

From the Holly Jolly to the Holy

Reclaiming the Sacred
During Advent and Christmas

Jim Rosenthal

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PREFACE

I invite you to use this book daily for an Advent journey that will be quite different this year. As you prepare for the abundance of wonder and excitement that is Christmas, you will have as a fellow traveler one of the early saints of the church: Saint Nicholas, Bishop of Myra. His companionship offers an opportunity to transform the “holly jolly” of these days into the “holy, holy, holy”—a time when we all can focus on what—and whom—we should truly celebrate.

As we move through the four weeks of Advent toward the festival of Christmas, we might experience, with the help of Saint Nicholas, a calmer, more peaceful season. We might discover that the gift we seek lies hidden beyond the myriad packages and parcels we crave so much. The witness of Saint Nicholas helping the poor, giving graciously and with humility, can help us reclaim this time as sacred.

My encounter with Saint Nicholas came through my work. For twenty years, in my role as communications officer of the worldwide Anglican Communion, I dealt with bishops of all sorts and conditions, all the time. I saw, sometimes in very hard settings, the importance of bishops who were orthodox in belief,

cared for people in the name of Christ, and communicated the faith with enthusiasm and a persuasive spirit. In my reading about the lives of saints who were bishops, the name Nicholas kept reoccurring. This was the beginning of a relationship that, over the decades, I have seen transform lives from holly-ness to holiness.

Let us join hands with this saint of old and invite Saint Nicholas to be our companion as we seek insights into the mystery of the Word made flesh. Let us attempt to reclaim the sacred and join in singing “Gloria in excelsis Deo” with shepherds, lawyers, teachers, children, doctors, taxi drivers, factory workers, shopkeepers—and all people of good will.

Saint Nicholas’s story can help unleash within us that holy virtue of bringing new life and new hope to people who come our way. As we anticipate the joy of Advent and journey together through Christmas and Epiphany, we have a chance to recapture the holy and reclaim traditions, all to give glory to the blessed Christ Child.

—*Jim Rosenthal*

Facing page: “Look, He Comes,” hymn text by J. M. Rosenthal. Used by permission. Tune: *KALMAR*, Traditional Swedish, 1676. Alternate tune: *Irby* (*Once in Royal David’s City*).

LOOK, HE COMES

Look, he comes, the one expected,
Good Saint Nicholas we see.
With your mitre and your crozier,
Holy Bishop, hear our plea.
Make us all most glad as we
Wait for Christ's nativity.

Look, he comes, the saint of caring,
For the young, the poor, and me.
In his bag, the gifts of plenty,
Children run and shout with glee.
Make us all most glad as we
Wait for Christ's nativity.

Look, he comes, the wonderworker,
Miracles and legends tell
Of a man whose holy living
Speaks of how all shall be well.
Make us all most glad as we
Wait for Christ's nativity.

Look, he goes, in shining splendor,
We are filled with joy and love.
May this feast and celebration
Seal our faith in God above.
Now in Bethlehem we see
Christ—his blest nativity.

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

*The night is far gone, the day is near.
Let us then lay aside the works of darkness
and put on the armor of light.*

— Romans 13:12

The story of Saint Nicholas is part history, part legend, part tradition. We know Nicholas was born in Asia Minor in what is now Turkey in the year 260. His parents were Christians and were successful in their business. They died in a rare plague, sadly while he was still a very young boy, and Nicholas was sent to a nearby religious community, where his uncle served as a priest.

Nicholas inherited the wealth of his merchant parents, but in his new home he quickly learned that not everyone was as lucky. Day by day, he saw people coming to the priests, begging for food, money, and help. The young Nicholas, taught so well by his parents and guided by faith, searched his heart and practiced generosity and empathy in his encounters. These virtues became the foundation of his life and set in motion practices that centuries later still bring hope

and joy to people around the world. Nicholas joyfully “put on the armor of light” and his example encourages us all to do the same.

In a sermon to the Worshipful Company of Parish Clerks, whose patron is Saint Nicholas, Lord George Carey, former Archbishop of Canterbury, said:

Faith, you see, is not intellectual knowledge that leads us in our arrogance to decide for or against God, but is the kind of trust that leads me into a way and style of living that shapes my whole existence. It does not lead to us becoming miserable, joyless people; it does not lead us to losing our friends; it does mean embracing a lifestyle of the love of God and concern for one’s neighbors that is essentially at the heart of the Advent Hope. That, precisely, is the surprising message of Saint Nicholas—that surprise that may turn a baby into a Savior, an obscure fourth-century bishop into Santa Claus—and each one of us into saints of God.

FIRST MONDAY OF ADVENT

*He will also strengthen you to the end,
so that you may be blameless
on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

— 1 Corinthians 1:8

Last Advent, I took a deep breath and made my way to London, to Oxford Street, near where I used to live in a Victorian rectory. Utter madness and chaos reigned on the trip, yet as I rode on the bus, every few feet I saw the word “Christ.” Advertisements, store windows, flyers, and programs all promoted Christmas. I wondered: Do people know that this name signifies a time of special worship in honor of Christ?

I wondered if Christ is even mentioned at the dinners and parties. Yet would we have a birthday party without the guest of honor?

We know there was a birth of the child Jesus. But I suspect we don’t spend much time, even during Advent, thinking about how that birth has (or has not) made a difference in our lives, communities, nations, and the world.

So what can we do? We try harder, I guess.

We can take little steps to reclaim this time as holy. When a clerk wishes us “Happy holidays,” we can respond “Merry Christmas.” We can select cards for family and friends that reflect the divine, ones that lift up Christ instead of reindeers and elves. We can select lovely, religious Advent calendars that reflect a time of holy waiting. Make opening the windows a fun family event accompanied by a traditional Christmas cookie or candy cane. Then explain the image or scripture verse found behind the little door.

