

December 23, 2007 “From the Chimney to the Manger”

Message Part 1

The story of Jolly Old St. Nick is one that's familiar to all of us—young and old alike, and my guess is that it's been a part of the Christmas celebration for many of us. I know there are some who have attempted to downplay the story of Santa Claus, claiming that he has become a totally commercialized entity, but I really believe that the Santa story at its best is a story of the spirit of Christmas.

I did a little research into the origins of Santa Claus, and learned a lot. It seems that most of those traditions began in the 3rd Century with a religious person who was also quite wealthy, and he decided that the best use of his money was to share it with others. This kind and generous man was made bishop of Myra, because of the many ways in which he came to the aid of people in need. Many miracles were attributed to him, and he became known as St. Nicholas. By the year 1000, he was one of the most important and beloved saints in Christendom. His legendary kindness knows no limit of time and space, and continues to this day to be poured out over all the earth.

Not all cultures call him by the name of Santa Claus, but most have their own version of someone who cares for children and the poor, and brings gifts at Christmas time. He was known as Pere Noel in France, and Father Christmas in England. The concept of the Christ-Child, or Krist-Kindl, as gift-giver came from Germany, and all of these came in one form or the other to the United States. However, it was Clement Moore's story, "A Visit From St. Nicholas," or "The Night Before Christmas," published in 1823 that transformed this kindly being into the robust character we now read about.

Message Part 2

There are always folks who want to cast doubt on the reality of Santa, and I don't know anything that responds to that doubt better than the classic letter that answered 8-year-old Virginia O'Hanlon's letter in 1897. She wrote this letter to the editor of the New York Sun:

"I am 8 years old. Some of my little friends say there is no Santa Claus. Papa says, 'If you see it in the Sun, it's so.' Please tell me the truth. Is there a Santa Claus?"

The heart of the response she received was this: "Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus. He exists as certainly as love and generosity and devotion exist, and you that they abound and give to your life its highest beauty and joy! Alas! How dreary would be the world if there were no Santa Claus. It would be as dreary as if there were no Virginias. There would be no childlike

faith then, no poetry, no romance, to make tolerable this existence. We should have no enjoyment, except in sense and sight. The eternal light with which childhood fills the world would be extinguished." The letter finished with these words: "No Santa Claus! Thank God! He lives, and he lives forever. A thousand years from now, Virginia, nay, ten times ten thousand years from now, he will continue to make glad the heart of childhood."

I'm well aware that there are some who would like to do away with the story of Santa Claus at Christmas, but I'm not one of them. Keeping the story, while always sharing the greatest story of God's love coming into our world through the birth of Jesus, opens the door of our hearts to the love and generosity that can make this world a better place.

The story of that first Christmas, of the baby being born in a manger is a simple story of a poor family, displaced by the politics of the times, without a place to stay. No one in the inn would make room for the woman who was soon to deliver her baby. The only family gathered around was the woman's husband, and a few smelly animals. There was no bed for the baby to lie in—only the feedbox for the animals. Yet, in spite of it all, God's gift breaks into the world.

Message Part 3

It's a beautiful story of God's love being made real among us, and it's not just a story of something that happened once and is over. Rather, it's a story we can read every year, and be reminded of the loving goodness that's so God. We can open our hearts and be filled with that wonderful gift of love again and again. This is the story of the gift given to us by the Ultimate Gift-Giver—the God of love who keeps on loving us until our hearts burst with that love, and it spills over into love for everyone we encounter. The love we find in Christmas is truly the only gift that keeps on giving.

CLOSING:

As we leave here this morning, and make our final preparations for the birth of Jesus, I hope and pray that we will know the real joy of gift-giving, and I'd like to share with you some final thoughts on the kind of gifts we might all be able to give. These suggestions are based on the thoughts of Oren Arnold.

To our enemies, forgiveness.
To our opponents, tolerance.
To our friends, our hearts.
To our customers, service.
To all, charity and generosity
To every child, a good example
To ourselves, respect

Have a great Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.

