

**Santa Speaks**  
**by St. Nicholas (aka Rev. D. Eric Elnes)**  
Pass-A-Grille Beach Community Church  
December 22, 2024

*The people who walked in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—  
on them light has shined ...  
For a child has been born for us,  
a son given to us;  
authority rests upon his shoulders,  
and he is named  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*  
- Isaiah 9:2, 6

Greetings, Pass-A-Grille Beach Community Church! It's a privilege to fill in for Pastor Eric this morning as he leads a special Sunday-Before-Christmas service for the elves at the North Pole. My sleigh is getting a last-minute tune-up, so you may have seen me pull up on my motorcycle this morning – the Holly Davidson out back. My dog came with me, too. He looks a lot like Roe, but this one's name is Santa Paws. He loves treats like Roe – especially Mistletoast if you have any. Anyway, it's great to be here. I've been a big fan of yours for a long time – especially your outstanding music program. Though, if I may make a suggestion, I'd like to hear you offer more music by my favorite artist, BeyonSleigh.

Now, let's shift gears for a moment to the heart of why I'm here. Eric asked if I would offer a little background about myself that some of you may not know. I was quite happy to, though I recognized the irony of his request. There was a time when Eric and I were not on speaking terms. I had no problem with him, but he called me a "fat man in a Satan suit" who represents everything wrong with Christmas. To him, I was the embodiment of American consumerism. He accused me of replacing a profound, life-bearing story of Christ's birth with a bunch of silly nonsense about a man who spies on little children, keeping a "Naughty and Nice" list that determines who gets gifts at Christmas and who doesn't. He said that idea perverts everything Jesus came to teach us about God's love and grace.

I agree with Eric on this last point – not the quip about me, but the truth about Jesus and God. God gives good gifts to everyone, not just to good people. You can affirm this truth from personal experience, can't you? If Christ could forgive even his own crucifiers, then he's certainly not going to approve of anyone withholding presents from little children who happen to misbehave. Since Jesus is my Lord, as well as yours, I've never kept a "Naughty and Nice" list. That idea came from a Nordic folk tale about a magician who punished naughty children and rewarded good kids with presents.

I'm a little surprised to see the look on your faces when I just said that Jesus is my Lord just now. You didn't know this? I don't expect my secular friends to know this, but Christians, of all people, should know who I serve. Why, the very color of my suit, as well as Christmas candy canes, are a testimony to the Lord Jesus. Red stands for the blood of Christ. White stands for our sins being washed white as snow.

These days, many of you find this idea of our sins being cleansed through Christ's blood to be an even worse idea than the "Naughty and Nice" list. But that's because you associate Christ's blood with his death. In ancient times, blood was a symbol of life. Christ's blood represents new life He brings to us.

The red and white of Christmas remind us that Christ transforms how we see ourselves and the world. It's not that sin disappears, but its power over us is broken. Our lives become focused on receiving the love and grace God freely gives and giving it away just as freely to others.

The next time you're wondering if someone like you can have a personal relationship with the Holiest of Holy Ones, the Creator of the Universe, the Lord of all Creation, just suck on a candy cane and remember the sweet truth that God prefers relationship over perfection. There's nothing that can separate you from God's love in Christ. That's the message of Jesus. And celebrating the gift of Christ's coming by offering gifts to others is part of what makes Christmas special.

Therefore, Christmas should always be a cheerful time for true believers. Not without a few tears of remorse, of course, given the high price Christ paid to teach us this lesson, but tears of joy as well.

This all may sound a bit preachy to you, but I was once a bishop in real life. Bishop of Myra. That's a little town on the southern coast of what you call Turkey. Gorgeous place. It's got the North Pole all beat to pieces. The Church of St. Nicholas is still there. Lots of people come to celebrate my feast day on December 6<sup>th</sup>. Actually, that's when we used to give presents to children back before anybody decided when to celebrate Christmas.

I was buried in Myra in the fourth century. My sarcophagus is still there in the church, though pirates stole the remains in 1087 and carried them all the way to Bari, Italy. That's the trouble with having precious bones. Nobody gives you any rest! It probably was a lucky break because it made me famous all over Europe. Now, even you have heard of me a thousand years after that theft.

Of course, it's not just precious bones that turned a bishop like me into a worldwide phenomenon. My story, like that of so many of Christ's saints, starts with an experience of suffering.

