

## 3 Advent, Year A

Isaiah 35:1-10

Psalm 146:4-9

James 5:7-10

Matthew 11:2-11

Today is the third Sunday in Advent, historically known as *Gaudete* Sunday, a day for lightening the load and finding a bit of extra joy.<sup>1</sup> That said, I want to take a little break from the normal pattern of things. Here at St. Anne's we have been immersed in Advent. We have been faithful. We have been hopeful. We have studied the scriptures hard. And along with John the Baptist and all the rest, we have been preparing well for the coming of the King.

But today, I wish to offer something different. Call it a “theological reflection” on someone who is not found in scripture and is not part of the Advent lineup; someone who is often grossly misunderstood and misrepresented; yet someone who is beloved by many and, as legend has it, will be entering many of our homes in just two short weeks. Today, I wish to talk about the ministry of the one they call . . . “Santa Claus.”

When I say “Santa Claus,” let me be clear: I am not speaking as we Episcopalians often do about St. Nicholas, the surly second-century saint from what is now modern-day Turkey. Now don't get me wrong. St. Nicholas was a cool guy. He was a stubborn old bishop who apparently went around rescuing children, performing miracles, and giving gifts. One story even has it that when he was at the Council of Nicea he slapped a heretic in the face!<sup>2</sup> (That's my kind of bishop!) But today, I am talking about Santa . . . the red suit, the white beard, the North Pole, the whole schtick. The reason I want to talk about him is twofold. First, he is already a big part of many of our lives, and perhaps we ought to do some theological thinking about him. Second, I am somewhat convinced that if we slow down and examine who he is, what he does, and how he lives, we might find that Santa Claus has a thing or two to teach us about the love of God and the coming Kingdom of Christ.

For me, it all started when I was four years old, maybe five, and I found myself on Santa's lap at the Valdosta Mall. When he asked me, “What do you want for Christmas, little boy?” I whispered to him—and *only* him—that the thing I wanted most in the whole wide world was an Ewok treehouse. You remember the Ewoks, those little furry guys from *Star Wars: Return of the Jedi*. Truthfully, I had never seen an Ewok treehouse, nor did I have any notion of what an Ewok treehouse might look like. I just figured that if anybody could manage to produce or procure one, it would be this guy. Lo and behold, on Christmas morning when I awoke and stumbled into the living room, what to my



<sup>1</sup> The word *gaudete* is Latin for “rejoice.” In the ancient rite, the liturgy for the third Sunday of Advent began with the words “Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice,” from Philippians 4.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.stnicholascenter.org/pages/bishop-nicholas-loses-his-cool/>

wondering eyes should appear, but an Ewok treehouse, that much was clear. It came with little miniature Ewoks. It had ladders they could climb and a little button you could press to retract the roof. I loved that thing, and for me, it sealed the deal. From that day forward, despite all the best efforts of my cynical cousins and schoolyard friends, I believed.

So, over the years and especially now that I'm older and a father, I have thought a lot about this man we call Santa. I have studied his ministry thoroughly for at least 30 years, and I believe there are five things he teaches us about God, ourselves, and the Christian life.

First of all, I believe Santa Claus teaches us something of what it means to believe in things beyond ourselves. As one writer put it, "He teaches children how to have belief in something they can't see or touch. . . . things you can't measure or even hold in your hand."<sup>3</sup> He does this by being playfully, delightfully elusive. Oh sure, you might catch a glimpse of him here or there—at the big chair in the mall or ringing a bell next to a Salvation Army bucket—but they're always just glimpses. No one's ever really been to the North Pole; no one's ever seen "the other side," so to speak. And of course, he only ever comes once everyone's asleep. It reminds me of how God once told Moses, "You cannot look on me face-to-face, O mortal; you can only catch a glimpse."<sup>4</sup> This is such an important life skill—an important faith skill—especially for children growing up in a world so arrogant as to think that the only stuff worth believing is the stuff you can see. "Faith is the assurance of things hoped for," says the letter to the Hebrews, "the conviction of things not seen."<sup>5</sup> Perhaps our friend Santa shows us something good and important about the value of things "unseen."

