

Keeping the X in Xmas Part 2
Santa Claus and the Gift of Giving
By Pastor Laura Hehner

One of my husband's lifelong dreams has always been to find just the right moment

To walk into a food court, dressed as Jesus, and chase the mall Santa in circles around the shops,

Yelling, "Give me back my holidaaaaaaaaay!"

We almost got a chance when he dressed up as Joseph for the parade.

Pretty close... but... still wasn't the full deal.

Guess we have to wait.

I don't think the reaction would be too bad, though, if that day ever comes.

A lot of people might agree. Give a hand.

So many people think the celebration of Jesus' life has been lost between piles of open boxes and crumpled wrapping paper.

After all, most people celebrate Christmas, right? Regardless of religious background.

...Which only shows how smoothly the holiday seems to sort of run on its own, with or without the spiritual fuel.

It's become almost an American thing, to some, rather than a religious celebration.

Past that, a worldwide, cross-cultural celebration, right?

With or without the reverence.

And a lot of people... they tend to blame the figure of Santa Claus, for this trend, don't they?

Poor guy. Takes alotta heat!

Last week, we looked into a few of the origins of our Christmas traditions;
and we talked about some of the ways we find balance between the holiday and the holy day.

We went into the ways the Christmas celebrations we still keep to this day,
actually came long before our celebration of the birth of Christ on December 25th ...
...these long held traditions founded in the Roman celebration of Saturnalia...
...a two week long revelry---an all out, to-the-walls holiday extravaganza---
---centered on the Winter Solstice.

And in Keeping Christ in Christmas, we also talked about the fact that
“Xmas” is actually not a non-religious version of “Christmas” at all.
---The “X” actually indicating the Greek letter “Chi”,
which is short for the Greek term, meaning “Christ”.
----Simple shorthand used by religious scribes to quickly write Christ,
or Christianity, or Christians, for more than a thousand years.

Today we’ll be moving on to the second part of our Keeping the X in Xmas discussion,
Looking into the ways the figure of Santa Claus,
----Between all of this Roman revelry of the holly, and the greens,
and the eating, and drinking, and merry-making---
---actually winds up being one of the most *Christian* symbols

of our Christmas celebrations.

Like last Sunday, we'll be going into some historical background,

then coming back to a spiritual center,

As we move on from this fourth Sunday of Advent, and into the heart of Christmas Eve.

It's interesting.

When you're younger, in your more emo years, ya sometimes hear people say,

'You believe God is real? May as well believe Santa Claus is real, too...'

Well... this sounds really strange to say from the pulpit,

but the figure of Santa Claus *is* actually quite real in the world,

And past this, all of our stories and myths about him are based---

--yes---on a living, breathing man.

One who existed in the world long before us, but he existed, all the same.

Some of this stuff you guys might already know,

But I also found some fresh facts and a little more detail as I was looking into all of this.

Stuff I'd never heard, but that makes a lot of sense.

This jolly, round, gift-giver in that super comfy-looking suit

Is based on a guy not so heavy---gaunt, actually---maybe jolly, maybe not...

Born in the year 280 CE.

His name was Nicholas, and he was the Bishop of Mira, in Turkey.

---A high ranking spiritual leader in the Catholic Church.

Nicholas was born into a wealthy family, and inherited a lot of money.

Being in the spiritual realm of things, he didn't let it get to his head.

He didn't hoard it. He didn't puff himself up with it.

Instead, he accepted what was given to him, and gave the blessing back,
in as many ways as he could, by giving the money away.

And *one* of the ways he gave that wealth

to help lift up the lives of people other than himself,

Really struck a chord with people, and stayed in people's minds and hearts in a deep
place--

---to be remembered.

There was a family in town facing rough times--

---and in the ancient world, rough times made our *modern* troubles
seem like smooth sailing, right?---

At the beginning of the fourth century, this struggling family had faced enough trouble
to the point where the father was just about to sell his three children---

---his daughters---into prostitution, to make ends meet.

Hearing of this, Nicholas, the Bishop of Mira, put gold into *three bags*,

Then he threw the bags into a window to save the destitute girls
from having to live their lives in grief and pain.

In his kindness and care, he did whatever he could, to make their lives just a little better.

A little smoother. A little more open to the possibility of happiness.

And people remembered this. They loved this. And they respected it.

Nicholas died in the 4th century, and was sainted by the Catholic Church,
 Becoming *Saint Nicholas*----his Catholic Feast Day, celebrated on December 6th.
 Over the years, he became one of the most popular Christian saints
 in the Roman and Greek Orthodox church,
 And people celebrated his Feast with a lot of love,
 giving gifts on this day in December, particularly as a way to honor *children*.

