

Four Gifts and a Greek Bishop
Christmas Eve Meditation 2014
Colebrook Congregational Church

During the early fourth century, European travelers in the Asia Minor town of Myra, on the southwestern Aegean Sea coast (rephrase?), beheld the local bishop, a respected and reputedly very generous man, riding through the town in a sleigh, to children chanting three syllables: Sant Ni Chlas! To their ears, and over centuries of elisions, this man's name became Santa Claus, but it was really Saint Nicholas. While the vast majority of Saints are canonized after their death, Saint Nicholas was considered such a kind and generous man that he was called Saint during his lifetime.

Saint Nicholas was a Greek, born in Asia Minor, to wealthy parents, in the mid to late third century. He was orphaned by an epidemic, and moved in with an uncle, who was the Bishop of Patara. He lived in a time when Christianity was an outlaw religion and then the state religion of the Roman Empire. By the time of Constantine's victory at Milvian Bridge, he himself was a Bishop, and was invited to the First Council of Nicaea, the very first time an ecumenical council was ever held, representing the whole of Christendom, and for the purpose of attaining consensus of the Christianity's belief, resulting in the First Nicene Creed, summarizing the faith of nearly the entire Christian Church. Santa Claus was one of the signers of that statement of faith!

That is what we concretely know about the man, Saint Nicholas. The rest are the legends and stories of a very kind and generous man ranging from the spectacular to the very plausible. This is called hagiography, the stories associated with the lives of saints.

There is a story with many variations during a famine, where an evil butcher killed tried to do the unthinkable with three children or three clerks or three seminary students, but Saint Nicholas discovered the deed and through prayer brought the three victims back to life.

There are many stories of Saint Nicholas helping sailors. And there is one where he convinced a ship to offload wheat bound for the emperor, enough to

feed the town of Myra, which was experiencing famine again, for two years. When they arrived in Constantinople, the sailors discovered they still had the same amount of wheat as they did when they started their journey.

The most plausible story, in its basic form, because it too has many variations, is how Saint Nicholas anonymously helped three girls with their dowries. There was a poor man who had three daughters and he could not afford proper dowries, which meant that they could not get married, and employment options were rather limited for unwed women in that time. Saint Nicholas heard about this and went to their home one night and threw three purses of gold coins into their window. Remember the bags of chocolate gold coins? Other variations of the story have him dropping the purses down the chimney and the purses landing in stockings drying by the fireplace.

He did stuff like this, giving gifts without looking for fame. He left gold coins in the shoes of good children, and coal for bad children. He gives gifts that see to the short term and material needs of people, but God has given us four gifts in Jesus, that are longer lasting and more spiritual, that we have celebrated during the four Sundays of Advent.

First, God gives us a Gift of Hope. Hope that no matter what happens, if we have faith and follow Jesus, we will be alright in the end.

Then God gives us a Gift of Peace. Jesus gives us peace of mind, that we need not worry if we follow God's Word.

And then God gives us a Gift of Joy. Jesus reminds us to take joy in this world, to make a joyful noise, and to help others find joy as well.

Lastly, God gives us a Gift of Love. Jesus is the embodiment of God's Love for us and we should respond to that love our own love for our neighbors.

As we return to our homes, to our families and loved ones, we should strive to deserve the generosity Saint Nicholas has for the good people, and also remember these four gifts from God that we have in Jesus. Amen.