

The story of St. Nicholas

Brigitte Bechtold (Ministerial Intern, UU Church of Greater Lansing)

December 6, 2020

It is December, the month that carries the theme of stillness, advent, and anticipation. For children in many places around the world it is also a time of expectancy—waiting for the appearance of figures like Santa Claus, Father Christmas, and especially St. Nicholas. St. Nicholas is the relative or the ancestor of many of these figures, and I want to tell you about him today.

There is an actual historical person on whom the St. Nicholas story is based: The Bishop of what is now Myra in Southern Turkey, who died on December 6th in the year 343. Today is December 6th. There are many stories about his benevolent generous deeds. One such story is that he saved children from being sold as slaves, or in some versions of the story as meat, using his own money to buy their freedom. This is not a totally unbelievable story. The Bible is full of admonishments from God that parents should not sacrifice their firstborn or another of their children. And, of course, the story of Isaac in Exodus tells us that sometimes God would condone such sacrifices—or at least act as if. So, such customs were not unheard of. Another deed credited to St. Nicholas is that he paid a dowry for young sisters to prevent their father from selling them as prostitutes. Now, they could enjoy the lesser evil of being placed in a marriage. Is this why he was made a saint? The short answer is, probably not. He had also played a major role at the Council of Nicaea, advocating for a position related to the trinity that is not quite the UU position. Since the middle ages, because of the legends, St. Nicholas day is celebrated on December 6th, to much anticipation of children.

Wait a minute now. St. Nicholas day is celebrated in countries like Germany, The Netherlands, Belgium, and a few others, but not Turkey. How did he make that MOVE? Well, he literally WAS moved. In 1087, a few years before the first Crusade, a group of fishermen stole his relics—meaning the bones that were in his grave—and brought them to Bari, which is near Naples in present-day Italy. St. Nicholas is also known as a patron of sailors. Is this why they stole his bones? Or did he become the patron of sailors AFTER this was done? This is not clear. We do know that the reason St. Nicholas is said to come from SPAIN to children from the low countries (Belgium and the Netherlands) is because his bones were in Italy—because that part of Italy belonged to Spain at the time. We also know that St. Nicholas rivaled the virgin Mary in popularity for centuries and to this day.

Let's look at some traditions and how they relate to OUR Santa Claus.

In Germany, the appearance of Sankt Nikolaus in past centuries was together with a servant, Knecht Ruprecht (meaning servant). Ruprecht looked like a scary sinister person who wore a tattered robe and carried a big sack on his back, in which he would put the naughty children to carry off. Some would just get hit with the switch he also carried. The children spent several days before and especially the night before the 6th in scary anticipation!

Sankt Nikolaus also would appear sometimes with St. Peter, and an angel representing the Christkindl, i.e. the Christ child. In Germany, St. Nikolaus looked a reverend white-haired figure with a huge beard, dressed as a bishop with miter and bishop's staff, and together with his partner, he would visit homes on the evening of the 5th, and ask whether Children were behaving. He carried a book (in which he could double check behavior of

children). Kids would be tested for their behavior and asked to recite poems or sing a song. They would get a gift for doing well. The day thus has become the favorite holiday of all children – it's a gift-giving day. To prepare for the visit, children would tidy their rooms and arrange their toys. Shoes would be polished and set out by the door. Some kids even left a bit of hay or straw for St. Nikolas's Donkey. Children still wake to find, candies, gold coins, and even small gifts on December 6th. The gold coins symbolize those used by St. Nicholas to buy the freedom of the children he rescued and those used for the dowry of the young women.

Gradually, the gift-giving function of St. Nikolaus began to shift to the splendor of the candle-lit Christmas tree and emphasis on the birth of Christ. Knecht Ruprecht became the servant and companion of the Christchild or the Christkindl in German. And this of course became the name of Santa Claus, Kris Kringle. During the Reformation, Martin Luther was adamant that the cult of St. Nikolaus had gotten out of hand and admonished the population that they should only celebrate the Christkindl, i.e. the Christ child during the time of his birth. Where this caught on, Ruprecht first became the servant of the Christkindl then became the patron saint of Christmas and was called "Weihnachtsmann," Father Christmas, or Santa Claus. This explains what we saw in the slide that was shown a few minutes ago: St. Nikolaus with Father Christmas (or Santa Claus) side by side handing out presents. Santa Claus had not yet taken on that rotund persona that is the result of the effort of an American cartoonist.

Meanwhile, in the Low countries, the Netherlands and Belgium, the notion that St. Nicholas or Sinterklaas comes from SPAIN has caught on firmly. What's more he has a flying horse and comes from Spain on a steamboat. You can imagine a bishop with miter and staff, with a horse that can fly to the rooftops so that presents can be placed in chimneys, which he does. This has little to do with Myra in Turkey but is influenced by two other cultures. The first is the Germanic tradition of The Pagan God Wodan or the Norse God Odin who (1) had a long white beard, (2) A flying horse, (3) a long spear (similar to a staff), and (4) a black raven as "helper." The second is the culture surrounding the enormous popularity of Don Quixote in the low countries, as they were under Spanish rule for a long time. The silhouette of St. Nic on his horse with his servant riding a donkey next to him looks almost identical to the silhouette of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza. The helmet of Don Quixote is the miter of the Bishop and his lance is the staff. The Spanish origin of St. Nicholas is also connected to the tradition of giving oranges as presents.

There are social and cultural issues related to the "helper." Many people don't like the idea of having servants. In the U.S. we have solved the problem by having elves in Santa's workshop, and flying reindeer instead of a flying horse. In the Netherlands, due to their colonial history, St. Nicholas's helper, Black Piet, is black-skinned and usually represented by people wearing blackface. This is so incredibly racist that the tradition is rapidly disappearing and Sinterklaas is often just coming by himself. Some cultural historians say that Black Piet is really an anthropomorphized version of Odin's raven, so why not just provide St. Nicholas with a raven? Well, the raven does not always have happy connotations in many cultures, so we will see how the Dutch handle this sensitive issue.

The only thing left to explain is: Why is Santa so rotund while every other ancestor or relative is trim? We can thank one single person for this: Thomas Nast, the German American editorial cartoonist whose drawing of Santa Claus became immensely popular. Nast is also the one who came up with the representation of Republicans as an elephant and Democrats as a donkey. Some people even say that the word nasty is derived

from his name because he had a way of presenting his subjects at their worst. And would you believe that Thomas Nast died on December 7, the day after St. Nicholas Day?

So, we have a tradition of gift giving in December that connects to all these figures. How will we tackle it this December? There will probably be much less exuberant giving of material things to each other. UUA president Susan Frederick Gray has suggested that this season we should concentrate on just being. And this is what the original St Nicholas did with his good deeds: he made it possible for the children, the young women, and the sailors to live, to just BE. We can think about this giving season as a time when we can emulate this kindness, and give the gift of giving, the gift of possibility, making donations to a worthy cause in the name of a loved one, for example, a donation to a food bank, a homeless shelter, a crowd funding to pay tuition or medical bills, or a donation to an international organization like OXFAM. In this giving season, let us think about gifting possibilities.

May we make it so.

Reference:

Handwerk, Brian. "From St. Nicholas to Santa Claus: The Surprising Origins of Kris Kringle." *National Geographic* (December 25, 2018).