

The Legend of La Befana

A story for Epiphany from Italy, retold in worship at Crafton Heights on 1/6/2019 with help from *La Befana: An Italian Night After Christmas* by Susan Frey-Blanchard and *The Legend of Old Befana* by Tomie dePaola.

*To hear this story as told in worship, please visit
<https://castyournet.files.wordpress.com/2019/01/oldbefana.mp3>*

A long, long time ago there was a small village in the countryside. On the edge of that village was a tiny house that was remarkable for two reasons. First, it was undoubtedly the cleanest house you've ever seen, and second, it smelled better than any home you've ever visited.

Inside the little home lived a very old woman whose name was Strega Befana. While other people were happy to go roaming through the village or even travel the world, La Befana was happiest inside the coziness of her little house. She kept busy all winter long by sewing little toys to sell to families who had need for such, or by making herbal remedies and potions to sell to those who were not feeling well, or by baking some of the most amazing bread and cookies you've ever eaten.

She also kept busy – very, very busy, by making sure her home was clean. She swept the floors at least three times a day – morning, noon, and night. If there was one thing that Strega Befana hated, it was a dirty home!

While she depended on other people to buy the things that she created, La Befana actually didn't like people very well and never admitted them inside her house when she could avoid it. She sold them their toys or their cookies or their ointments, and then she sent them away. She led a clean, quiet, life, and didn't want anyone messing with that!

One night, when she had finished sweeping the last stair and had pulled in the lantern and blown out the light, she was presented with a mystery. Her home was not dark! She checked the lantern and it was indeed out –

but the light was pouring in through the window. “Why was it so light?” she wondered. She looked out the window and saw a star was shining brightly – it was the brightest star she had ever seen! But she didn’t have time to think about what was happening, because she was startled by a knock on the door. “Visitors now?” she complained. “Who is bothering old Befana so late? If it wasn’t bad enough with the sky all lit up, now I have company!” No one had ever come so late before.

She peeked out her window to see who was there and saw an old man who was magnificently dressed. He looked to be very learned, his face was quite tan, and although his clothes were brightly colored, they were covered with dust from the road. His shoes were very muddy, and he looked worn out from his travel.

She opened the door, reluctantly, and he stepped inside – with his dirty shoes and muddy pants. “Good evening!”, he said. “I’m sorry to be disturbing you at such a late hour, but I am lost. I’m on a great mission – I’ve seen a sign that a child has been born – one who will lead us all in the years to come. This child is divine! He is full of joy, hope, and love. I know that he is sent from God above. I’ve brought gifts to this child, and I want to give him my heart, too.”

The old man saw the little toys and things on the shelves in La Befana’s home. “Oh! You could come with us! These things that you sell would be fit for a king like this baby!”

Befana wasn’t too sure about that, and she didn’t like the fact that this man was dressed so funny, and that he was out there following the stars. And he was MUDDY.

“No, no, no,” she said. “I don’t know anything about this child, and I can’t help, and I certainly don’t want to go out following a star or some such nonsense!” She showed him the way to the door and reached for her broom to start cleaning up the mess.

No sooner had she started cleaning when there was another knock on the door. She saw another man, also dressed quite finely. “What do you want?”, she yelled through the closed door.

He answered, “I need directions, my friend. I am also looking for supplies for a journey.”

The second gentleman and his friends came inside. Like the first, their boots were covered with grime and dirt. “My friend,” he said “We are seeking a child of light – one who will become a King! We go to bring gifts and offer him our hands. He will bring good news to the poor, and to change the world! Why don't you join us as we travel to see him?”

Once more she assured them that she was not at all interested in something like that, and so she sold them what they needed and sent them out into the night.

She thought that they had all gone, but she looked out and there was still a young boy, holding a camel. “Please, Befana!”, he said, “Come with us! We will find the king, and he will be good news for all people! He will love and help the poor. There’s still time! Join us!” But Strega Befana just closed the door and collapsed into her chair.

She looked at her room – it had been soooooo clean! She set down her broom and decided that she’d take a quick nap before she cleaned it up again. As soon as she sat to rest, the oak door was pounded on one more time. She didn’t even get up – she just yelled at the door: “Go away! I know nothing about this child that everyone is trying to find! Please, leave at once! I will not come, and I’m not interested in selling anything else!”

Whoever it was that had knocked went away slowly, and La Befana finally started to finish cleaning up her house. She muttered and sighed as she swept. “Coming to serve the poor...hmp! Old Befana is poor. Does this baby care for her? I think not!”

But when she opened the door to sweep the dirt out she let out a small cry. There in the distance, something bright caught her eye. It was a wondrous new star in the deep blue sky. Something in her changed, and she realized that this was not an ordinary star, and it was not an ordinary day.

She thought back to those lost gentlemen, the king they were seeking, and the gifts that they'd brought. "That star – and those visitors - they were right!" she said to herself. "Maybe it's not too late for me to go. I will find them. I will go with them and present my gift to the child king. But what could I take?"

She set down her broom and went to the kitchen. All day long she baked. When she was not baking, she was clearing all the little toys from her shelves, throwing everything into a large bag.

She put on a shawl, and she opened the door. She grabbed her broom, thinking, "I imagine that when I find that baby his mother will not have had time to clean. I can help her with the sweeping of her home..."

But as she stood at the door looking back into her home, La Befana noticed that there was a speck of dust in the corner of the room. She thought, "Well, now, how would it be if I were to go on a trip and leave my own home a mess!"

And so La Befana put down her sack and started to sweep. She got the speck of dust. And then she swept the room, and the other room. She swept the steps, and she even thought to sweep the walk outside.

Finally – hours later – she was ready to leave. She glimpsed the star all right, and she walked toward it. She was in such a hurry that she began to run, and she ran as fast as she could... but it was a long way, and she was old, and she got tired. She started to walk, and she thought, "This is no good. I'll never find this baby. I don't even know where he is."

And, sure enough, when she looked at the sky again, she wasn't sure which star was THE star. She sat down and cried. She got up again, and started to walk when she saw a home with an open window. She looked inside, and there was a child asleep. "I wonder," she said, "Could this be the one? Is this the one who is born to be king? Maybe I better leave something just in case...? The further Old Befana walked, the more sleeping children she passed, and in every home she left a small gift and swept it a little cleaner with her broom, because she said, "After all, I'm not sure which of these was born to bring good news to the poor and to change the world."

Well, La Befana never caught up with the wise men, and she never made it to Bethlehem, and she is still not sure which child they came to see.

So now, every year on the eve of the Feast of the Three Kings, the story is told of a sad old lady who flies around on her broom, bringing little treats to all children. She's happy that she can share what she's been given, but she's sad because she wasn't able to welcome the visitors to her home, and she missed her chance to follow them and to greet the Christ child. She's decided that from now on, she'll never miss the chance to show kindness to strangers, or to welcome visitors, and in so doing, to follow the star of Bethlehem.