

Tom Coop
Luke 2:1-20
December 24, 2016

“Living a Christmas Life”

A Sunday school teacher challenged her children to take some time on Sunday afternoon to write a letter to God. They were to bring back their letter the following Sunday.

One little boy wrote, “Dear God, We had a good time at church today. Wish You could have been there.” Ouch!

I think it was that same little fellow who turned to a classmate and asked, “And by the way, who is Round John Virgin?”

She answered, “I think he was one of the 12 opossums.”

The Christmas story is such a magnificent one, so full of tenderness and love, that we might wish God had been there.

Unfortunately, we often miss the presence of God because of all the distractions that occur this time of year.

If you have missed the last four Sundays, shame on you! Just kidding!

If you weren't here, though, you wouldn't have heard my Advent Sermon series connecting Christmas secular characters and songs with people from the REAL Christmas story.

For example, I compared and contrasted Frosty the Snowman and John the Baptist one week, Jingles Bells with Mary being visited by the Angel Gabriel on another, and last Sunday, Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer and the Shepherds.

It has been a challenge. However, as we dug deep, we found connections ... and, in turn, we found God.

Tonight, we are looking at Santa Claus and how he might fit in with the whole Advent/Christmas message and the birth of Christ which we celebrate tonight.

I have to admit, it was fun trying to put the two together.

There are those who rant and rave about the craziness of Christmas which can result in neglecting the real reason for the season and then often they lay that at the feet of Santa.

But even without Santa, when we think about what really happened over 2000 years ago, it is pretty strange. I mean, think about it.

If you never heard about Christmas or Jesus before and someone told you the Christmas story about how Mary was visited by an angel and told that she was going to be impregnated by something called the Holy Ghost and the baby was going to save all humankind – wouldn't you be a little leery?

Or that Joseph, who Mary was engaged to, saw his wife was pregnant and he wasn't the father ... and then he, too, is visited by an angel ... and he is okay with the whole thing.

And then that this savior of all humankind is born in a cave, in a manger, surrounded by dirty sheep and goats and other animals, and then is visited by shepherds, who were dirtier than the sheep.

I mean, come on! That's how God chooses to come to us – in filth and grime? No palaces, grand announcements, etc.? REALLY????

It is a crazy story. So, how can I fit Santa Claus into it without making it even crazier? Well, you know Santa Claus wasn't always Santa Claus, right? His roots actually go back over 1700 years.

That's when there was a real, live, historical (and deeply religious, I might add) human being named Nicholas.

Sometime around the year 280 AD, a boy – named Nicholas – was born to wealthy Christian parents in the city of Patara, on the coast of what is now Turkey.

It is said that Nicholas' parents were devout believers who had long prayed for a child. When Nicholas was finally born, they devoted him to God.

Early in his childhood, Nicholas' mother taught him the scriptures, and from those, the compassionate, justice-loving, humanity-serving ethics of Jesus of Nazareth.

However, when Nicholas was still a boy (most likely a teenager), a plague struck his city, and both of his parents died.

Though a loss like this might turn some away from God, it seems to have drawn Nicholas closer to him.

The loss of his parents also seems to have made the boy's heart tender to the suffering of others.

Nicholas had been left with a large inheritance and decided that he would use it to honor God.

Concerned about the poverty he saw, he began giving away his family's wealth.

When he was around 30, he was chosen to be the bishop of the region and as bishop, he continued his generous ways.

In the beginning, not wanting to receive public praise for his charitable giving, Nicholas would often don disguises, and give small gifts to the poor and needy.

One popular story was that in the town of Myra where he was bishop, Nicholas heard of a father with three daughters, who was too poor to provide dowries for them.

The father considered selling his oldest daughter into slavery to be able to feed the younger two.

Hearing of this, Nicholas filled a bag with gold and tossed the bag through an open window. His generosity literally saved the girl.

Twice more this scenario was repeated – though this time Nicholas reportedly tossed the gold down a chimney where it fell into the other two daughters' stockings that had been hung there to dry.

Ahhh... now we know where that tradition comes from.

Well, after his death, at age 63, stories began to be told about the miraculous feats Bishop Nick was said to have performed:

He was said to have calmed the Mediterranean storms, that he brought people back to life, that he saved some from famine by miraculously multiplying grain.

He was the protector of the poor and powerless.

Nicholas was made a Saint in the 9th century and by the 1400's over 2000 chapels, hospitals, and monasteries were named in his honor.

And, December 6th was designated as the day to honor this amazing and generous man.

In many countries today, December 6th continues to be celebrated as the *Feast of St. Nicholas*, where many of the rituals of gift giving we associate with Christmas are still observed.

Ok, quick aside...