As we prepare the way for Jesus’ birth, we should also prepare our own stories of who Jesus is in our lives and what Jesus means to the world. Write down five or six phrases about what Jesus means to you. Share them at a family dinner or with a book club. When people ask if you’re ready for Christmas, tell them how you have readied your heart.



*Ours is a great responsibility
not to waste this Advent time.*

— Edward Hays, *A Pilgrim’s Almanac*

FIRST TUESDAY OF ADVENT

And what I say to you I say to all: “Keep awake.”

— Mark 13:37

Bringing sanity back to the weeks leading up to Christmas is a task for our saintly friend Nicholas. The traditions of Saint Nicholas always point to the focus of the season—namely the Holy Family—and to our expressed Christian vocation to bring joy and concrete help to change people’s lives for good.

According to tradition, Saint Nicholas helped keep three girls from being cast into slavery. In those days, families offered dowries—money, land, or other riches—to a prospective husband in exchange for marrying a daughter.

In the story, a poor man with three daughters does not have any money to offer as a dowry, which means that the girls likely will not marry and may end up being sold into slavery. Saint Nicholas makes a visit to their house, climbing to the roof and tossing a bag of gold down the chimney. The gold lands in their stockings. Saint Nicholas returns the next night and again leaves gold, so the girls might have a dowry and be able to marry.

On the third night, the father of the three girls waits up to learn the identity of the gift bearer. Saint Nicholas arrives and drops the money down the chimney. The man falls to his knees, looks up, and recognizes the man as Nicholas.

When the father expresses his gratitude, Nicholas embraces the man and says, “Thank God, not me. Go in peace.”

Do you recognize in this story some of today’s popular Christmas traditions? There’s the figure on the rooftop who drops gifts down the chimney. There are stockings and even a bit of mystery about the true identity of the gift-giver.

These traditions have their roots in the real person of Saint Nicholas, and it is our job as Christians to reclaim them, to teach our children and others the origins, to recall the saint’s constant witness of joyfully helping others, and to keep awake for opportunities to follow his example in our lives.

You never have to lie to your children. Yes, Virginia—yes, everyone—there is a Santa Claus, and his real name is Saint Nicholas.

FIRST WEDNESDAY OF ADVENT

*In him was life, and the life was
the light of all people.*

— John 1:4

I have never understood why Protestants or even some Episcopalians object to the word Mass as the name of the Eucharist or Holy Communion. Mass comes from the Latin *ite missa est*, the dismissal used at all liturgical churches after Holy Communion. Translated literally, it means “Go forth, you are sent.”

Mass is a gathering of the church community, so when the Mass is over, the call to care, support, love, pray, and be light to all people begins, nourished by Christ’s very presence in the eucharistic bread and wine.

The term Mass appears in some feast days, such as Candlemas (February 2), which marks the presentation of Jesus at the temple, and Michaelmas (September 29), the feast of Saint Michael the Archangel. And, of course, in Christmas.

A dear friend used to argue endlessly, claiming that the name “Christmas” was no longer religious.

The word had been hijacked by marketing gurus and shopping center executives, he said. My response was always the same. “What is December 25 called? Yes, CHRIST-MASS. The day of the Mass—the liturgy of Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem.” Even if people don’t understand the full meaning when they wish someone Merry Christmas, the very word “Christmas” still has at its root the worship of Christ.

I encourage us to reclaim and embrace the word Mass when we are talking about our liturgies and worship services. Perhaps if we use this word more often in our daily vocabulary, people will more readily associate Christmas with Christ’s Mass.



*Take Christ out of Christmas,
and December becomes the bleakest
and most colorless month of the year.*

— A. F. Wells

FIRST THURSDAY OF ADVENT

*He [John] himself was not the light,
but he came to testify to the light.*

— John 1:8

A world of excess and greed has recast Saint Nicholas into a jolly creature whose elves fulfill the wishes of all who make the nice list. Nicholas's new identity creates anxiety for parents and grandparents, desperate to meet the child's cries for the latest gadgets and the hottest toys of the season. Santa Claus, the consummate gift-giver, often takes on a tempter's role and leads many into unnecessary and unhealthy debt.

Is Santa a villain? Of course not! But think how much more meaningful he could be. Instead of waiting until December 25 to see what Santa drops down the chimney, I invite you to consider a change in traditions. What about moving your day of primary gift-giving from Christmas to Saint Nicholas Day? Some countries already do this—and I think this is a wonderful idea!

This keeps Christmas as a time for awe and celebration of the birth of Jesus instead of a mash-up

of “O Little Town of Bethlehem” and “Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer.” Rather than worrying on Christmas Eve about whether you’ve finished wrapping all of your gifts, you would have space and time to reflect upon God’s ultimate gift, our Savior Jesus Christ.

On December 6 then, the feast day for Saint Nicholas, you have an opportunity to follow the good bishop’s example and give gifts to those you love and to people in need in your community. This move is not just about saving money or cutting back on gifts, but rather taking the opportunity to live into Saint Nicholas’s example to give graciously and meet the needs of others.

Saint Nicholas, through his miracles and wonder-working, symbolizes all that is good in giving and in learning how to receive. Naomi Starkey, in her excellent book *Pilgrims to the Manger* (Bible Reading Fellowship, 2010), says, “Saint Nicholas is remembered now because of the generous spirit he embodied, but, rather than simply linking him with seasonal giving, we can reflect on him as an example of one so devoted to serving God that the Spirit coursed through his life unchecked, touching with grace all those he encountered.”