

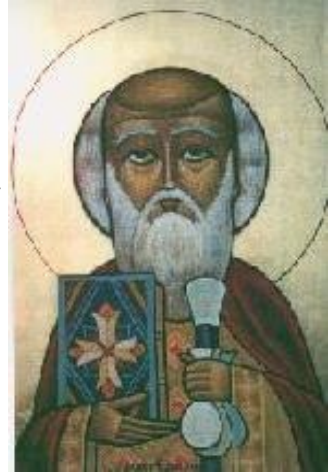
Second Advent Service

Text: Matthew 25:40

Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of Mine, you did it for Me.”

Theme: Meet the Real St. Nicholas

When we think of St. Nicholas, we think of a man who lives at the North Pole. He brings presents to all the good children on Christmas Eve, and drives a sleigh which is pulled by 8 reindeer. That story of St. Nick, came from a poem written in 1823 by Clement Moore for one of his children who was sick. Most of us know the poem very well. It is entitled, “Twas the Night Before Christmas.” The image of Santa which we currently think of as a man who in a red suit with a sack of toys was first depicted by Thomas Nast in *Harper’s Magazine* in 1863. The final versions of Santa came from American Corporations. A human sized version of Santa first appeared in a series of Coca-Cola ads, which were introduced in 1931 with Santa drinking a bottle of Coke. Haddon Sundblom continued to produce those images of Santa for Coke until his retirement in 1969. Rudolph, the ninth reindeer was invented in 1939 by an advertising writer for Montgomery Wards.



That’s the St. Nicholas that we usually think of today. Now meet the real St. Nicholas. He was born in the year 270 AD in the seacoast town of Patara in Asia Minor, which is present day Turkey. His parents were wealthy, but they died in a plague when he was very young. Already at a young age, he was known for a strong faith in his Savior. As he grew older, he traveled and enjoyed using his wealth to help people. When he was nearly 50 years old, he became a pastor. This is where his story really begins.

He became the pastor and bishop of Myra, which is modern Denre, Turkey, a place which is much warmer than the North Pole. He suffered for his faith during the last Roman persecution.. He oppose Arianism, which taught that Jesus was not true God, and was at the council of Nicea which drafted the Nicene Creed. He is also remembered for many deeds of generosity and kindness.

He died on December 6, 342. By then he was well-known and respected by the people of the area. Christians quickly commemorated the day of his death. Many Christians made pilgrimages to his grave in Myra, which led Italian pirates to loot his grave in 1087 and bring his remains to Bari, Italy where a cathedral was built over them. Today about 2,000 churches throughout the world are named after him, and he is the patron saint of Russia, Greece, and many cities throughout the world.

In Holland the Dutch pronounced his name, “Sinter Klaas.” When they came to America, people thought that they were saying, “Santa Claus.” The Germans focused their attention on the Christ Child, whom they called “Krist Kindl.” That sounded like, “Kris Kringle” which was later applied to the Santa Claus legend.

In the 1600's the Puritans made it illegal to mention any saint’s name. It was also forbidden to light

candles, exchange gifts or to sing carols at Christmas. However, as immigrants from Germany, Holland, and other countries came to America, they brought their traditions with regard to St. Nicholas, which have evolved into the Santa Claus that we have today.

What can we learn from St. Nicholas? As a pastor he was known for three things. He suffered persecution for his faith; he stood up for the orthodox faith; and he was kind and generous. In the letters to the seven churches in St. John's Revelation, we see that the devil attacks the church with false teaching, persecution, and a lack of love. St. Nicholas withstood these attacks and faithfully followed His Savior.

I. He didn't deny his Savior in the face of persecution.

The Diocletian persecution was the last of the Roman persecutions against the church. It was also the most severe. It lasted from 303-311. Churches, Bibles, and Christians were burned. A confession of Jesus Christ meant that a person would be imprisoned and possibly executed. Yet Christians continued in their faith, and the church continued to grow in this period. It is said that at the Council of Nicea in 325, every pastor had some sort of mark on his body from beatings or imprisonment from this persecution. Nicholas was one of those who didn't deny his Savior, even though his faith brought suffering. He was like Paul in our epistle lesson, who was in chains because of the Gospel. He was like Elijah in our Old Testament lesson, who was always on the run from King Ahab. He was like the Christians in our Gospel lesson who are hungry, thirsty, homeless, naked, sick, and in prison because of the Gospel. In some ways it's sad that this man, who suffered for his confession of Christ has now become the center of Christmas for so many people, rather than the Lord for whom he suffered.

