

Sermon – 2nd Advent
Luke 3:1-14
December 9, 2018

“A Letter *from* Santa”

First off, I want to say that ‘yes’, there is a Santa Claus. But first there was a St. Nicholas. Now we’re one in the same. But it’s hard to see what I’ve become. I Nicholas of Myra was born into a wealthy family. My parents died and I inherited everything, then one day I lost all desire to enjoy it. It was as if I heard the voice of one crying in the wilderness...in my wilderness of privilege, saying to me “*prepare the way of the Lord*”. I repented of a way of life, sold all I had and gave my money to the poor. Not much to do after doing that than to become a monk. Pretty soon, they made me a bishop. All of a sudden my old friend wealth returned. It was the church’s wealth, but I controlled it. My approval rating took a quite hit when I did with the church’s gold what I had done with my parent’s...give it away.

December 6th is my “feast day” for which I’m honored, but the big legend - and this is where my trouble began I can see that now, is the night I allegedly tried to save the daughters of a poor man from street prostitution by slipping them some of the church’s gold so he could afford a wedding dowry. I went by night so as not to be noticed - but how was I supposed to know the old man hung his socks by the window to dry every night? As luck would have it or legend insists my three bags of gold tossed in his window landed in his socks! You know the rest of the story. For that act of kindness, I became a saint...Saint Nicholas. But please, remember me for what I was, or tried to be...a simple man who did simple kindnesses in the name of Christ, and not what I’ve become...a symbol of simple excess.

I know this will be hard for you to believe, but in my day, (the 4th century) Christmas was really not that big of a deal. It had little to do with the birth of Christ. It exulted the life he lived. Nowadays Christmas is a very big deal that exults his birth...but seems to have little to do with his life. At least not from where I sit these days – in malls till all hours. And that’s the problem. All I ever wanted to be was a man who spoke and lived on behalf of God. In my day, anyone who did that was called a prophet. What I’ve become is a red suited spokesman booked by merchants from Thanksgiving on to help them do one thing...make a profit. It was the Dutch who took my name, Saint Nicholas, and made it “Sinter Klaus”, patron saint of sailors. By the time my legend reached the shores of America, I became your “Santa Claus”.

Yes, I was a gift giver and I tried to be jolly about it. But I guarantee you I wasn’t big and round. That was Clement Moore’s idea of me. He wrote that poem about me in 1823, and decided my gift giving happened on “*The Night Before Christmas*”. He’d taken a sleigh ride through New York City one cold winter night, and, I’m not making this up, his driver was a big fellow who wore a red coat. Now I’m the one in velvet red with ‘*a tummy that shakes when I laugh like a bowl full of jelly*’

But I ask you, could two “messengers” of Christmas be more dissimilar? John the Baptist said; “*prepare the way of the Lord.*” I say “*prepare a list and some milk and cookies*”. John the Baptist saw Jesus, and said “*he must increase and I must decrease.*” I’m the star of every parade in America from Halloween to New Year’s Day. John the Baptist was by his own admission the messenger of something greater. I, sad to say, have become the message. John didn’t mince words either. He had good news, but it was tough on the ears... ‘*repent, so that you may experience the gracious forgiveness of sins...and be generous to those who need your generosity.*’ John saw how the line between good and evil, right and wrong needed to be fixed, and then we’d be ready to receive a gospel of faults forgiven. I on the other hand send such a mixed message...taking a child on my knee, asking them if they were naughty or nice while never really explaining what those words mean, and the smart kids all know I’ll give them what they want anyway.

John and I have one thing in common at least. The people came to him in droves. But most came to be relieved of their baggage. People come to me to fill their bags. John invites you to the cross, so that you can have your debts forgiven. I leave you a Visa statement 3 pages with no payment due till January. But it's still your debt. This year, listen to John, not me. If you want the Christ of Christmas, John's message must increase, and mine decrease. Because he tells you what you need to hear; that you are in bondage to sin and cannot buy your way out of it. He also points you to the Savior who releases you from that bondage – as a gift.

I wish I could return to my obscure place in history, take with me the Santa Claus I have become, and leave you with the Saint Nicholas I longed to be. That way instead of just good cheer, I could share with you good news. Yes, there once was a Saint Nicholas. But there is and always will be a God of love and mercy, who put your name on a gift and laid him in a manger. The tree would come later. So give gifts to one another, and be joyous about it. A gift warms a person's heart. But it's Jesus who came to be the light of your soul. Remember this as I fade out of sight – listen to John, live like Christ, and you won't just "twinkle" for a season, you'll shine for a lifetime.