

ADVENT TWO, YEAR B, DECEMBER 6,2020

Besides being the Second Sunday in Advent, and the Sunday of Peace does anyone know what else today is? It is the feast of Saint Nicholas. So while John the Baptist shouts at us to repent this morning I would like to talk about Saint Nicholas.

Nicholas was born at the end of the third century, in about 280, in what we now call Turkey. His parents were devout Christians, extremely wealthy and died in an epidemic when Nicholas was still young. As he grew up, Nicholas was also a very devout young man who took seriously Jesus' admonition to "sell what you own and give the money to the poor". That admonition became his guiding principle.

He became a priest and an example how God can use us when we least expect it. It is said that being chosen as Bishop came as complete surprise to Nicholas. The bishop of Myra had recently died and the priests in the city had decided that the first priest to enter the church that morning would be made bishop. Nicholas went to the church to pray and consequently was proclaimed the new bishop.

He developed a reputation as a fiery, wiry, and defiant defender of church doctrine during the Great Persecution in 303, when Bibles were burned and priests were made to renounce Christianity or face execution. Nicholas defied these edicts and spent years in prison before the Roman emperor Constantine ended Christian persecution in 313.

Nicholas was not a person who sought recognition but instead sought to help others which is probably why he was such a good bishop. He symbolized and lived to the fullest what is at the heart of our Christian faith which is the ability to give, and to give again; to love, and to love again; and to care, and to care again.

Nicholas's reputation for generosity and kindness gave rise to legends of miracles he performed. The most familiar one is how he changed the life of a poor family with three daughters who were destined to be sold into prostitution because they did not have enough money to be married. He provided the three bags of gold for their dowry, one each night. He wanted to do it without anyone knowing and legend says on the third night the father of the girls waited for the anonymous benefactor only to discover it was Nicholas and he begged him not to tell anyone. Eventually his act of generosity became known and anytime someone received an anonymous gift they believed it was Nicholas who gave it.

The other story is not so well known now but was enormously well known in the Middle Ages. Nicholas entered an inn whose keeper had just murdered three boys. The bishop then resurrected the three boys. That's one of the miracles that made him the patron saint of children.

He also changed the life of a soldier wrongly accused who was to be put to death by making the authorities give him justice. He altered the life of some sailors who were shipwrecked on a stormy sea by rescuing them. Nicholas' passion was for children and those in need. This is why Nicholas is considered to be the patron saint of children, sailors, merchants, archers, repentant thieves, prostitutes, brewers, pawnbrokers, unmarried people, and students in various cities and countries around Europe.

Nicholas's fame lived long after his death which was December 6 in the year 343 and reverence for him continues to this day independent of his Christmas connection. For several hundred years from about 1200 to 1500, St. Nicholas was the unchallenged

bringer of gifts based on his anonymous gifts to people in need and so celebrations of gift giving was designated to occur on his feast day, December 6. But when it came to giving gifts, Nicholas, during his lifetime, insisted that kids toed the line by saying their prayers and practicing good behavior.

So how in the world did Saint Nicholas turn into our modern day Santa Claus. Up until the Reformation he was one of the most celebrated saints, second only to Mary. Thousands of churches were dedicated to him all across Europe until the Protestant Reformation discouraged and banned the practice of honoring saints, especially Saint Nicholas.

After the Reformation, devotion to Nicholas had disappeared in all the Protestant countries of Europe except Holland and I'll come back to that in a minute. Now if you ever wondered how gift giving became associated with Christmas it was because of the reformation prohibitions. Gift giving was so ingrained in the culture that it was moved from Nicholas's feast day to Christmas and they had the Christ child bringing the gifts. But that presented a problem. The giving of gifts to children was based on whether you had been good or bad and the bad would either not get a gift or be punished. Being reprimanded by the Christ child if you'd been bad just wasn't appealing and eventually, as time went on, countries reintroduced and reinvented St. Nicholas under different names. In England he was renamed "Father Christmas", "Father Frost" in Russia, and "Pere Noel" in France.

But let me back up to Holland. Holland never banned St. Nicholas because they had defied the original prohibition on saints and so his legend persisted as Sinterklaas - a Dutch modification of the name St. Nicholas. He remained the patron of gift-giving and Christmas throughout the reformation to this day.

Now it was the Dutch colonists who brought this tradition to New Amsterdam, now New York City in the 17th century. Sinterklaas was adopted by the country's English-speaking majority under the name Santa Claus, and the legend of a kindly old man was united with old Nordic folktales of a person with magical powers who punished naughty children and rewarded good children with presents. The resulting image of Santa Claus in the United States was crystallized in the 19th century.

In 1809 Washington Irving first portrayed, in a book, a pipe-smoking Nicholas soaring over the rooftops in a flying wagon, delivering presents to good girls and boys and switches to bad ones. Then in 1821 an anonymous illustrated poem entitled "The Children's Friend" went much further in shaping the modern concept of Santa. This poem stripped St. Nicholas of any religious characteristics, and dressed this Santa in furs that brought gifts to good girls and boys, but he also sported a birch rod for discipline. Santa's drove a thin wagon pulled by a single reindeer. The following year this Santa and one reindeer got a major makeover.

In 1822, a man named Clement Moore, who was a professor at the General Theological Seminary in New York, wrote a poem for his children that was titled, "A Visit from St. Nicholas." That poem that started with "Twas the night before Christmas is known and loved the world over. There are some that believe someone else wrote it but it was the beginning of the iconic Santa and his eight reindeer story that we all know. When it was published the following year it became a classic and a few years later, Thomas Nast, a political cartoonist, is attributed to drawing the Santa Claus that we've

come to know. These two people redefined Christmas and Santa Claus as we know it today.

But whether you realize it or not Moore's poem actually translated some profound adult themes to a child's level. The feeling of expectation and preparation pervades the poem. Stockings hung, the tree decorated, treats left out for a mysterious special visitor who would come in the quiet of the night. Hope is tangible, as children's dreams are full of sugarplums, fairies and wonderful visions. All that was because they had faith that something wonderful was going to happen. Those are all Advent themes; hope, expectation, waiting.

Today, St. Paul's letter to the Philippians tells us that God has created us for something good and John the Baptist tells us how to get ready for the coming of the Lord. He proclaimed "a baptism for the repentance of sins." Repentance meaning to move in a new and better direction. The season of Advent is designed to set us in a new direction so we can better prepare our hearts for Christmas.

So you see Nicholas looked at his life in the light of Jesus teaching and used his wealth for the benefit of others and he gained so much more by using it that way. To me, the greatest lesson for all of us is to take a page from Nicholas' life. You don't need a red outfit, you don't need a bag of toys; what you need is a giving heart, a loving soul and a willingness to share your faith, share hopes, share your dreams, share even materially with those who come in contact with you day by day—whether it be at work or at school or at church. For Nicholas all people, no matter what classification we might put them in, are the loving children of one God—the God Nicholas worshipped and adored throughout his life.

So in this giving season, the time of St. Nicholas and Santa Claus, we can be reminded that there is room for growth in our giving nature as we celebrate the gift of God, born in a manger long ago. Amen