... We see here the foundation of all of these character traits
 in the figure of Santa Claus, right?

Santa Claus' suit is red, and he wears a red hat.

Nicholas was a bishop for the Catholic Church.

And what color are the vestments for that position?

Yep... Red. And what else do bishops wear besides the robe?

Yes, a big, red hat.

Then moving from Saint Nicholas, how did this figure come to be known as Santa Claus?

This comes from the Dutch, actually.

The name Santa Claus comes from the way

the Dutch said the shortened version of Niclaus.

That shorted version of this name? Claus.

The word for Saint: Santa

Saint Claus... Santa Claus.

... Saint Nicholas.

Just some other interesting info, before we move on from here,

How did Saint Nicholas turn into Cris Cringle?

Well, during the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther

(the leader of the split between the Catholic and Protestant Church),

He wanted to do away with all of the celebration around the saints.

He thought it was too paganistic. Too polytheistic.

Considered it idol worship, to an extent.

So he did away with the celebration of these Feast Days for the Saints.

He wanted to do the same for the Feast Day of St. Nicholas in December,

but popular sentiment was too high.

People loved him too much. And they loved this celebration

of the kindness he gave in his life.

So, Luther, in a really strange way, tried to change the traditions around this man's life.

Instead of it being St. Nicholas commemorated in this gift giving,

he wanted to change it around so that it was the Christ Child giving these gifts to people.

Kinda creepy, when you think about it, right?

I just imagine this crawling baby creeping around under trees in the dark.

Anyway, Luther, being from Germany, when saying Christ Child,

in the German Language, these words together resembled the sound,

“Kreest Keendle.”

And from there, the name Chris Cringle evolved.

But it stayed with the image of Saint Nic, instead of the Christ Child.

...Guess other people felt a little creeped out by the idea of the crawling baby, too.
...Just didn't stick.

It's strange the way things work out.

Santa Claus, so often viewed as the thief of the Christian spirit of Christmas,

In reality, being one of the only true Christian symbols

that really made an impression on the way we celebrate the holiday.

Most other stuff comes from the Romans, and their celebration of the Sun God;

While St. Nicholas, a spiritual leader of the early church,

living in the imitation of the love of Christ,

---Through his good will, and acts of life-changing kindness---

He keeps the spirit of Christ alive in the world, as we remember what he did with his life.

And that's what it all comes down to, right?

---In thinking about keeping the holy day in balance with the holiday.

In these traditions, in these acts of giving...

...putting these gifts under the tree for others, what we're doing,

Is we're remembering and lifting up something bigger

than all of these tiny little wrapped up things.

In keeping the Christ in Christmas, what we're celebrating

is the holy act of bringing something new and different to someone's life...

...Something they need. Something they can use,

to make the moments feel just a little warmer.

In kindness and care---we're repeating the acts of the Bishop of Mira,
who himself was repeating the acts of *Christ*---

---By doing something to make people's lives just a little better.

A little smoother. A little more open to the possibility of happiness.

...We're remembering the gift of giving.

And when it comes down to it, in these moments, we're holding holy what it feels like,
to have the company and care of God, in our lives.

God---that Living Spirit inside of us all, which when we grow close to It, when we love
It,

We can so beautifully feel for ourselves this sense of being known.

Of being loved. Of being cared for.

...Whether we're doing well, or find ourselves in a whole heap of modern troubles....

We're remembering the breathtaking surprise of the miracles of God in our lives...

...those startling moments of companionship and guidance

we receive from God so many times from out of nowhere,

Like Joseph experienced in our reading from Matthew,

Like those kids experienced in the kindness of Nicholas.

And like we're so blessed to experience each of the days we're alive and privileged

to know God as our very personal friend and overpowering savior.

So---as entertaining as it would be to see---in keeping the Christ in Christmas,

there's no need to chase down St. Nic in the halls of the mall.

I'd bet if in some strange dimension Jesus and the Bishop of Mira stood in the same place,

They'd probably have a pretty nice time together. Have some nice conversations.

Maybe spend the afternoon volunteering together down at the Denver Rescue Mission.

So let yourself breathe deep in these moments we wrap and unwrap the gifts in front of us.

Keeping the Spirit of God as the center of our celebration,

know those packages are only a tiny symbol

of what it means to give God's love and receive it for ourselves, each day...

Look at those images of that guy in the red robe and red hat,

and remember Nicholas, the Bishop of Mira,

Who taught us that our greatest joy as Christians is to repeat the life of Christ in our own;

And let your soul fill with the fact that when we celebrate, this Christmas Eve,

Christ being born into the world,

What we're celebrating is Christ being born into *us*...

...As we give of ourselves again and again and again, in God's love,

To help make this world just a little warmer, between all of the cold.

Amen.

