

December 11, 2016

“Santa Chronicles”

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Sermon "Santa Chronicles"

As I said last week, we've developed a god like image around Santa Claus. He rewards for good, and punishes the bad. This mythology, the mythologies surrounding Santa, has permeated our culture. Additionally, our culture has made a religion out of the practice of Christmas with its main prophet and god being Santa Claus. Both the observance of Christmas and the personification of the mythical man in the red suit bear little direct correlation to either the celebration of the birth of the Jesus or the Roman celebration of Saturnalia on which the date was established. There are some loose connections. The celebration of Saturnalia was Roman feast honoring the goddess of agriculture. Its placement in the calendar corresponds with the completion of the winter seed sowing and before the blessings of the fields. The festival included periods of rest and merry making, connections with family and friends, and included prayers for the protection of the crops. The festival was celebrated with candles and fire, greens like holly formed wreaths and garlands which decorated the homes.

Under Roman law, punishment and war making were suspended during the festival. Fruits representing increase and dolls for fertility were given as gifts. There was also the custom of helping the less fortunate with food and small charities. In 336 CE a Christian Rome chose December 25 as the official date of Jesus' birth, as the Queen of England has an official birthday.

From our Christian heritage, we of course have the stories of the Magi or wise men who traveled to honor the birth. In the story, they honor the divine child with tribute as in the time any dignitary would honor any ruler. This is not a tradition of gift giving but a show of respect through tribute. Like with any religion, the religion of Santa Claus comes with its mythology. The historical Saint Nicholas comes from the orthodox Christianity in the east. He became a monk in about 342 CE and eventually an Archbishop. His characteristics for sainthood were his charity to the poor.

On a theological issue, he was an opponent of Arianism which was an early heresy of Unitarianism. He was honored with a church in Constantinople in his honor by the Emperor Justinian. The Russian church that probably brings in the idea of snow, reindeer and sleighs particularly honors him.

Early church legends make him an advocate for children and sailors. In one of these early stories he is said, to have delivered a bag of gold coins for a dowry to a poor family with many daughters by tossing it through a window. As his legend spread through Europe he became a bearer of gifts. As a bearer of gifts, his stories meshed with pagan figures in Romans and German mythology. As a saint, he became known and was called Sankt Nikolaus in Germany and Sinter Klaas in Holland. Both pagan figures were said to ride through the sky on horses. His depiction in German and Dutch culture was as a thin man wearing the robes of a bishop. A figure named Black Peter accompanied him. This elf's job was to whip the unruly and naughty children.

When the reformation came to Germany, the protestant church emphasized the birth of the Christ on the 25th at the expense of St. Nicholas day, which was December 6th. The Christ child or Christkindl evolved into Kriss Kringle. Other European derivation were Pere' Noel in France, Julenisse in Scandinavia and Father Christmas in England.

Meanwhile in America the Reformed Protestantism of New England in the form of congregational church rejected Christmas celebrations as a major holiday.

In 1621 Governor Bradford, one year after landing, when he discovered that some of the colony's new residents were planning to take Christmas day off and ordered them back to work. And in 1659 the General Court of Massachusetts declared that to celebrate Christmas was a criminal offence and until 1681 the criminal was subject to a fine of five shillings. In Puritan and reformation thinking the celebration of Christ's birth was not a biblical event in December but was an arbitrary decision of the Early Catholic Fathers. Which of course it was and their reformed theology was to go back to the bible for authority. They also objected to the medieval partying practices that had grown up around the holiday, referred to as reveling. December had become a month for natural over indulging, all of the harvesting was complete, the stock that was not being kept over the winter had been slaughtered and much needed to be eaten due to lack of

preservation options and the wines and beers brewed in the summer and fall were just starting to come into season. It was these traditions that our Pilgrim forbears rejected in what we imagine as traditional puritan practice.

Santa Claus subsequently developed in the Dutch colony in New York. In the 17th Century the Dutch brought the legend of Sinter Klass and was found in print as St. A. Claus, but the real propagation of Santa Claus began with the popular writers.

Washington Irving detailed the Dutch version of Saint Nicholas. IN 1809 under the pseudonym of Diedrich Knickerbocker, Irvin published the "History of New York" that described Santa Claus and his elf Black Peter on the horseback. This image was further and finally developed into the saintly Nick by Clement Clark Moore in his 1823 poem "the night before Christmas" which you heard. His became the American image with reindeer, and jollity and his elf like appearance and ability to enter homes via chimneys with the little old driver and his miniature sleigh, and eight tiny reindeer. Moore develops Santa Claus as an elf-like being who brings joy especially to children. In Moore's time children were looked at as small adults but in Moore's message we see a more important image of childhood, an image of imagination and wonder. The Unitarian illustrator Thomas Nast further spread the image in Harpers and New Yorker magazine from 1860-1880. One of his pictures fronts today's order of worship.

