

Old St. Nick

By Joe Wheeler

Focus on the Family – December 2005

pg. 10-11

I was 12, and I was devastated. OK, I was also naïve, but I believed in Santa until that awful day my classmates mocked me to shame for still believing. I went home and pleaded for my mother to tell me the truth, which she did. I cried myself to sleep that night, not just from shame but also because I felt betrayed.

My mom had meant well, and Santa was one of the most exciting memories of my childhood. She went all out – milk and cookies for Santa, presents and stockings galore. She even stomped around in the attic and told us the sound “must have been Santa’s reindeer landing on the roof.” We were thrilled, and even today the memories are sweet.

But when I found out the truth, I promised I’d never mislead my children. I didn’t want Santa to confuse them. After all, if I told them Santa was real and later admitted he wasn’t, why wouldn’t they question the reality of Christ?

So I refused to pretend Santa was anything more than make-believe. Although we read “The Night Before Christmas” and I let the kids sit on Santa’s lap at the mall, they knew it was just a game.

This, however, was problematic. When my children’s friends talked about believing in Santa, my children self-righteously set them straight, and I got several calls from upset parents. They soon learned to keep it to themselves.

There are no easy answers in a day when Santa is celebrated, almost deified, and Christ is brushed aside as politically incorrect. Because Christ is rightly the focus of our celebration, where does Santa fit? No matter how your family handles the fictional character, I wish I’d known about St. Nicholas, the real man behind the red suit. You might, too.

The real St. Nicholas

There are legends, myths and stories about St. Nicholas – some embellished to unbelievable dimensions – but we do know that Nicholas was born in a province of Asia Minor, most likely during the third century.

History records that Nicholas was a bishop of Myra, a town in Lycia. Accounts say he was persecuted and imprisoned for his faith by Roman Emperor Diocletian, but Nicholas faithfully served the Lord his entire life. After his death, St. Nicholas became a symbol of selfless giving, and by the 1400s, he became one of the most popular nonbiblical figures in the Christian church. Music, art and plays celebrated his unselfish life, and stories continued to grow out of the part he played in history.

Yet, as with many stories of real-live heroes, embellishments began to transform this humble bishop into a super-hero, and St. Nicholas’ legacy became secularized. Through the centuries, he continued to evolve into the popular caricature we know today.

However your family deals with the Santa Claus challenge, the truth of St. Nicholas’ selfless service to the One we celebrate during this season is admirable and worthy of recognition.

The Christian Parents’ Dilemma

There is no escaping Santa Claus during Christmastime. So parents are faced with a choice: Should they disillusion their children by telling them Santa is a fake? Or is a better approach to let

them believe he's real until someone tells them the story is a lie? Stir in society's determination to remove Christ from the Christmas season, and you have a massive parental dilemma.

I suggest we acknowledge the real St. Nicholas – the humble shepherd who ministered to the Lord's sheep – as well as the myths that have stemmed from his story.

Then this Christmas season, focus on the giving nature that St. Nicholas portrayed. For example, during the St. Nicholas season (Nov. 15 to Dec. 6), emulate St. Nicholas' selfless service to others and anonymous giving. During the Advent season (the four weeks before Christmas), emphasize the events leading up to Christ's birth. During Christmastide (the Twelve Days of Christmas), emphasize new beginnings, service for others, the coming of the Magi, and Christ's baptism and ministry on earth. This way your children will learn that St. Nicholas was real, and Santa Claus is make-believe.

Christmas Reclaimed

By Mary Pierce

Focus on the Family – December 2005

pg. 24-25

My friend Nancy called just before Christmas. "Hershey at the baby Jesus!"

Nancy's young children, playing under the Christmas tree with the holiday train and the wooden nativity set, decided to give the baby Jesus a train ride. As the train passed under the nose of their schnauzer, Hershey . . . well, you can imagine the rest.

Nancy's youngest one cried, "How can we have Christmas without Jesus?"

Sadly, it's easy these days. A scan of our cultural landscape shows just how easy Christmas without Jesus is. Turn on the TV after Thanksgiving dinner. You'll find the Grinch and Scrooge, Big Bird and Barney, Dora the Explorer and Bob the Builder mixed in with Santa and the elves. Throw in some jingle-belling plastic trout, a few battery-powered country western Santas and some cheesy made-for TV holiday movie marathons. Get bleary-eyed watching 24 hours of Ralphie and his BB gun and reruns of a half-dozen Scrooges.

If you want to find a nativity or ornament that focuses on Christ, you may have to go to a Christian bookstore to find it. Put it all together, and you've got yourself a North American Christmas. Oops! I mean all-American Winter Holiday.

A hijacked Christmas

The word *Christmas* is now deemed politically incorrect. At some shops, owners and managers forbid retail clerks from wishing anyone a "Merry Christmas," lest Scrooge take his dollars elsewhere. Jesus – the namesake of the celebration – is nowhere to be found.

Christmas has been hijacked, and it's easy to blame media bias. It's easy to blame retailers seeking to be inoffensive for the sake of being profitable. It's easy to blame the politically correct culture police.

It's easy to blame others, but I'm guilty, too. I've been giving away Christmas, surrendering the sacred, one small compromise at a time.

I give it away when I, who inherited from the shepherds the privilege to "go and tell," prefer to shop instead of sharing Christ with my neighbors. I give it away when what amazes me is not the coming of our Savior but a 50-percent-off sale before Christmas. I give it away in my silence, as Christmas concerts and nativity displays are legislated from public life.

I give it away when I get so involved with the holiday hustle that I lose sight of what happened on that silent night, when God entered our reality, assumed humanity in humble, helpless infancy, and reclaimed eternity for us.

His celebration regained

That long-ago and far-away Incarnation is an invitation to our hearts. Here. Today. God will reclaim Christmas, one heart at a time, beginning with mine.

In consecrated imagination, I kneel at the manger. I kiss the infant feet, washing them with tears of joy at His birth and gratitude for His coming for me. I believe Christmas can only be truly celebrated by those who know how much they needed Someone to come for them.

O Come, Immanuel, I pray today. Ransom my captive heart, mourning lonely exile here – buried in the trimmings and the trappings of a secularized season.

Let God's people pray Christ back into our Christmas, into our hearts, into our homes. Let God's redeemed beloved celebrate our Deliverer born in a stable for us, nailed to a Cross for us, triumphing over death for us. Let God's entrusted messengers end our silent surrender and raise our voices to tell the Truth to all who need to hear.

Nancy's little one was right: there is not Christmas without Jesus, and we find Him not at the mall but in the manger. We find Him not in shopping but in worship. And we who've found Him have the joy of telling the poor in spirit, the lost and the broken-hearted that Jesus Christ *is* Christmas.