

Youth Sunday Sermon preached at Trinity Memorial Church, Philadelphia; By the Rev. Edward G. Rice, Priest-In-Charge; - December 6, 2009; 2nd Advent Year C; Malachi 3:1-4; Canticle 4; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6

To one degree or another, we are all preparing for Christmas. Yesterday this place was full of activity in what used to be called a Christmas Bazaar, more inclusive now. I saw children making Christmas decorations and presents for their parents. I thought the church looked gorgeous and very festive, and I loved seeing all the people, young and old, in this place.

Every year people argue about the best way to prepare for Christmas and what is Christmas about anyway. When I spoke to my ninety-year-old mother yesterday (almost ninety-one now), she said she was starting to make her Christmas cookies. The nursing home she lives in now is letting her use their kitchen. From as long back as I can remember, for much of the month of December she was making one kind of cookie or another. I think she makes about thirty different kinds—some pretty with red and green sprinkles on them, some with chocolate sprinkles, some with peach or raspberry jam on them; some are so sweet they make your teeth hurt, others taste like bitter licorice; some are so soft they almost crumble when you pick them up, some so hard you almost have to smash them with a hammer so you can eat them. I used to drop those in my milk so my parents couldn't see that I didn't eat them. Yuck! One kind of cookie Mom made one day and then didn't cook them until the next. Overnight they are suppose to rise and this little dome forms; the dome is supposed to be shiny, but the temperature has to be just right for that to happen. We spent about five years trying to figure out where we could find that exact temperature. It turned out to be on top of the refrigerator.

The Church seems to think the best way to prepare for Christmas is to read stories about John the Baptist; or John the Baptizer. Do you know anything about him? He was a strange kind of guy.

- He lived out in the desert—some would call it the wilderness—where it was very lonely, very hot, and sort of smelly. That seems pretty strange to me.
 - He wore very funny clothing, even for two-thousand years ago. He wore animal skins, like a sheepskin over his shoulder.
 - And he was on this strange diet. Do you know what he ate? Locusts—grasshoppers—and honey.
- ^a And he called people names: “You hypocrite!” “You sons of snakes.” He picked up stones and said, “These rocks are better people than you are!” I mean, do you think this guy can help you prepare for doing Christmas the right way?

Well, maybe not.

Now in recent years the Church has been saying that perhaps this guy (cutout

of Santa Claus) would be more helpful in preparing for Christmas. Do you know who this guy is?

Santa Claus? Well that is what a lot of people call him. Is he real? Did he ever live? Or (if there are younger children) where does he live? Is this what he really wears? Has he always looked like this?

Well this guy is dressed like the Santa Claus in the 1938 Coca Cola advertisement and he might not be the best person to teach you about what Christmas is suppose to be all about. He only asks you what you want for Christmas. And, though you are very important, Christmas is about more than just you!

So a long time ago there was a Christian minister, a Christian Priest, actually a priest in charge of a whole city in Turkey. You know where the country of Turkey is? He really existed about seventeen hundred years ago. We think he had a long white beard and wore a pointy hat—not like this so much as like a kind of triangle on top of his head, the kind of hat bishops still wear. And he wore a red robe, and carried a shepherd's crook and wore a cross around his neck. Sort of like this. Can you see how he got from this to this?

And how do you think they got the name, Santa Claus? When they don't call this guy "Santa Claus", what do they call him? Have you heard, "Old Saint Nick?" Well, if you round the edges of saint, you get santa and if you shorten Nicholas, you get Claus.

But why do you think the Church is saying that learning about Old Saint Nicholas is a good way of preparing for Christmas? Well, to answer that question you need to know about Old Saint Nicholas.

Old Bishop Nicholas was very rich, he was also very caring. He loved Jesus and wanted to be like Jesus, so he went around helping every one who needed help. He particularly helped those who were too poor to help themselves. There was once a family, a father and three daughters, and they were so poor that the father was sure they would all starve to death. One night Old Bishop Nicholas who had heard how desperate they were, snuck into their house and left a bag of gold at the feet of each daughter as they slept. He also helped little boys, so he is the favorite saint of both boys and girls—and brides and grooms. Because of his help people who were very poor could get married.

He also helped other ministers and people in prison, both thieves and murders. He helped bankers and those who made shoes. He helped travelers and jailers and judges. People who made medicine and those who made perfume. He helped people who brewed beer and made the barrels the beer was kept in. He helped pilgrims, and those who had a husband or wife who died, and those who never got married. He helped everyone who really

needed it.

So here is some information on Saint Nicholas, and on a website you can go to with your parents to learn more about him and all the good he did and why he is remembered. Yup, I think he can teach all of us what Christmas is all about.

He helped everybody who needed help, and that is why in many places around the world the Christmas season starts on December 6th, today, St. Nicholas's Day. In the Name of Jesus Christ Our Lord. Amen.