

Guest Preacher Reverend Mary Conant
Preached at Clayton Valley Presbyterian Church
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Concord, CA

Yes Virginia...

Welcome to Christmas in July. I know that it is 85 degrees outside, we have not seen rain in months, and the last thing you were probably thinking about as you headed off to church on this mid summer Sunday morning was celebrating Christmas.

How many times during the hectic Advent season in November and December have you paused for a moment and thought, "I wish I had the time to savor these feelings; to ponder the real meaning of the birth of the Christ Child."? Or perhaps you thought, "Wouldn't it be nice to capture the Christmas joy and spirit at other times during the year?"

Well, this is your chance! We are not stepping on anybody's theological toes. Scholars do not actually know when Jesus of Nazareth was born --- there is no specific date set in the New Testament. We do know that the early church wanted to convert pagan Romans and there was already a holiday celebrated known as the Invictus Sol --- the birthday of the unconquered sun, S-U-N, as it begins its return after the winter solstice. We also know that the Romans never did order a census in winter, and that the shepherds would not be out in the fields in the dead of winter with their flocks in the freezing cold hills of Judea. And there was also a tradition during that time that a person died on the same day as their conception. If one places the Crucifixion of Jesus on March 25th, then December 25th would have been remembered as his birth date.

The first reference to Christmas actually comes in 354 AD. And it became more important as a feast and celebration day when Charlemagne was crowned Holy Roman Emperor on Christmas Day in the year 800. Let it also be noted that our Protestant forebears were not wild about Christmas as a holiday. My Puritan ancestors banned it in 1647 and it was outlawed in Boston from 1659 through 1681.

If the chronological date is a bit fuzzy down through history, so be it. What matters is the spirit that is generated, the charity that is inspired and the hope to the world in remembering the birth of the Christ Child brings to all of us. So on this hot summer morning, lets continue our celebration of Christmas in July.

Quite often, the Christmas Eve worship is called the service of lessons and carols. The term lesson in the church is not about classroom teaching instruction or an attempt to understand the moral of a story. It is a term used primarily by the Church of England denoting any passage of scripture to

be read during any liturgical service. Except on special occasions like Christmas Eve, there are generally two lessons; the first read from the Hebrew text and the second from the New Testament.

But this is also a service using carols. A carol is just a joyful hymn. For a song to be a carol, it does not have to have anything to do with Christmas --- although that is how we primarily associate the word. But many carols were written to teach a lesson or tell a story.

The carol we just sang, *Good King Wenceslas* technically is not a Christmas carol. If you think about the words we just sang, there is nothing in them about Bethlehem, or Mary and Joseph, or the birth of Baby Jesus. The closest reference that could even be associated with the Christmas holiday is that the Feast of St. Stephen happens to fall on December 26th.

John Neale, an English clergyman, wrote the hymn in the mid 1800's upon hearing stories by the British soldiers returning from Bohemia --- what we now know as the Czech Republic. Neal included the song in a hymnal for children --- to be used as a lesson in teaching the virtue of generosity.

Just as the world was in turmoil at the birth of Jesus...it was also at the time of the tale of this carol. The story of King Wenceslas goes back to the Dark Ages --- the early nine hundreds. A young boy named Wenceslas was heir to the throne of the dukedom of Bohemia where there was a struggle between the authority of Christianity and paganism. The religious struggle was as much a part of the ruling family's politics as it was to the nation. Wenceslas' father was a Christian and his mother followed the old religion. Wenceslas adopted his father's religion while his younger brother Boleslaus, followed his mother's way.

The father, the Duke of Bohemia died when Wenceslas was just fifteen and his mother took over as regent. She banned Christianity, and had the Christian paternal grandmother murdered for her role in converting some of the family members. History has not viewed the mother's leadership to the dukedom in any way positive.

Before Wenceslas legally came of age, he was asked to depose his mother and take the reins of leadership. He did so, with one of his first decisions to make Christianity the state religion. Throughout his reign, he was known as a good, honest and principled young man --- as well as being very popular. Soon he married and a son was born.

The carol we sing is about Wenceslas' understanding that Christian faith needs to be put into action in practical ways. As the legend goes, on Christmas night, Wenceslas saw a poor man gathering fuel. When he asked his page where the man lived...the reply was...a good league hence. For you and me that is 5.5 kilometers or about three and a half miles away.

And so in the cold and the snow, as an expression of their faith, the duke and the page walked those 3.5 miles with their lifesaving gifts of food and fuel to the poor man's home. The young page struggled to keep up in the deep snow with the duke. He managed to keep up by placing his feet in the footprints where Wenceslas had already broken through the snow.

