

“Santa vs. Jesus: Who Gets Your Vote?”
Genesis 2:15-22; 3:1-6
Written by Troy Pribnow
Preached by Troy Pribnow & Rev. Désirée H. Gold
Cottage Grove United Church of Christ
Cottage Grove, Minnesota
Sunday, 26 December, 2010
First Sunday after Christmas

Troy: HAPPY VALENTINE’S DAY!
No? Oh... umm HAPPY NEW YEAR!
Still not right? You mean it’s STILL Christmas?

Désirée: December 26th MAY mean confetti, top hats, noise makers, champagne and even hearts and chocolates, but while corporate and retail America are gearing up for what’s next and clearing out all memory of Christmas, the church is still celebrating, still rejoicing, still praying, still contemplating... still *believing*.

Troy: In the midst of rearranging the house for New Years’ parties, finding places for the new additions to our lives or returning the “not quite right size, shape, color, brand or fit” sweater, we encourage you to hold on to the contemplative and meditative spirits of the Advent and Christmas seasons.

Désirée: We, as Americans, are not a people who like to remember, unless it is done in a sense of reminiscence or nostalgia. We prefer to look forward to the next holiday, test, game or anything else.

Troy: I remember as a child, attending church on a regular basis and especially anticipating Christmas in the church. The meals, the treats, the singing, the story of Mary, Gabriel, and Baby Jesus, the new Christmas clothes which were usually accessorized with a clip-on tie.

Mom would get us kids ready with no small amount of stress, get our hats, mittens & scarves on, drive the whopping three miles to church, then take it all off again. I remember usually finding out what our hymns were for the

Christmas Eve service and that generally dictated my mood for the next hour. After singing, praying, hearing the nativity story again and a LOT of hugging, we would be on our way to Uncle Gunter and Aunt Margaret's house. As soon as we were on the road for the long 4 mile car ride, I was intently searching the sky for that tell-tale red glowing beacon that meant Rudolph and Santa were on duty. I will not lie, I was a selfish child. I wanted the best presents and was pretty obviously unable to accept only clothes or other necessities and my whole Christmas season could be "ruined" by what I didn't get or what someone else *did*.

Does *that* sound like the true spirit of Christmas to you? As I have grown up, I have started to see Christmas for what it really means and being increasingly disturbed by how commercial it has, and continues to, become. I also started seeing the Holy Trinity very similar to Santa with similar purposes and messages.

Désirée: Santa is the epitome of nice and cheery as the "Jolly Old Elf" and Jesus the epitome of calm and quiet grace as the "Lamb of God." They are both "UP," whether it is "Up at the North Pole" or "Up in Heaven." We are told they are both "always watching." Depending on our spiritual health, we look to the spectacular gifts of the season either as being filled with "the Christmas Spirit" or the Holy Spirit. Both Santa and God are often shown as father figures with long beards. They both have many pseudonyms:

Troy: Santa Claus
Désirée: The Father, Son and Holy Spirit
Troy: Father Christmas
Désirée: Prince of Peace
Troy: St. Nicholas
Désirée: Lamb of God
Troy: Kris Kringle
Désirée: Son of Man
Troy: Papa Noel
Désirée: Messiah
Troy: Kanakaloka

Désirée: The Great “I Am”

Troy: It really becomes obvious in Spain, where their name for Santa is “El Niño Jesus,” or “The Baby Jesus.”

Désirée: God and Jesus and Santa all want us to be good to others, do what we can for others and are used to illustrate consequences.

Troy: But why do we seem to put more emphasis on “getting what we want” from Santa in the form of earthly possessions than on receiving the treasures of heaven?

If you do what you should do, what is right, fair and just, Santa will bring you that new doll or toy train. Well nowadays I suppose it’s more like a cell phone or new Wii game. But if you don’t behave, you will get a nice big lump of coal.

Désirée: Spiritually, those toys or games translate into salvation and the kingdom of God and the coal translates into “fire and brimstone.” I guess that coal metaphor seems more appropriate now.

Troy: Judy Spooner of the Washington County Bulletin wrote last year of the history of Santa Claus in America. In the fourth century, St. Nicholas was born to affluent parents, received schooling and went to what is now Turkey to continue his studies. He became a Catholic bishop in the city of Myra. When his parents died, he is said to have given his inheritance away in charity. His reputation as “The Giver” began with a story of three girls that were so poor their father could not afford their dowries and was talking of selling them into slavery to afford the other two. As the girls became marrying age, the family received an anonymous donation. It is said that St. Nicholas dropped the donation down the chimney which fell into the girls’ stockings which were hanging in the fire place to dry. Because of his generous nature, he became what one writer calls “The Patron Saint of Darn Near Everyone.”

Désirée: Spooner continues the history of Santa with a German tradition of Ru Klas, a dark shaggy man who appears with offerings that

hold the promises of plentiful crops. He visits at the winter solstice and heralded the warmth of the coming season. Later, the observance of “Christ’s Mass” begins to incorporate these two traditions. Through the Protestant reformation in the 16th century, the observance of Catholic saints was banned, but St. Nicholas’ tradition slipped through those bans. Protestants suggested that the Christ child be substituted for St. Nicholas, but that led to confusion and a combination of traditions and imagery.