Wouldn't it be nice if we could have a *St. Nicholas Day* early in December and get all the gift giving out of the way so Christmas could be dedicated to celebrating the birth of the Savior?

Alas, I don't think that's going to happen anytime soon!

Well, back to our story. When the Reformation took place, the new Protestants no longer desired St. Nicholas as their gift-giver, as he was too closely tied to the Catholic Church.

Therefore, each country or region developed their own gift-giver.

For example, to the Dutch, he was Sinterklaas.

To the English, the gift-responsibilities were handed over to Father Christmas – who was depicted as a huge man wearing a scarlet robe lined with fur and a crown of holly, ivy, or mistletoe.

When the Dutch came to the New World in 1624 they brought Sinterklaas with them.

After the British arrived around 40 years later and the British and Dutch intermarried for a few generations, Sinterklaas merged with Father Christmas and he began to visit homes on Christmas Eve instead of December 6th.

By the end of the Revolutionary War, his name had been Americanized into “Santa Claus.”

By the end of the 19th century Santa Claus was everywhere, and children everywhere delighted in him.

And as we all know, to children all around the world, St. Nicholas or Sinterklaas or Father Christmas or Santa Claus, will always be the most loving and wondrous of human personalities.

One, who faithfully comes into their lives at this time each year with the simple message (through the gifts he brings) that (no matter how naughty or imperfect they have been – regardless of what the song says) they are valued, cherished, and loved beyond words.

Now, does that sound so different from the Jesus whose birth we celebrate?

Santa Claus has never been a symbol of greed or selfishness. He has never been used to promote hatred or intolerance.

I mean, he championed Rudolf, the underdog (or should that be underdeer?), creating community among reindeer where formerly there was divisiveness.

Truth is, Santa Claus has always only been about giving, and that is partly because the good Bishop Nicholas' life all those years ago and far away was modeled on Christ's life and on God's free gift of grace in Christ.

The original old Santa Claus – St. Nicholas – based his giving on the idea that the poor have first claim on God's mercy.

His miracles of giving were aimed at meeting the real needs of real people.

This truth about Santa reminds us to give not only to each other, but also to organizations that serve persons whom we may never meet, but who need help and support at the holidays, and every day.

Perhaps most of all, the real truth about Santa Claus is that we – each and every one of us – is a person inherently worthy, a person with a special place in God's family, a person who carries the gift of love and can love in return.

I would like to close with a story I heard about a Christmas pageant Father McNerney, a Catholic priest, attended a number of years ago.

It was a typical Christmas pageant; as someone read the Christmas story from Matthew and Luke, children came out dressed in bathrobes and wearing cardboard wings.

And at center stage, there was the Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus, portrayed by a seventh grade boy wearing a false beard, a girl with a blue shawl over her head, and a Cabbage Patch doll as the Baby Jesus.

But just as the pageant reached its emotional climax, with the lights lowered and everyone singing "Silent Night," Father McNerney saw something out of the corner of his eye that made his blood run cold.

At the back of the auditorium, he caught a glimpse of Santa Claus, looking very much like the church janitor, dressed in a moth-eaten Santa suit.

"Oh, no! He's going to completely disrupt the pageant. He's going to start passing out candy and going 'Ho, ho, ho!' and totally shatter the mood."

Father McNerney wanted to get up and tackle Santa, but he figured that would *really* shatter the mood.

But as Father McNerney watched, Santa did something amazing. He simply walked up the center aisle, completely oblivious to the crowd, totally focused on Jesus in the manger.

And when he got to the front, Santa paused for a long moment, and then he dropped to his knees and knelt there by the manger, his hands folded in prayer.

And then, as quietly as he came in, Santa stood up and walked out a side door.

I'd like to think that is how Santa would act in every Christmas pageant, in every story, in every time and place.

I know that isn't always going to be so – but I think that's the way St. Nicholas would have it ... and so should we!

So, what if we made it a goal in the coming year to represent this Saint Nicholas with our giving to Christ?

What if, instead of entering the fray at the mall, we all decided to try and help lift one family out of poverty in 2017?

What if instead of spending all our time visiting relatives, we chose instead to visit someone in prison, or spent time talking to that homeless man on the street?

I'm guessing that Christmas would start to feel a lot different—and maybe even honor the Christ child more than any sale or full stocking ever could.

We can do extraordinary things if we devote our lives to the manger-born King.

Tonight, we just don't celebrate a holiday, we remember the invitation of Christ, who wants to be born in us—to change us so that we can join him in changing the world for the sake of his kingdom.

Tonight as you get ready for bed, I hope you will remember the story of Saint Nicholas ... the story of one who gave his life completely to Christ.

And then, tomorrow, may you remember the Christ who came to earth for you, and begin living the Christmas life every day!

Amen!