Ultimately, Wenceslas was martyred for his Christian faith...or as the carol puts it...for following in **his** Master's footsteps. His brother Boleslaus, seeing the dukedom slipping away with a new baby heir to the throne, knew that his brother was going to attend church, the very next day on the feast day of St. Stephen. Boleslaus met him there on the steps of the church and took Wenceslas' life.

As many have found before us, the world can be a frightening and dangerous place to try to truly live out the idea of what it might mean to have the Incarnation --- **God with us**. Just as the birth of the Christ Child turned the world upside down, the faithful actions of Wenceslas seemed more than his brother could bear.

God has given us a choice. We can read the lessons and sing the carols --- then ignore them for the rest of the year going our own way. Or we can live the lessons and carols, learn from the lessons and carols and try to make the world a better place.

At the end of the service, you will head out into the hot, bright, sunny day --- not the deep snow on a cold night. Where will your feet take you? In whose footsteps will you follow? Where will your faith take you? I hope it will be where the Christ Child leads you.

This story is about a young man named Nicholas. He was born in the city of Patara in what is now present day Turkey almost 1700 years ago. Because he was born so long ago, there are not a whole lot of actual facts known about this young man. But many, many legends have sprung up around how he practiced his Christian faith.

As a serious and pious young man, Nicholas made a religious pilgrimage to Egypt and Palestine wanting to follow in the actual footsteps of Jesus. Because of his devout Christian faith, he got caught up in the politics of the day, being cast into prison during the persecutions ordered by Roman Emperor Diocletian. He was released from prison when Emperor Constantine came to power and converted the Roman Empire to Christianity.

We do not know a whole lot about Nicholas upon his return to his hometown of Patara until much later. There is a story about a citizen of his town who lost his fortune. Now this citizen, who had three daughters, decided that the only way that the family could survive was to sell his daughters' services to

the "oldest profession in the world". When it came time for the eldest daughter to leave home to create income and Nicholas heard about it, late one night he tossed a bag of gold through an open window --- sparing the daughter. A few years later, he tossed another bag of gold through the window to assist the second daughter.

And finally when it came time to toss the bag of gold to the youngest daughter, Nicholas had a problem. That particular night all the windows of the house were shut down tightly. Not to be deterred on his mission of mercy, Nicholas climbed up on the roof and toss the bag down the chimney.

Nicholas went on to become a saint of the church and a very popular one at that. He is the patron saint of Greece, Russia and Sicily --- as well as unmarried women, travelers, sailors, merchants, bankers, pawnbrokers as well as children. His feast day is celebrated on December 6th.

It is a funny thing about legends and traditions --- over time they change, adapt and bring in new elements to meet the needs of the current day. Over time, in the Netherlands, the practice of giving secret gifts to children on his feast day became a tradition. After the Protestant Reformation in the 1500's --- twelve hundred years after the life of Nicholas --- the idea began to spread all across Europe. In France, he became know as Pere Noel. In England, Father Christmas. For the German Lutherans, Christkindl --- which sounds very similar to Kris Kringle. And of course in the Low Countries, Saint Nicholas is pronounced Sinterklass.

The generous practices of Sinterklass or now anglicized Santa Claus became popular in North America through the Dutch settlers of New Amsterdam which we now know as New York. Dutch Protestants also brought to this country a non Christian tradition of folklore about a magician. The story of this magician was that he punished naughty children and rewarded exemplary ones with presents.

Legends and traditions of the Christmas season are shrouded in the mists of history. Although there are only a few recorded facts, it does not make the feelings and the faith any less real. The power of the Incarnation --- God coming among us --- in the birth of the Christ Child --- is what motivated Nicholas. Sinterklaus --- the giver of gifts, assisting those less fortunate --- making the world a better place by his actions ---- was simply and clearly motivated by being a follower of the Baby of Bethlehem.

In 1897, the son of Baptist minister, Francis P. Church wrote a newspaper editorial in the New York Sun in response to eight year old Virginia O'Hanlon's question, "Please tell me the truth, is there a Santa Claus?" His reply is as if he knew St. Nicholas himself. **"...as certainly as love and generosity and devotion exist, and you know they abound and give to your life its highest beauty and joy."**

For all of you on this warm summer day in July as well as during this upcoming Christmas season and throughout the year --- seek out and meet the needs of a friend, a loved one or a complete stranger --- follow in the example of Wenceslas and Nicholas --- do it in the name of the Christ Child -- with love.

Thanks be to God. AMEN

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