Second, Santa Claus teaches us about grace, which comes straight out of his ministry of giving gifts. Unfortunately, there are some misconceptions out there about how all that works, and I'm afraid the whole "naughty and nice list" thing has been blown way out of proportion. The other day I was shopping for Christmas cards, and I found one that spoke to this. On the front was a sour, dour Santa Claus, and on the inside it said, "He saw everything." It's funny, but only because we know or at least hope this is not how Santa really operates. As my friend Melody once said, "Christmas is about getting [and giving] gifts that are completely undeserved, the overflow of an uncontainable love." The truth is, none of us are ever completely on the nice list. None of us ever make it through the year—let alone a season or even a day—without landing on the naughty list at least some of the time. But maybe when it comes to Santa, it's neither the naughty nor the nice that ultimately defines us. Maybe, very simply, we are defined by his love for us. Does that sound familiar? It should. It's called grace. He didn't come up with it, but he ministers it to us in a way from which we could learn a great deal.

Third, I think the ministry of Santa Claus teaches that we don't always get what we want, and that it's okay. Ewok treehouses notwithstanding, the truth is I didn't always get everything I asked for on Christmas morning, and neither, I'm sure, will my children. My guess is the same is true for you, too. There are plenty of reasons why this might be the case, but in the end it's a valuable thing. Sometimes the thing we think we want is not what we truly need. Santa seems to know this, just as God knows this, too. Today's Gospel lesson is a perfect example. John the Baptist, who had prepared the way for Jesus, now sits in prison wondering if Jesus really is the

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<sup>3</sup> Brockenbrough, Martha. <<http://www.cozi.com/live-simply/truth-about-santa>>

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 33:21-23

<sup>5</sup> Hebrews 11:1

Chosen One. One thing's for sure: Jesus is not the fire-and-brimstone Messiah John had been proclaiming and expecting. "Are you really the one, or are we supposed to wait for another?" he asks. "Oh John, John, John," Jesus replies. "The blind are receiving their sight, the lame are walking, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf can hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them."<sup>6</sup> In other words, John, it's not what you wanted; it's not what you asked for; but in the end, isn't it so much better? Maybe Santa knows that our disappointments sometimes have as much to show us about God as our fulfillments do.

Fourth, Santa teaches us to wait in hopeful expectation. If you do not believe me, just spend five minutes with a child between now and December 24. It's all they can talk about. Despite the fact that they've never seen him, that they've never been to the North Pole, that they've never touched an actual reindeer, children have this uncanny knack for preparing their hearts for one who is to come. They talk about him. They draw pictures. They wonder, and they wait, and the waiting is never sorrowful, sour, or glum. It is full of hope, expectation, and joy for a future they can't even see but that they know in their heart of hearts will be good. That is so *totally* what Advent is supposed to be like, though Santa would be the first to remind us that as wonderful as he is, he is not the One for whom our hearts are truly waiting. Ultimately, it is the One beyond him, Jesus our Emmanuel, the Christ of God. What if all of us were able to look, listen, and actively wait for the Kingdom with the same hope and zeal our children bring to their wait for Christmas?

And finally, I believe one of the greatest gifts Santa Claus gives us is the gift of tradition. The gift of formation. The gift of passing on to others what we know, what we have learned, what have come to love as the truth. Knowing that Santa Claus will come to see our children—just as he came to see us, and just as we hope he will see our children's children, and their children, too—might somehow point us to the greater tradition of our faith, to ideas like continuing in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, the breaking of bread, and the prayers. Again, Santa would be quick to remind us that neither he nor his traditions are the *ultimate* tradition, but they point to it and show us something reliable and true about what it means to pass the things most important to us down from generation to generation.

Brothers and sisters, my prayer for you on this third Sunday of Advent—as we continue to make our preparations and await all that is good, holy, and true—is that you may know and share in the spirit of the one they call "Santa Claus"; that you may believe in things unseen; that you may give freely to others just to know the grace of it all; that you may rejoice in the disappointments that lead us to acknowledge our dependence on God alone;<sup>7</sup> that you may know what it means to wait in blessed hope; and that you may have the grace to pass on those things that matter most to those whom you love.

Happy Advent.  
Ho ho ho.  
And Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Matthew 11:4-5

<sup>7</sup> *Book of Common Prayer* 836.