

St. Nicholas Speaks
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Adapted by Bill Chadwick
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
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*Down the chimney Saint Nicholas came with a bound.
He was dressed all in fur from his head to his foot,
And his clothes were all tarnished with ashes and soot;
A bundle of toys he had flung on his back,
And he looked like a peddler just opening his pack.
His eyes, how they twinkled! His dimples, how merry!
His cheeks were like roses, his nose like a cherry,
His droll little mouth was drawn up like a bow,
And the beard on his chin was as white as the snow.
The stump of his pipe he held tight in his teeth, *
*And the smoke, it encircled his head like a wreath.
He had a broad face and a round little belly,
That shook when he laughed like a bowl full of jelly.*

Ho! Ho! Ho!

Well! Well! Well!

Thus the confusion between your modern idea of Santa Claus and the historic St. Nicholas (points to self)!

"Down the chimney *Saint Nicholas* came with a bound"? Heavens! Your Santa Claus maybe, but I don't do chimneys! Well, there are some stories about my life that do have chimneys *and* stockings hung up to dry. But "a round little belly that shook when he laughed like a bowl full of jelly"? My nickname was "Slim"! And it wasn't used ironically. I was skinny.

You all know about Santa Claus. Let me tell you about me. My name is Nicholas. I was born in the year 270 in the seacoast town of Patara in Asia Minor. That's in the present day country of Turkey. My mother and father were very rich and they raised me in a Christian home. Sadly, they died from a plague, a sickness that spread through the entire area, when I was a little boy. Fortunately, we don't have plagues anymore, so you children don't need to worry.

As I grew older I traveled often and I got into the habit of using my money to help people. When I was nearly 50 years old I took a trip to the Holy Land. I

wanted to see Galilee, Jerusalem, Bethlehem—the places where Jesus walked! During that journey God spoke to my heart and called me to become a pastor in the church. This seemed the best way for me to really help people.

So I returned to a village near my birthplace, a town called Myra. The year was around 320. It was just when they were electing a new bishop and God guided them to elect me. So I became the pastor to people from my hometown, a wonderful honor and blessing to me and I hope a blessing to them.

Now in those days we dressed like this. Today I've noticed your doctors wear green, your police officers wear blue, the delivery men and women in the...what's the funny name?..UPS! trucks wear brown...

Well, this is how ministers dressed in my day to remind people who Christ is. The red bishop's robe is a reminder of the blood of Christ (crosses self). The Lord be praised! My hat is called a miter. It is a symbol of Christ as the helmet of salvation. The stole is a symbol of the yoke of Jesus: "Take my yoke upon you and learn from me," said Jesus.

So, who am I? I am Nicholas of Myra, Turkey. I lived 1700 years ago and I was a pastor of the church of our Lord Jesus Christ.

In my day it was dangerous to be a follower of Jesus. Rome ruled our world. And Diocletian was the emperor. Aye! And he was evil. He said that he was himself a god and ordered everyone to burn incense to his image, to bow before him, and to chant "Diocletian is lord!"

I refused. And I taught my people that only Jesus is Lord. So the emperor had me beaten. He persecuted my people and exiled me, forced me to live away from my flock. Oh!

Then, God be praised! (Crosses himself) Mean old Diocletian died and was replaced by Constantine as emperor! And he became a "Christian" of sorts and he allowed me to return to Myra and to my parish. What joy! What a feast! What worship there was in the church when we met together in God's house! Freedom! I was able to spend the rest of my life with my people.

For 22 years I watched over my church. And during this time the church became my family. You see, I was single, my parents were dead, so I became like a grandfather to the children in my parish. How I loved to gather the children around and tell them the stories of Jesus!

One of my other joys was gift giving. Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive."

Not to brag, but to give you an example to follow: Once a man in my church went bankrupt. That is, his business venture failed and he owed a lot of money. In order to pay his bills he was going to have to sell his three beloved daughters into slavery, a practice quite common in those days. When I heard about it I prayed to God almighty, our provider, collected an offering, and in the dead of night crept past the man's house and threw a bag of gold into an open window!

Well, it seems the little girls had left their freshly washed stockings by the chimney to dry and don't you know that bag of gold landed in a sock! Imagine everyone's surprise the next morning when they were dressing and they found enough money to pay off their debts and keep the family together.

