**St. Nicholas Sermon Advent Midweek 2 – December 11, 2019**

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

We are only two weeks away from Christmas. By now, you’ve seen lights, you’ve heard Christmas songs, you’ve eaten a few cookies, you’ve watched a few movies, you may have even exchanged a present or two. You’ve read, watched, heard, or even gotten to go see Santa Claus himself. One of the complaints that Christians often voice at this time of year is that Christmas has become too commercialized and too secularized. Far too many people observe the holy day of Christmas without any acknowledgment of Christ at all. This encourages a different mindset about Christmas, that it’s really more about the parties and presents and television specials without any reverence for or meditation on the main focus of Christmas, namely, the incarnation of our Lord, his taking on of our flesh to save us. It almost seems like Santa Claus and Jesus are somehow competing with each other for the very spirit of Christmas itself.

Perhaps, however, this problem can begin to be corrected by understanding where the legend of Santa Claus comes from and the actual historical basis of who he is. Most of us have heard of Santa Claus referred to as St. Nick or St. Nicholas. And, in fact, that’s where the name comes from—*Santa* is a word for *Saint*, and *Claus* is a shortened form in Dutch of the word *Nicholas*. Which brings us tonight to Santa Claus or better put Saint Nicholas, the second of our Saints of Advent, whose particular day of commemoration was last Friday, December 6th.

Nicholas was born into a wealthy family in Asia Minor, what is now Turkey. Having become a Christian, Nicholas chose not to pursue a life of riches, but instead he devoted himself to the Church. He eventually became bishop of a city called Myra. Myra was a rich city but also very corrupt, and Nicholas became well-known for transforming it by his hard work with the people and preaching of the Word of Christ.

St. Nicholas was also known for his love for those in need, such as poor widows and orphaned children. As bishop, he saw to it that the Church worked to care for the needy, a tradition that still continues today not just in Missionary work around the world but also in our local communities. Perhaps his giving of gifts, especially to impoverished children, is part of what formed the Santa Claus we know today.

And there is one famous story in particular about Nicholas that stands out above the rest. There was a man in the city of Myra who had three daughters. But he did not have enough money to provide his daughters with suitable dowries necessary for marriage, and without being able to marry, it was likely they would end up on the streets. Nicholas was deeply troubled about this, and he decided to help, but he chose to do so in a way that wouldn’t draw attention to himself. Evidently taking from his own resources, Nicholas prepared three bags of gold. On three successive nights, St. Nicholas went to this man’s house and threw a bag of gold into an open window—one bag of gold each night for the three daughters, sufficient to provide their dowries. Later, when this story was told in colder regions, Nicholas was portrayed dropping the bags of gold down the chimney.

There are many more accounts of Nicholas helping others. For instance, once there were three men who were falsely accused of a crime and sentenced to death. Nicholas stepped in and spoke in their defense and was able to secure their release and give them their lives back. There are many similar stories of Nicholas helping others, including him helping save sailors who were going to drown. You can imagine that over the years these stories were embellished and exaggerated.

Nicholas was also one who was a defender of the trinitarian faith, someone who proclaimed belief in the one and only true God who is threefold—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

In fact, it is quite possible that St. Nicholas was one of the bishops present at the Council of Nicaea, which defended and confirmed an essential truth about the Trinity—the teaching that Jesus is both true God and true man. It is from this council in AD 325 that we get the Nicene Creed, which we confess together, a longer creed that goes into a closer detail on what it meant that Jesus was in fact both the Son of God and born of the virgin Mary. A certain false preacher named Arius was teaching that Jesus was not of the same substance as the Father, that the Son of God was a created being, godlike but not true God. The Council of Nicaea roundly rejected that heresy and reaffirmed the scriptural position that Jesus is both fully divine and fully human in one undivided person, true God from all eternity. Which is important for us to remember in our own lives especially around Christmas, that we don’t lose this important teaching in our Church now any more than it was threatened back then. To see Jesus, the baby born in Bethlehem, as God himself dwelling among us in the flesh, and as a man who takes on our own weaknesses, our pain, our suffering, and dies in our place.