None of us have gone through a time of such extreme persecution as those Christians in the early 4th century. But there are times when we are ridiculed for our faith, when we are asked to compromise our Christian integrity and morals, and when we are made to feel ashamed of our Savior. Sometimes we almost feel afraid to say that Christmas is about Jesus and His birth today. But Jesus says in Matthew 10:32 Jesus says, *"Whoever confesses me before men, I will also confess him before my Father in heaven."* In Revelation 2:10 Jesus said to Christians, who were suffering persecution, *"Be faithful even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life."* When we think of the riches that we have in Christ, our forgiveness and eternal salvation, we cannot deny Him. The cost of following His never too great, because He is our Lord who will never leave us nor forsake us. He will keep us in His care until He takes us to His everlasting glory in heaven.

II. Nicholas also stood for the truth of the Gospel in the face of false teaching.

The devil never gives Christ's Church a moment of rest. Right after the Diocletian persecution ended, the Arian heresy began. Arias taught that Jesus is like God, but that he isn't true God. He had so many followers, that the Emperor Constantine finally called a council at Nicea. Nicholas and the other bishops wrote the Nicene Creed, which states that Jesus is **"God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, through whom all things were made."**

We are living in such a time today. There is so much false teaching about Jesus. Like Arius many people don't believe that Jesus is the Son of God or they pick and choose what they want to believe from the Bible. But we Christians still believe what Paul wrote in Colossians 2, *"In Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form... When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision*

of your heart, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all of our sins.” (Col. 2:9,13) We Christians want to hold fast to the pure teaching of Jesus Christ as the Son of God who came into this world to take away our sins, because He has given us a new birth as God’s beloved children and made us into God’s heirs by paying for all of our sins on Calvary

III. Nicholas was also known for his generosity and kindness, especially toward children and the poor.

There are a number of stories, which show that he must have been very kind and generous, however some legend has probably been added to most of the stories. The most well-known story is of a poor nobleman, who was unable provide doweries for his 3 beautiful daughters, so he was going to have to abandon them to houses of ill-repute. The good pastor sneaked to the window one night and threw three bags of gold into the house. Later legends say that he threw the bags of gold down the chimney, and that some of the money landed in the stockings that were hung there to dry. There are stories of how he saved sailors and children, and helped a variety of people. The stories describe a kind man who gave gifts to those in need and cared for the needy, especially for children.

Nicholas didn’t do those charitable deeds to earn His salvation. He did them out of thankfulness for the salvation that his Lord gave to him. When the Lord put people in his life who needed help, he gave freely of the blessings that the Lord had given to him. Whenever he did that, it is as Jesus says in our text, as if he were doing it to the Lord Himself.

Because of all that Christ has done for us, we want to follow Nicholas’ example of kindness and generosity. The Lord has given us the greatest treasure of all, our salvation through Jesus Christ, and He has given us so many blessings. The Lord also puts people in our lives who need our help. When you are generous and kind, do it out of thankfulness for all the blessings that God has given to you. When you do so, it is as if you are doing it to the Lord Himself.

Tonight I introduced you to the real St. Nicholas. He was a great servant of the Lord, who centered his life around his faith in Jesus Christ. It’s actually a shame that a man, who served his Lord so faithfully, has become the focus of Christmas for so many people, rather than the Savior whom he served. This Christmas follow the example of St. Nicholas and honor the Savior who came to redeem you. Trust in the greatest Christmas gift of all, God’s gift of His Son for us. And as one of the Lord’s redeemed, follow the example of St. Nicholas and countless other Christians who have gone before us, by sharing the love of Christ with a world which desperately needs His love. Remember those words of Jesus as Nicholas did, *“Whatever you do for the least of these brothers of Mine, you have done it for me.”*

Amen.

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December 8, 2011***