



Poland Presbyterian Church

At the Green since 1802

2 Poland Manor
Poland, Ohio 44514
330-757-1547

**A Christmas Eve
December 24, 2015**

**Sermon by Brent J. Eelman
7:00 p.m. Service**

Saving Santa

Tonight we have heard the Christmas story told through Scripture.

We have listened to the visionary words of the Psalmist, that one would come who would judge the peoples with equity and truth, and all the world shall rejoice.

We have heard the powerful words of the prophet Isaiah: "For unto us a child is born, a son given to us; Authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.... And there shall be endless peace."

We have heard the words of the Gospel: "While they were in Bethlehem, the time came for Mary to deliver her child. And she gave birth to a son, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them.

We heard this same story last year... and the year before and the year before. Some of us can repeat it in language of King James. This is the story that has brought us here this evening. It is a story that created this community of faith. It is the story that has been handed from one generation to the next. It is the story of hope that enables many of us to believe that in world, often filled with darkness and evil, we can live and live gloriously. It is a story that says "No!" to the principalities and powers and says "Yes!" to God's love, peace and justice. On one of the shortest days of the year, when evening dwarfs, the daylight, flowers and trees shed their verdant liveliness, we sing the carols of hope: "Come let us adore him. Come let us adore him. Christ the Lord." That is why we are here.

In the spirit of this season, a Sunday School teacher asked the children in her class, "What happens on December 25th?" The unanimous answer was: "That is when Santa brings our presents!" Not the answer she was hoping for, and so she rephrased her question, only to get a similar result. The third try got this response: "Oh yes, Jesus was born on the same day the Santa comes with presents." How does Santa Claus fit into the Biblical message of Christmas? I believe he does.

You might argue with me because for many Santa symbolizes all the things that religious people believe is wrong with our celebration. With his pack of presents, he inspires the gluttony of

consumerism and greed in our children. He seems the very antithesis of this sacred holiday. Yet, ironically, Santa Claus, the true Santa Claus, is more Christian than a number of the symbols we revere.

Santa Claus comes from the Dutch "*Sinter Claus*" or St. Nicholas. When I was child, my father would share stories of growing up on a Dutch Island in the North Sea. I loved to hear the stories of Christmas. *Sinter Claus* would come on the day before St. Nicholas day. There would be treats: often an orange from Spain and a new pair of wooden shoes. But he was not the modern "jolly old elf" that we know. No. He was a bishop of the church.

Do you know the story of St. Nicholas?

St. Nicholas was born in the beginning of the fourth century in what is now Turkey. His parents were very wealthy, but they died during an epidemic when Nicholas was young. Consequently, he inherited a great deal, and obeying the words of Jesus to "sell what you own and give the money to the poor" Nicholas spent his entire inheritance assisting those whom Jesus called the least of these. He dedicated his life to Christ's service and became the Bishop of Myra.

He also willingly suffered for his faith. He was imprisoned by the Emperor Diocletian during one of the great persecutions. After his release he attended the council of Nicaea, which laid the theological foundation for our understanding of the Christian faith. Throughout his life he was known as one who was generous and had a special love for the poor.

There are two legends associated with Nicholas that give an insight into this amazing man. One story tells about how Nicholas saved the lives of three young boys who were about to be butchered by a murderer. Hence, he became the patron saint and protector of children.

The other story is about a poor man with three daughters. He did not have enough money for a dowry, and consequently they could not be married and often that meant that they were destined for slavery. On three different occasions bags of gold appeared that provided a dowry for these young sisters. The bags were thrown through the window and landed in the stockings or shoes that the sisters had laid out by the fire to dry. (now you know where we get the tradition of putting stockings by the fireplace. When I was a child we also received gold covered chocolate coins. These traditions come from the legends of St. Nicholas the Bishop).

This was St. Nicholas: a bishop, a patron of the poor and abused, a churchman. Ironically a 19th century clergyman, the Reverend Clement Moore, is the source of the transformation to our modern Santa. He wrote a clever little poem to amuse his children: "A Visit from St. Nicholas".

"The night before Christmas and all through the house." This poem transformed a bishop of the church into a jolly elf, riding a sleigh, pulled by reindeer. Thomas Nast, the political cartoonist for

Harper's Weekly, drew this St. Nicholas and he appeared as the fat jolly bearded man that we know today, carrying his sack of presents. This is all fun, but these are not the values we celebrate on Christmas. Ironically, St. Nicholas, Bishop of Myra, the original "St Nick" **does** embody the ancient Christmas story.

The Christmas story is one filled with both drama and miracle. It is the drama of an oppressive king, Herod, who killed children to protect his power. It is the story of a young woman, pregnant and unmarried, facing hard consequences and harsh punishment. It is the story of a carpenter, Joseph... the father who was not the father. It is the story of poor shepherds keeping the sheep that probably belonged to a wealthy farmer. It is the story of magi, the learned of the day, seeking to understand the world better and being led to the child. It is a story of hope.

St. Nicholas serves as wonderful example of how we as God's children can respond to the awesome miracle of Christmas. You see, Christmas 2015 occurs in an age when children throughout the world are abused. Some are still sold into slavery. Nicholas, responding to the incarnation of Christ, said "no".... and so should we. Christmas 2015 occurs in a world where women are still oppressed. In some parts of the world they still experience brutal violence in the name of religion. Nicholas responded to the oppression of women by freeing them... and so should we. We need examples of moral courage in the church... individuals who are willing to embody the message of Jesus. St. Nicholas is one of many in history who can serve us as such an example. In no small way, he carried the light of Christ, into the darkness of his world.

In a few minutes we will be lighting our candles as the room darkens. We will sing the carol that tells of the savior's birth. And then, suddenly the lights come on, and we extinguish our candlelight. I leave you with a Christmas eve challenge... After you have extinguished your candle, allow the light of Christ to shine brightly within you, as you leave this sanctuary. Share that light where there is darkness. Follow the example of Nicholas, and the other women and men who had the moral courage to share the bright light of Christ in the darkness of their world. Amen.