Troy: In 1600s America, the Puritans passed laws banning St. Nicholas and Christmas. That, obviously, didn’t work. What we Americans know as Santa Claus came through all of these different traditions worldwide meeting in our “Great Melting Pot.”

Désirée: The Dutch contributed Sinterclaus, Scandanavians brought Tomte who were gift-giving elves. Germans decorated trees and Irish hung candles in windows. After years of hearing all these different traditions, they merged into one Santa Claus. Later came the “disappearing up the chimney with a finger beside his nose,” the modern image of white-trimmed red suit came from Haddon Sundblom in 1931 who used himself as basis for his annual commercial drawings, mainly for Coca Cola. Spooner concludes her article with this statement “If Santa had not been a legend passed down through generations, we would have invented him.” The part that is a bit confusing is that we were *given* that person, that icon, by God in the form of the Baby Jesus.

Troy: What has made us, as a society, so cynical toward religion that we can raise children who have never known the splendor of God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit by name, but not a child who could not point out Santa in a crowd?

More often than not, we see Christmas movies that look to Santa as the performer of the proverbial “Christmas Miracle.” Where did we go wrong that we can get more people to believe in a “magical being” who lives in the North Pole, employs elves to make original toys and travels by

nine flying reindeer, one of whom has a genetic headlight than people who believe in the original miracle workers of God & Jesus?

Désirée: Not to mention that people, for the most part, will allow someone to believe in Santa, but will ask for proof of God and Jesus in our daily lives. It's almost as if "Clausianity" is a religion.

As we grow up, we measure our maturity by the ability or inability to grasp whether or not something is "real." "You *still* believe in Santa Claus?" becomes a taunt of classmates at a certain age. As though believing in something or someone who brings joy to our hearts, amazement to our eyes and peace to our souls is a *bad* thing.

Troy: I hypothesize that we more enjoy a notion of Santa because of how we are wired as human beings. We, especially in America, crave and often receive, instant fulfillment. In a world of fast food joints on most corners or within a few minute drive, sitcoms that provide answers to all of life's problems in twenty-two minutes, twenty-four hour gas stations, super markets and discount stores we are able to feed every craving, every indiscretion, every addiction at any moment of any day. We have become a society of "What have you done for me lately?" Americans even prefer football over soccer because *SOMETHING* happens every play. Our fast-paced minds prefer the instant gratification of the "fourth and two" situation over the hours of no or low scoring soccer.

Désirée: Americans do take it to the extreme more often than not, but we are not the only, nor the first people to do this. This is a story as old as creation. Adam and Eve seemed to have it when so easily enticed by the serpent. What God created for them wasn't enough; they needed to have God's knowledge, too.

In Exodus, the Israelites weren't content with the many miracles God performed through Moses. When the going got rough or God seemed not to be with them, they erected a golden calf idol

to worship. Something they could see and touch; something that was always in sight.

Troy: God is always present whether we acknowledge or recognize that presence. Jesus returns to our lives not just at Christmastime, not just with miraculous affirmation, but daily, hourly, even minute-by-minute. As Christians, we are called to help people see that God *IS* still present.

Désirée: And, speaking of presents, we are called to show through Jesus Christ that people need our love, compassion and presents on every day of year. The 30 below wind chill is as deadly to the homeless of our communities as the 110 degree-high humidity of July. Families like the Christophersons need help on May 17th as much as on December 25th. Yes, there are times of the year that make it seem easier to give to those less fortunate. Those gifts do not go unnoticed or unappreciated. However, it is our responsibility, nay, our duty to carry the peace, love, kindness and generosity through all 365 and one-fourth days of the year.

Troy: With that helping spirit of generosity, we cannot force our views on others, we cannot judge others for celebrating Santa at this time of year just as we do not want to be judged for following Jesus and God any other day, but we can *inform* those who are unfamiliar with Christian tradition or who have lost their way in the church. We have talked about many comparisons today and to help others see what we see, we can further illustrate the comparisons between Jesus' arrival and Santa by considering the lyrics of some common Christmas carols.

Désirée: What child is this who, laid to rest in Mary's lap, is sleeping?

Troy: Jolly Old Saint Nicholas, lean your ear this way. Choose for me Old Santa Claus, what you think is right

Désirée: The thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices. For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn.

Troy: Up on the housetop reindeer pause, Out jumps good old Santa Claus. Down thru' the chimney with lots of toys, All for the little ones, Christmas joys.

Désirée: Light and life to all he brings, Risen with healing in his wings,
Mild he lays his glory by, Born that man no more may die: Born
to raise the son of earth, Born to give them second birth.

Troy: He's making a list, checking it twice, gonna find out who's naughty and nice

Désirée: Joy to the world, the Lord has come. Let earth receive her king.
Let every heart prepare His room and Heaven and nature sing.

Troy: When all is said and done, yes, there are definite similarities, both intentional and imagined. But there are also very important differences. Santa brings goodies and toys, Jesus helps rebuild homes, lives and futures. Santa comes down your chimney, but Jesus stands at your door, knocks and enters your heart when invited. Santa's belly that shakes like a bowl full of jelly cannot compare to Jesus' heart full of love and compassion. Santa says "You better not cry" while Jesus invites us to "Come to (Him), all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and (He) will give you rest."

Désirée: Christmas comes once a year, Santa comes once a year. God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit are ever present. Let us pray on that true gift to all.