

Sermon on Luke 3:1-6
2nd Sunday in Advent, St. Nicholas Day, December 6, 2009
Lutheran Church of the Redeemer
By James Erlandson

One thing that we humans are very good at is taking a gift from God and using it for purposes other than what was intended. We so often take what is precious and waste it, what is holy and make it trivial, or what is a blessing and turn it into a curse! Take for example, this blessed season of Advent, a time of preparation for the birth of God's Son Jesus on Christmas, that we have let our retail culture turn into more than a month of frenetic holiday shopping, spending money we don't have on things we don't need (mostly gifts that will likely be returned)! It all started the week of Halloween, when all the Halloween decorations and costumes (which have nothing to do with the holy festival of All Saints, by the way!) were taken down and replaced with Christmas trees, decorations, and holiday toys. Then, as soon as the Thanksgiving turkeys were cleared off the table, many people couldn't even wait until "Black Friday" to head to the store. Thousands left their homes Thanksgiving evening to travel to malls where they could wait in line until the doors were opened for 50% off deals. Those who didn't just left early the next morning to line up at different stores for different deals. By the end of last weekend I imagine that the majority of shoppers were too exhausted to realize that Sunday morning marked the beginning of Advent, four weeks to prepare for the coming of our Lord Jesus into this world and into our hearts. Now, this is not meant as a criticism, necessarily – just an observation! Last Sunday's message to be prepared for the future coming of the Messiah in the clouds to bring peace and justice to the earth was most likely lost on most people, in the aftermath of Black Friday! I know the retail world is busy calculating their profit margins and the fate of Western civilization, while a few of us gather around candles to sing Mary's song of praise at the coming of a savior each Wednesday evening in Advent....

So I guess it's not surprising that John the Baptist's call for repentance this Sunday, for us to purify our hearts for God's coming, is lost in the much more inviting celebration of Saint Nicholas Day! Once again, we humans have taken an inspiring example of a person of faith who long ago displayed compassion for the poor and God's love for all, and turned him into a chubby, costumed elf who rides in a sleigh pulled by flying reindeer to deliver toys to children around the world. Everybody knows about Santa Claus – from a little child in China to Eskimos in Alaska would recognize his picture, but few know anything about the original saint named Nicholas who really lived, so long ago. So let me share with you just this:

The real Nicholas was born sometime in the third century on the far western coast of Turkey, which was then called Asia Minor, in a coastal town called Patara.

His name is Greek for “Victory of the People”, as the region around the Aegean Sea was dominated by Greek culture through Roman times. His parents were wealthy, and raised him as a devout Christian – but they died in an epidemic when he was young. A paternal uncle cared for him, and Nicholas studied Christianity in the nearby city of Myra, where he became a priest. We don’t know a lot more about him, except that he was persecuted, imprisoned and tortured, along with other Christians during the time of Roman Emperor Diocletian in the early fourth century. Nicholas survived, was released and rose to become Bishop of Myra – he even attended the First Council of Nicea in 325 A.D. (where the Nicene Creed originated). He was known as a kind and generous bishop, who cared for the poor and defended those who were falsely accused, and remained popular with the people until the day he died, in 342 A.D. He was buried there in Myra, which later was taken by Islamic invaders along with the rest of Asia Minor. In 1087 some sailors from Bari seized his body and brought it to their city in Italy, where his remains still are buried. Over the years Nicholas’s popularity and generosity resulted in many legends and stories being told about him, and they spread throughout Europe during the Middle Ages. His love for children, care for the poor, and concern for sailors and ships eventually made him the patron saint of children and of sailors. Over time Nicholas became the patron saint of harbor cities in Greece and Italy, and the most revered saint in the Eastern Orthodox Church. Many churches throughout the world commemorate Saint Nicholas today, the 6th of December, especially in Germany, Russia, and the Netherlands. His memory inspired the mythical character “Father Christmas”, and “*Sinterklaas*”, which is a major celebration the evening of December 5th, in the Netherlands and Belgium. He is the inspiration of the main character of Clement Moore’s poem *Twas the Night Before Christmas*, whom children everywhere in America now know as *Santa Claus*. But this character who sits in countless malls listening to children’s requests for Christmas gifts is far removed from the original St. Nicolas.

This afternoon you are invited to a celebration of Saint Nicholas Day with our friends and neighbors from other Lutheran congregations in VIBE, here at Redeemer at 4:00 pm, to hear some of the original stories from Saint Nicholas himself, and enjoy food and fellowship together. It’s fun to commemorate this legendary saint in the traditional way. But one of the ways we best remember the true, original saint – the Bishop Nicholas – is to remember the poor among us today, to be generous in our giving for the poor and hungry. So we ask those attending this afternoon to bring donations of food or warm clothing to share with the community. In the spirit of Saint Nicholas, we invite everyone in this congregation to be kind to children, compassionate to those who are poor, and to be generous in your offerings for the local food shelf and *The Family Place* today, and in the days ahead. And as we raise funds today for a new floor in our church undercroft, where we have fellowship so often and host many community groups

and events, we dare not forget to raise our awareness of the poverty among and around us in our community and world. So let's be generous to both causes! Even if we don't remember the real Saint Nicholas, we can imitate his spirit of generosity and love for others, as lived and taught by our Lord, Jesus Christ.

For just like John the Baptist served as God's messenger, pointing to the coming of Jesus, so the life and ministry of St. Nicholas always pointed to God's Son, who gives life to the world and shows us all how to love. So how do we prepare for Christ's coming, knowing that it goes beyond "just" buying gifts, decorating our homes and trees with lights, baking cookies or other holiday treats? Though there is nothing at all wrong with doing these things, when we get too busy with them we don't have time to listen for God's voice. When we're always rushing around we don't stop to reflect on why we are celebrating. So Advent is a gift from God to all of us – should we accept the gift - in which we can slow down, stop, reflect on the Word of God, and get ready to celebrate the birth of God's Son. Isn't that why you and I are here today? So how can we prepare ourselves when the world around us has so many distractions, calling us to buy this or buy that?

One way is to listen to John the Baptist's message in the gospel, who was a prophet's voice crying in the wilderness, urging us to "prepare the way of the Lord, to make his path straight." John proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, before the Lord comes to "fill every valley, make low every mountain and hill, make straight what is crooked, make smooth all that is rough" in our world and in our lives. That sounds like change to me! And that's exactly what repentance is: change! When we repent we realize that we need to turn our lives around and to walk in new and different ways. To repent means, after all, to literally "turn around"! So Advent is a season of preparation AND repentance, for the coming of God into our lives. For how can we ever prepare without turning our lives and our faces in a new direction, to kneel and repent of what has fallen short in our lives, so that we can stand and face God with honesty and faith?! To realize that all of our chasing after material gain and trying to get ahead has left far too many of God's children behind, and for this we must all repent. So instead of letting the retail world's image of Santa Claus lead us to spend without ceasing, let's look deeper into the faith and action of the real Saint named Nicholas, who loved children and was compassionate and generous to all who suffered – and imitate him! Let's change our pattern of frenetic activity this season before Christmas, and follow the direction of scripture which cautions us to slow down and listen for the voice of God as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ. It doesn't mean that you and I can't cook, bake, decorate, sing carols or give gifts this year – but we should do it without going overboard, and for the right reasons – as joyful acts of love for our loved ones and for our neighbors. May God help us by his grace to do all these things in the Spirit of love and generosity, as God has first loved us! In the name of his blessed son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.