



**S**O HERE'S HOW IT WORKS: A sleigh, pulled by flying reindeer (one of which has a red light-emitting nose), lands on your roof. An obese, pipe-smoking old man with way too much facial hair climbs out. He's wearing a fur-lined velvet suit—a pimptastic red velvet suit, mind you, with a matching hat—and he's lugging around a big sack. He makes sure you're asleep and then sneaks into your house. Supposedly having kept track of your behavior over the past year, he rewards you by depositing gifts into oversize socks. Then he heads to the next house, the next city, the next state, the next country and does the same thing for every child in the world. Over a period of 24 hours.

And everyone's pretty much cool with the whole scenario. Hold a powerful magnifying glass up to a common object, and the familiar becomes strange. Same goes for our Christmas traditions. Look past the familiarity, and the Santa Claus legend sounds bizarre—and I didn't even mention elves, or chimneys, or how Santa finds time to let kids sit in his lap on December 23 in a mall in Boise.

This Santa thing? Weird. Even weirder is the fact that the whole scenario has gotten attached to the story of Jesus. The Creator demeans Himself to enter His creation as a helpless infant, and we celebrate by waiting in line to tell an overweight bearded man to bring us stuff. The North Pole is a long way from Bethlehem. How did we get here?

### THE HISTORY

It's complicated. Like Keith Richards, the Santa legend is ancient, murky and fairly disturbing. The cuddly version—grandfatherly St. Nick employing elfin labor to make toys for the children of the world—is only the latest in a long line of iterations. Santa has evolved.

The original St. Nicholas was a Christian bishop in fourth-century Myra, geographically located in modern-day Turkey. As is appropriate for a saint-to-be, Nicholas was devout from the time he exited the womb. Back then, Wednesdays and Fridays were considered fasting days for Christians, and according to 1887's *A Dictionary of Christian Biography, Literature, Sects and Doctrines*, these were also the days wee little Nicky refused to nurse, on principle. (Like I always say: If there's anything our society could use more of, it's infant piety.)

As an adult, Nicholas gained a reputation as a generous man and the protector of innocents. These saintly traits largely arose from two horrific legends, both of which eventually led to his canonization.

The first is said to have occurred during a terrible famine. A local butcher lured three unsuspecting boys into his shop, killed them and chopped them into pieces, hoping to sell the parts as ham. Nicholas was visiting the afflicted region at the time of the crime. Somehow he became aware of the butcher's wicked deed and hastily reassembled the three boys. They came back to life, a bit salty but otherwise in good health. Despite the happy ending, it's not exactly the kind of story that gets told at the Christmas Eve candlelight service.

In the second legend, a poor citizen of Myra had three daughters, but not enough money to afford a dowry for them. No dowry meant no marriage, and unmarried women in those days generally had one career choice: prostitution. The father was less than thrilled by this possibility, but too proud to ask for help. Nicholas discovered the family's predicament the night before the first daughter came of age. Not wanting to embarrass anyone, he approached the family's house late that night and tossed a bag of gold through an open window. He did the same thing the night before the second daughter came of age. Both gifts were enough to cover the dowry, and both girls were spared the consequence of their poverty.

Before long, the third daughter was ready to marry, and the appreciative father wanted to find out who was behind the gifts. When the time came, he hid next to the window, hoping to catch their anonymous benefactor in the act. Nicholas learned of the father's plan and improvised: Instead of lobbing it through the window, he dropped the third bag of gold down the chimney.

It wasn't long before people began to suspect that the kindly bishop Nicholas, who had inherited money from his affluent parents, was behind

these mysterious actions and a great many other secretive gifts to the poor. After he died of old age on December 6, 343, the people of Myra continued providing for those in need. In fact, they made a practice of giving gifts anonymously, always attributing them to the late Bishop Nicholas. Before long, the bishop—who had worn liturgical robes of red and white—was canonized as a saint. St. Nicholas became venerated as the protector of innocents, the patron saint of children and a secret giver of gifts.

### THE BISHOP OF MYRA IN 2007

Of course, the traditional American idea of Santa Claus originates in the stories surrounding Nicholas of Myra. As far as saints go, St. Nick was especially venerated in the Netherlands, where he became known by the Dutch variant Sinterklaas. When the Dutch came to the New World and settled in New Amsterdam (today's New York City), they brought with them the story of the now-Anglicized "Santa Claus."

And as is our custom, we Americans made the story bigger and gaudier, tacking on details from several unrelated sources. The karmic idea of rewarding good kids and punishing naughty children is rooted in old Norse folk tales. The stuff about the reindeer and Santa's sleigh got added once Clement Moore's poem "Twas the Night Before Christmas" swept the nation in the early 1800s. Decades later, the magazine *Harper's Weekly* commissioned several Thomas Nast engravings that depicted Santa in his workshop, reading letters and checking lists. The legend grew.

And here we are today. Kids leave cookies near the fireplace, parents are careful to preserve boot prints in the ashes and Santa has transitioned into the 21st century. No longer does he oversee the building of simple wooden toys in his elf-staffed workshop. Nope. These days, little boys and girls—whether they're good or bad, or rich or poor—probably expect Santa

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to drop a new iPod Nano in their stocking. Or, at the very least, the *High School Musical 2* DVD. A wooden toy train? Unthinkable.

You gotta feel for St. Nick. The legendary protector of children and distributor of anonymous gifts to the poor has turned into a victim of the worst kind of Western entitlement and consumerism. Kids are more demanding. Chimneys are smaller. Families are leaving skim milk and low-fat cookies. It's hard out there for a right jolly old elf. Somewhere deep within the folds of Santa's suit, we've lost the story of St. Nick.

### THE REAL MEANING OF CHRISTMAS

Many people are advocates for stripping away the Santa Claus stuff at Christmastime and focusing on Jesus. But there's a wide chasm between baby Jesus and Santa Claus, and maybe it's a lot to ask a Christianity-averse culture to make that long journey from one side to the other.

Perhaps a better idea is to move them toward the middle by resurrecting St. Nicholas of Myra. Annoyed with all the Jesus talk? Don't want to celebrate Christ at Christmas? Fine. Then let's celebrate someone else. Let's talk about the fourth-century dude who kept little boys from grisly deaths and kept little girls out of the sex trade. Let's talk about the revered figure who freed those in bondage, who restored life to the lifeless and who refused to overlook the suffering of the innocent. Let's talk about the man of God who gave out of his prosperity, who dispensed grace with no strings attached, who lived to bless those in poverty. Let's talk about St. Nicholas, the Bishop of Myra, Sinterklaas 1.0. Because when we peel away the red robes and silly hat and centuries of tradition, we might just see something that we Christians recognize: the Gospel. It's the face of Jesus. It's hope for the hopeless, liberty for the captives, abundance for the poor. Maybe the distance between the North Pole and Bethlehem isn't so great after all. 📖

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