He added the idea of Santa's workshop and increased Santa to human-size from the elf like creation of Moore's poem. The advertising images by Montgomery Ward and Coca-Cola illustrators finalized the popularizing of the Santa image.

Along with his image our culture was developing his theology or gospel. He is an all-knowing party who knows who is naughty and nice. This follows from the idea of Black Peter. The image is also very masculine and male. His image parallels the idea that D' Vinci put on the Sistine Ceiling as an old white-haired, white bearded patriarch. And as many other religions promises rewards based on the works we perform throughout the year. There is almost the idea of entering of a year's accounting in a book as it is in the practice of Yom Kipper. There is the idea of a negative reward of coal in stockings for those who haven't measured up well. In another poem of the Victorian age we hear the judgment expressed for the future.

"Then holy St. Nicholas! all the year,
Our Books we will love and our parent revere,
From Naughty behavior we'll always refrain,
In hopes that you'll reward us again."

This is the gospel of authority and judgment and culminated on the yearly Day of Judgment as seen in the rewards under the Christmas trees of America. This is in keeping with the Dutch concept of rewards and punishment that is seen depicted in art going back to the 17th century. As the songs points "you'd better watch out. Santa Claus is coming to town.he knows if you've been bad or good-so be good for goodness sake." This gospel is meant for children and has the judgment as a yearly event with the ability of wipe the slate free each year when punishment and reward are meted out. This gospel teaches the preparation of the idea of adult judgment, which is a lifetime judgment. The gospel has further ramifications especially when thinking of economic successes. For those who are not economically able to reward their children there is a personal judgment. This deity of Christmas recognizes the inherent worth of wealth and poverty. This was essential to the Victorian idea of wealth.

In the 19th century it was thought that to be successful in commerce was a divine gift for the successful person. If we look at the era of Vanderbilt's, Rockefellers and Carnegies and what became the social gospel of the era. The theology of the wealth was god given and poverty was likewise ordained.

Looking at the President-elect's cabinet choices we may be entering a second era of the social gospel. In this social gospel, charity and maybe welfare became the reward of the rich for being blessed to care for those who were not as blessed. This theology certainly places the deity of Christmas as favoring those who have succeed in commerce and punishes those whose successes are limited. There are some parallels I fear with today's theological landscapes in the relationship of the poor and the view of the poor as seen in our erosion of the social services by federal funding.

This gospel is maybe more evident in today's commercialism where consumer debt is anticipated to increase in the Christmas season. Our banking institutions depend on this increase for their yearly profits as do our selling institutions.

All perpetrate the theology or gospel of reward for those with money and guilt for those not as successful. This gospel of Santa Claus has affected the growth of Hanukkah into a more gift giving enterprise. These are the shadow sides of the Santa gospel but there are also much that the spirit of Santa Claus nurtures. As I said last week, the Jackson quote, "Your children need your presence more than your presents." The gospel of Santa Claus encourages family oriented celebration. This part of the gospel mirrors the other religions which celebrate in the mid-winter: Ramadan, Hanukkah, the Hindu celebration of light and the Birth of Jesus.

Another very significant dogma of the Santa's Gospel is the public nature of charity. During this season, Santa's gospel of charitable giving is consistent with all the major religions. The use of Santa's example to advertise charity produces much monies for the non-profit agencies that produce good in our world.

This theology is consistent with the year ending and the excess profits or crops would be contributed to the less fortunate. This gospel again goes back to the Victorian idea of the divine blessing being shared when that blessing is seen as a vindication of a certain divine blessing (whether that be education based or individual initiative based) that are received by the elect but are not granted to those who the divine does not bless. What this theology does not imply is that the underprivileged are entitled to a share of success from public coffers. This is a shadow side of these charitable gifts that is part of the dogma of the gospel of Santa.

Please join me in the spirit of meditation and prayer.

If I were to pray to the spirit of Christmas I would pray that the holiday would be a time for peace especially within families and walls of the homes.

If I were to pray to a Santa Claus that traveled the world spreading joy, I would ask him to stop in the middle east and display that as citizens of the world we have more in common with each other than we have differences.

If I were to pray to an elusive sage I would pray that we not sing a song of Christmas until we can hear its message in our hearts.

If I were to pray to the giver of gifts I would pray that the gifts I would receive this year would not be found wrapped in paper under a tree but be wrapped in the quality of new relationships I established.

If I were to pray I would ask that our gifts to the less fortunate would be seen as a responsibility that our blessings give us rather than the result of the blessing of being among the elect. In a world of inequality may we value with less emphasis on economics and place more importance on humanity.

If I were to receive a gift in this Christmas I would ask that we could have a better understanding rather than bigger commercial advantage.

If I were to pray to the all-knowing sage of the north I would pray that my motives in the coming year would be more altruistic than personal and that all good motivations would be seen through the eyes of a less skeptical world, and that as a nation our actions that are just would be seen in that light.

If I were to pray to the great navigator of the winter sky, I would pray for the guidance to find my own true way.

In an ever-evolving and never-ending world, Amen.