Another time a young lady wanted to marry, but she had no dowry. That is money to pay the groom's family. Without a wedding a young woman in my day would live a life of poverty. Hearing of her plight I gathered some money, climbed on her roof in the black of night, and dropped some gold coins down her chimney. Wouldn't you know it! They fell into her stockings hung to dry by the chimney with care! The next day she found the money, and a wedding was announced right away! Imagine their joy! And because the gift was given in secret there was no one to thank but God!

I hear tell that on Christmas Eve people still hang their stockings by the fireplace in hopes that something good will fall into them by morning!

I, Nicholas, was also a scholar. The church in my day was having trouble deciding what to believe about Jesus and the Bible and the Holy Spirit. So Emperor Constantine called the church leaders to meet in the city of Nicaea, Turkey, in 325 AD. There we decided which books were to be included in the Bible and which were to be left out, a process called canonization. We also summed up our beliefs in a statement now called the Nicene Creed, which begins *I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, begotten of His Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of very God...* That was good and inspired work, if I do say so...

Lest you think that I was perfect, let me hasten to confess that I was a sinner, like everyone else. Once at the Council of Nicaea I got in an argument with another pastor over a point of theology, I so violently disagreed with him that I...well, I punched him in the jaw! For shame! I was arrested and spent the night in jail.

I am very sorry I did it. Such behavior is not Christ's way. He said to love our enemies and pray for them, not punch them!

So, for 22 years I was a pastor—teaching, sharing the gospel, offering communion, baptizing, burying the dead, performing weddings. But all the while, my favorites were always telling the stories of Jesus to the children and gift giving in secret.

I died in the year 342 on December 6. By then I was well known in the area. Many Christians had begun to follow my example and have ministries of their own. It became popular to hold a feast and worship service in my memory on December 6, the anniversary of my death. Why, people would dress up like me, tell the stories of Jesus to little children and often give them gifts.

Some people began to say I was a saint. In 1087 a group of Italian businessmen dug up my bones in Myra and reburied my remains in Bari, Italy. There I am enshrined in the church of San Nichola to this very day. However, in the 1980s the pope, in an ecumenical gesture of good will, gave some of my bones to a Greek Orthodox church in Flushing, New York.

My! My! How things get out of hand. In some places my memory began to overshadow people's devotion to Jesus. Merchants, bankers, sailors, children and especially girls looking for husbands began to look to me for help. The nations of Greece, Russia and Sicily made me their patron saint.

Well, all of this went on and on. Churches were named after me, people hung little pictures of me around their necks for a good luck charm, and people even began to pray to me as if I were God!

Thank God for the reformation that began in Germany in 1531 with Martin Luther and his insistence that Christians use the Bible as a guide for their faith. You see, I was never meant to become more popular than Jesus. Things had clearly gotten out of hand!

The Puritans overreacted. They made it illegal to mention my name! During the 1600s in your country at Christmastime it was decided that Christmas was to be celebrated at home, quietly, soberly. So it was forbidden to light a candle, exchange gifts, sing a carol or make a mince meat pie. But people will celebrate! And if we don't teach them how to sing and feast and dance and make merry before the Lord, then the world will. So, because the church unwisely banned my name, the world took over and secularized my memory.

In England I became Father Christmas. In France I was called Papa Noel. In Russia, I became Father Frost. But in Holland the Christians were stubborn. And they refused to forget the life I lived in Jesus Christ. The Dutch pronounced my name as "Saint Niclaus" which soon became Santa Claus.

In the 1820s a literature professor named Clement Moore wrote a poem for his sick child to cheer him up. It was called "Twas the Night Before Christmas," and it became a major source for your American ideas about Santa Claus. And a major source of confusion.

Santa lives at the North Pole. I came from Turkey. I didn't have little elves to help me. I worked with deacons and elders; much better! I'm not making a list and checking it twice and I'm certainly not going down your chimney!

Today there are many who love Santa Claus so much they forget Jesus. And many people don't even know about me at all. All of these extremes are too much! It's better to remember the real Nicholas. I was a follower of Jesus who lived 1700 years ago. I loved God's people, especially children. And I gave gifts in secret.

I pray that through my story you might see the light and love of Jesus, whose birth we will soon celebrate. God bless you, my children. And merry Christmas!