“The Wolf of Gubbio”

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Luke 2:1-14 = St. Francis and the wolf

From the 13th Century, this report has been handed down through the generations:

“[In] Italy there was a beautiful city named Gubbio nestled in the foothills... When the people from Gubbio traveled to another part of Italy, they would be recognized... by their haughtiness... They were proud, defiant and very full of themselves.



[Then one night a] shadowy figure lurked out of the woods near Gubbio. It made its way through the streets and the alleys of the city. The next morning a terrible discovery was made [~ one] of the citizens of the city, an elderly man, was found [dead]... Everyone was afraid...

That night, for the first time, everyone locked their doors. Everyone stayed inside, everyone except for one lady. She was found dead the next morning. [A]nother lady called out. ‘I saw what happened.... I saw a [big grey] wolf walk right down the street by my house last night.’



‘How are we going to get this wolf out of Gubbio?’... Some said, ‘We will have to call for military assistance.’ But others said, ‘No, then all of Italy will know that there is a wolf in Gubbio. People will mock us.’ ...

A young girl in the crowd said, ‘I heard that in one of our neighboring cities there is a holy man who talks to animals. Why don't we ask him to talk to the wolf.’ ... So they sent a delegation to the neighboring city with the mission to find the holy man and ... have him tell the wolf ... ‘to go



someplace else... They deserve a wolf in Perugia.' ...

They found [the holy man] on the outskirts of the city ... He was short and frail and wore a dirty brown habit. They told him their problem and asked him to talk to the wolf for them. 'Tell him to obey God's commandments. Tell him to go someplace else.' Perugia seemed to be the best place for a wolf to go."

That evening the holy man traveled to Gubbio... He walked until he came to a thicket so dense neither starlight nor moonlight could penetrate. His hand trembled as he pushed aside the brush. He fumbled into the blackness. Scratched and bruised he stopped when he felt hot breath and the beating of another heart just ahead of him. Into the darkness, he said gently: "Brother wolf, we need to talk."



"The next morning the holy man was standing in the Piazza of Gubbio... The people gathered around and asked. 'Did you find the wolf. Did you tell him to obey God's commandments? Did you show him how to get to Perugia?' The Holy Man just stood on the steps of the fountain and said, 'This is what you are to do. Feed your wolf.'



'Our wolf,' they said. 'He's not our wolf.'

But the Holy Man just said again, 'Feed your wolf,' and he moved through the crowd and went back to his own city.

That night the long grey figure lurked again through the city. The wolf went up one street, then the next, and then down an alley. Suddenly, a door opened and a plate of meat was pushed outside. The wolf ate the meat and went away. The next evening the wolf came back. He went down that same street and into that same alley. Another door opened. Another plate of meat was pushed outside. Again the wolf ate and left. After a while everyone in the city, every single family, had fed the wolf.



Now, when they would travel ... [other] people would [ask], 'Gubbio, don't you have a wolf in Gubbio?' And they would respond. 'Yes, and we feed our wolf in Gubbio.'

Now that holy man ... was Francis of Assisi...²

This story of St. Francis helping the people of Gubbio to tame their wolf is at a deeper level, the story of how Jesus handles the weaknesses within us as well.



The arrogant people of Gubbio thought falsely and foolishly that they could simply wish the wolf away. Yet in the taming of their wolf and in the subsuming of their vanity, Jesus demonstrated he is able to tame even our darker selves, our self-

centered sides, those sides of ourselves we would prefer others not see, the sides we hope Jesus will help us to tame.

The same year that Francis taught the people of Gubbio to feed their wolf, he [started] the Christmas [nativity scene] and celebrating midnight Mass around the [manger]...

Of course there were also animals drawn to that [first nativity scene]. There were sheep and oxen, cows, dogs, a donkey or two, and they tell us, at that first Christmas [manger] there was also a wolf."³



As we gather around the manger on Christmas, we come bowed down by the challenges in our overly busy lives. Meeting the challenges of the season is always difficult. Do we come to the manger weary and ready for this all to end?

Many of the challenges in our lives are daunting and we have no idea how to overcome them. Yet the Good News is that the kingdom of God has arrived in an entirely unexpected form: a baby boy in a feeding trough. So then all our challenges now pale in comparison: our lives touched by divinity. The word of the angel comes to us as well: **"Do not be afraid! For I bring you good news of great joy."**

It is more than just Good News: it is earth-shattering and paradigm shifting and dissonance making, reforming and restoring altogether.

We thank God that there is a wolf in Gubbio. [And] yes, we [ourselves do] have a wolf [as well]. But we feed our wolf ... with that everlasting presence whose birth we [celebrate].”⁴



¹ Joseph Pellegrino, <http://www.st.ignatius.net/wolf12-10-00.htm> adapted from *Starlight* by John Shea.

² Pellegrino, *op.cit.*

³ Pellegrino, *op.cit.*

⁴ Pellegrino, *op.cit.*