The fact that St. Nicholas was present at that council is debated, but whether or not Nicholas was present, he was a defender of that faith, faith in Christ the Son of God as the only Savior from sin and death and the devil. Nicholas preached Jesus, baptized people, absolved people of their sins in Jesus’ name, and fed them with the life-giving body and blood of Jesus. This is the real St. Nicholas. He wasn’t a Santa Claus taking attention away from Jesus. He was a preacher drawing everyone’s attention to Jesus. He wasn’t one making a list and checking it twice to see who was naughty and who was nice. For he knew that his people were both sinners and saints at the same time and that all desperately needed Christ’s forgiveness and mercy. By God’s grace, the love of Christ shone forth in St. Nicholas’s preaching and in his life.

We give attention to the generous deeds of Nicholas because that ultimately draws our attention to the infinitely generous love that he himself first received from God. It was that love of God that was working through Nicholas in his life.

After all, just consider his deeds. Nicholas sacrifices and gives of his own resources to save the three daughters. Is that not what Jesus did for us? He sacrificed and gave himself for us to rescue us from being eternally destroyed and given over to death. He redeemed us not with bags of gold or silver, but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death. So it is that we are now worthy and prepared to be his holy bride. Love is sacrifice, a sacrifice of oneself for the sake of others, and this is how we know the love that Jesus has for us, that he gave himself up and died on the cross.

Likewise, Nicholas stood in to defend those facing death, risking his own name and reputation. Is that not what Jesus did and still does for us? He stood between us and eternal death on the cross and thereby kept us from having to suffer a death sentence that we deserve. Furthermore, the Scriptures say that even now Jesus is standing before the Father as our advocate, our intercessor, the one who speaks in our defense, responding to every charge laid against us with the merits of his own blood and righteousness. Through him, we are given the greatest gift we could imagine. Better than any new toy, piece of technology, or stocking stuffer that Santa Claus could ever bring, We are given the gift of freedom from sin, and the curse of death. We are given the gift of life everlasting.

The same love of Christ that was at work in St. Nicholas is also at work in you. For in your Baptism you were crucified with Christ, and you no longer live, but Christ lives in you and through you. The Lord is working in you so that his boundless love, which has been shown to you, might spill over to others in the giving of yourself and in the giving of gifts—not so that you can feel good about yourself or draw attention to yourself, but giving that is anonymous and entirely for the good of others, like a bag of gold through an open window at night. That’s why Christians too, when giving an anonymous gift, might refer to gifts being given by Santa Claus, St. Nicholas. For such a gift is given in a spirit that reflects the love of Christ as Nicholas did, and ultimately it seeks to give glory not to ourselves but to God, who is the true giver of every good and perfect gift.

Indeed, every present that we give is a sign of that greatest gift of all, the Christ Child in the manger—given to us almost anonymously, noticed only by shepherds on that night, recognized and received only by few throughout his life. But hidden within the wrapping of his lowly humanity dwelt all the fullness of our God, who is full of grace and mercy. Jesus is love in the flesh for you. There is no greater present than that.

So is there such a person as Santa Claus? Of course, there is. If you don’t believe in the existence of St. Nicholas, you might as well not believe in the existence of Mary or Joseph or the shepherds or the Wise Men. Is everything you hear about Santa Claus in movies, books, and television true? Well…I’ll let you look into that for yourself. But, like all saints, like all believers who have gone before us, Saint Nicholas would not want us to celebrate, pray to, or worship him tonight, Saint Nicholas would point to the true reason for this season, the birth of Jesus Christ. The life that he now has in Christ, which he celebrates and has with all the Saints we will look at, from Andrew to Nicholas to Thomas. Thank God that St. Nicholas lives. He lives forever because, just like you, he was baptized and he believed in Jesus, who was born, who died and rose for us all.

Amen.

The peace of God which surpasses all human understanding keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus.

Amen.