



“A JOYFUL CERTAINTY”

Philippians 1:3-11

Advent 2 C

The Day of Saint Nichols, Bishop of Myra

December 6, 2015

Christ Lutheran Church

Zionsville, Indiana

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You finally get to sit back in your favorite easy chair after a long hard day of work, when the phone suddenly rings. You hear the voice of friend that you have not seen in years. He was just passing through town and wanted to stop by your place for a visit . . . *in about ten minutes!* Your heart begins to pound. Your blood pressure rises. Your palms start to sweat. You know that you cannot say no. You frantically run around throwing things into closets, under furniture and behind the curtains. Then the doorbell rings and you see the dust piled high on the end table!

This frantic scene resembles our society every December. We worry that there will never be enough time to get everything done for Christmas. Then, the church offers the season of Advent. We too prepare for the arrival of Christmas but we do it very differently. For four weeks, we try to be patient, to take our time and to wait. The sanctuary is adorned in blue, the color of hope. We slow things down. We are reluctant to sing the Christmas carols that have blared in the shopping malls since November. We patiently mark the passage of time, lighting one more candle on the Advent Wreath with the passing of each week.

Then we mess it up by talking about the Last Day, when Jesus returns “to judge the living and the dead.”

Today’s Scripture readings remind us that Advent means more than getting ready for Christmas. There is no mention of Christmas. They all speak of the Last Day and God’s final judgment of everyone and everything.

In today’s Gospel, we meet John the Baptist preaching in the wilderness, preparing his world not for Christmas but for the final coming of God. John, like a big bulldozer leveling the mountains, filling in the valleys and making a great super highway in the desert, prepares for the arrival of God who will come and finally set all things right.

The prophet Malachi also speaks of someone coming to prepare for the coming of God. He will be like a “refiner’s fire” and a “fuller’s soap,” burning away the impurities

and washing away the dirt. That preparer turns out to be John the Baptist, whose baptism and fiery preaching gets everyone ready for the arrival of Jesus.

Both of these texts reinforce our popular culture's perception of the Last Day: it is something to fear. You had better be prepared . . . or else!

Several years ago, I came across a hard-hitting poster designed by The Episcopal Ad Project. Aimed at people who had drifted away from the church and were anxious about their future, the ad got my attention. It showed nine men carrying a casket up the stairs of a church for a funeral. Printed over the picture were these words: "*Will it take nine strong men to bring you back to church? . . . The Episcopal Church welcomes you back no matter what condition you are in, but we would prefer to see you breathing.*" I was never quite sure if that was scary or comforting.

I remember as a youth my mother trying to put a little "fear of the Lord" in my heart as she warned me about certain worldly amusements: "What if Jesus returned . . . and you were smoking a cigarette?"

In contrast, there are Paul's words in today's Second Reading. Paul writes confidently concerning the arrival of the Last Day, "the day of Jesus Christ." His words express not fear but a **JOYFUL CERTAINTY** that when Jesus comes, it will be good news.

Paul's words seem even more surprising when you consider the circumstances of this letter. Paul is in prison. His enemies put him there because they despised his preaching and wanted to kill him. You would think that Paul would be afraid.

But not Paul! Even though he is in jail facing death, a **joyful certainty** fills his heart. Even though he is in prison and without a future, even though he has every reason to despair and complain, "Don't you feel sorry for me?" He does not. He continues to cling to the God who has been gracious and merciful to him, who delivered him from his fear and anger. Because Christ has rescued him, he looks forward to that day when Christ comes again and all will be well. He is not concerned about his fate. He is concerned for the Philippians and their lives.

This is what happens when Christ has won our trust. This is what happens when God's promise sweeps us off our feet and captivates our hearts. Even in dire circumstances, even when the future seems dark and forbidding, we do not have to worry about ourselves. Like Paul, with a sense of joyful certainty, we are free to care for others. Instead of always asking, "What's in it for me?" we get to ask, "What can I do for you?"