You know, don't you, that suffering is one of the greatest generators of empathy and compassion for others? The next time you find yourself shaking your fist at the heavens for your suffering, you might want to offer thanks instead – or at least ask God what

good can come of it. You never know how much good can grow from experiences most of us pray will never happen.

The source of my compassion and the generosity that arose from it was suffering intense persecution during the reign of Emperor Diocletian, in the late 3<sup>rd</sup> and early 4<sup>th</sup> century. His reign has gone down in history as the Era of the Martyrs. It was the last and the worst of the great persecutions of Christians under the old Roman Empire.

At that time, I was imprisoned, along with many others. After being beaten, starved, and tortured, it became abundantly clear that our lives would soon come to some horrible end. It didn't matter what we said or if we had done anything wrong. There was no court of appeal. I wasn't so much praying for release as praying that it would soon be over.

Then something miraculous happened. Constantine rose to power, fighting under the banner of Christ with the cross emblazoned on his soldiers' shields – a bold symbol of hope for those long persecuted. Constantine's victories ended Christian persecution, bringing freedom to many, including me.

The passage from Isaiah we read this morning – about people walking in darkness seeing a great light – perfectly describes the moment I stepped out of my prison cell. It felt like Christ was using Constantine to give me and many others a new lease on life.

I wanted to make the most of my remaining days, so I dedicated my life to helping others experience freedom from whatever bondage they were in. The Holy Spirit heard my prayer. Soon, I was sent three young women in my parish who came from some of Myra's most impoverished families. These were good, conscientious young women, yet when I pondered the life ahead of them, my heart ached. Their families were far too poor to provide them with a dowry. This meant they had no hope of ever being married and, in our context, this meant they would most likely end up as prostitutes just trying to survive.

So, I met secretly with each of their fathers. I promised that as soon as they could arrange a proper marriage for their daughters, I would provide the dowry. No one was to know where it came from, primarily because I didn't want any trouble with the archbishop! Of course, in time, the news leaked. And I did find myself in trouble with the archbishop. But he couldn't stop me. I had lost too much fear during the persecutions while awaiting death in my prison cell, even as the archbishop was safely hidden.

Before long, generous supporters were helping me give more and more gifts to those in need. I tried to keep it as quiet for as long as possible. Still, I was getting blamed for every kindness and every miracle that happened to anybody in the whole territory, whether I had anything to do with it or not. That's when my reputation began to spread far and wide.

Within 200 years, Emperor Justinian had built a beautiful church in Constantinople in honor of my ministry of generosity. Eventually, I was named the patron saint of both Russia and Greece!

In the Middle Ages, thousands of churches all over Europe were dedicated to me – or, as I prefer to think, to the generosity and compassion of Christ, for which I stood. The movement to bring down the Berlin Wall started in one of the churches named after me.

Here's a piece of trivia I'll bet you don't know: A number of those churches bearing my name were built in prominent places along the seacoast, becoming landmarks for seafarers. So now I'm also considered the patron saint of sailors and the father of lighthouses!

I must confess, though, that my reputation took a huge hit during the Protestant Reformation. Puritans, in particular, associated me too closely with Catholic traditions and banned Christmas celebrations entirely. Holland, however, kept my story alive as Sinter Claus and carried it to New Amsterdam – what you now call New York. Over time, I regained popularity, catching on big-time in the 19th century. Now, even the children of Puritans are on speaking terms with me again – just like your Interim Minister, Eric.

Well, it's been nice filling in for him today. I'd love to stay and talk with each one of you personally. I really would, but I've got to get back to the North Pole and get ready for the Big Night. If you have any special requests, put them in your prayers. My boss will send word to me of those requests that align with His will. Let me just say to those of you who have genuine compassion that I can always use as much help as I can get. I hope I can count on all of you to help with the true celebration by doing something nice for someone you or others have considered naughty this year. That would make my heart sing – and further help dispel that whole "Naughty and Nice" mythology I've been saddled with.

Oh, and hey, one last thing. In case I haven't made it obvious by now, I want to remind you that Christmas isn't about me – it's about the One who gave the ultimate gift of His life for us, inviting us to live with generosity and love. I hope that living and loving generously is what you want to do, too. I'll stick around long enough for those who want to take an Elfie with me, but let us never forget the real Lord of Christmas.