Today, December 6, is also the day of St. Nicholas. **St. Nicholas, . . . is not Santa Claus.** He was a 4th century leader of the church who loved Jesus and was famous for his generosity. Saint Nicholas Day, here in the first week of December, . . . reminds us that the Season of Advent is about God's generosity in Christ and not . . . a clatter on the

roof, the arrival of a miniature sleigh with eight tiny reindeer and jolly old elf whose belly shakes like jelly.

Today the church remembers a saint who has left an indelible mark on our culture's celebration of Christmas. December 6 marks the death of St. Nicholas, fourth century Bishop of Myra, a city in what is Turkey today. Much of the life of St. Nicholas is layered in legend. Many of the stories associated with his life seem to be more fanciful creations of an admiring church than facts of history. Nevertheless, what we do remember of his life is a big corrective to our culture transformation of St. Nicholas into Santa Claus.

According to tradition, Nicholas was born into a wealthy family. When he became a priest and then a bishop at a young age, he established a reputation for his generosity. However, it was an unusual sort of generosity. He loved to give his money away, often in secret. Why? Because he did not want any credit. Because he did not want anyone to feel obligated to return the favor. Because he wanted his giving to reflect the grace of God in Jesus.

One of the most famous stories associated with the life of St. Nicholas reflects just this sort of secret generosity. In St. Nicholas' town, there were three sisters who were so poor that they had no dowry. They were too poor to marry. In that world, such girls might have to resort to becoming "ladies of the evening." If they remained unmarried, many would have still thought they were engaging in the world's oldest profession, even if it were not true. When Nicholas heard of their plight, he decided to rescue them. On three successive evenings he secretly tosses a bag of gold through the window of their house (another version has him throwing it down the chimney). The gold lands in their shoes (another version has it landing in their stockings). Each daughter now had enough money for a dowry and could marry. Nicholas had saved them from lives of disgrace. That is why today you will see pictures of St. Nicholas carrying three bags of gold at his side. That is how the traditions began of children hanging their stockings by the chimney or putting their shoes by the front door on the night before Christmas.

Even though the life of St. Nicholas is similar to our Santa Claus, at the core it is very different. According to popular tradition, Santa only gives gifts to good little children, depending on whether they have been naughty or nice. Santa's gift giving is either a reward for good behavior or a bribe for better behavior. Such gift giving expects to be recognized and acknowledged. We get irritated if no one offers a "Thank You." We expect gifts to be reciprocated with gifts of equal value.

How different from the giving of St. Nicholas, who gave generously, in secret, anonymously, with no strings attached, never expecting to get anything in return, never seeking a pat on the back . . . just like the gift God gave to this world in the person of His son, Jesus.

Just think of how different our gift giving might be at this time of the year, and even year round for that matter, if it reflected the life and spirit of the original St. Nicholas.

Such giving is possible when we have no worries about the future. When we no longer have to worry whether our last breath will be the next minute, the next hour, the next day, the next week, the next month, the next year, the next decade, the next century, the next millennium, . . . or our next breath, we are free. We can live with a joyful certainty. Because when Jesus finally **comes** to wrap it all up, it will be just like he came the first time: as the baby born in the manger, who grew up to welcome worriers like us, sinners who are always fretting and wringing our hands about tomorrow. Generosity and kindness toward others is not risky or reckless when we have **a joyful certainty** about tomorrow.

Every year I dress up and play St. Nicholas for the children in our pre-school. I tell them about my friend, Santa. However, I also remind them I am not Santa. When they go to visit Santa and sit on his lap, what does he ask them? “What do YOU WANT for Christmas?” However, Saint Nicholas has a very different question for them. “What will YOU GIVE for Christmas?” Saint Nicholas reminds us that we GET TO ask that question not just during December but every month of the year, because we like him live in the joyful certainty that our lives are in the hands of the Babe of Bethlehem.