

8:30 a.m. Sermon December 6, 2009

In the name of God...

Yesterday I went to a 5 hour African Pentecostal service. It was a mixture of eating together, dancing, singing, praise, witnessing, preaching, gift-giving, sharing, and yes, speaking in tongues. As an Episcopalian, and the only white woman in the room, I was definitely outside of my comfort zone. Yet God was surely present in that place. It reminded me of how broad and beautiful the Kingdom of God really is. It is much larger than my little world and includes all kinds of people!

The preacher at this church spoke for about an hour and a half. Fortunately for all of us, I will not go on that long today. Her sermon had many good stories and points, but one large focus was on forgiveness. She is from Nigeria. In one of her stories she spoke about a big rift in the family over money. It involved a law suit and in the end, her aunt received a large settlement and no one else in the family received anything. There was lots of anger and alienation and no one spoke to each other for several years. But one day this woman felt called by God to heal the relationship. So she filled her car with groceries and showed up at her aunt's house bearing these gifts, and they fell into each other's arms, crying. There was repentance and healing for both of them. They each forgave the other and so were reconciled to each other.

Reconciliation and repentance are the themes we hear about with John the Baptist in the Gospel.

But first I wanted to talk about St. Nicholas. December 6th is the day we celebrate St. Nicholas of Myra. St. Nicholas lived in the 4th century and Myra is located in what is now modern day Turkey. He was a good man who helped people in trouble, and gave gifts of money to those in need. Over the centuries people began to give him a nick name - "Santa Claus". "Santa" comes from the word "Saint", and "Claus" is a shorten form for "Nicholas."

In many parts of the world, Santa Claus doesn't fill your stocking on Christmas Eve, but instead fills your shoe on the night of December 5th, so you wake up on the 6th you find your shoe filled with candy and small gifts. That is because today is his feast day, St. Nicholas Day.

Who knows the words to the song?

He's making a list, checking it twice, (gonna find out whose naughty or nice,) He knows if you've been bad or good, (so be good for goodness sake!). Now, these words aren't true about St. Nicholas, but they have come to be true about Santa. We are warned to be good, or we will be in trouble. It sounds a little bit like our gospel lesson.

Who did we read about in the gospel today? Hint: he baptized Jesus.

Today we read about John the Baptist. He said, "You'd better watch out. God is coming to town." It sounds like Santa "be good, or you will be in trouble." But actually, it isn't. Sometimes we think God is like Santa. "Be good or you will be in trouble." What John the Baptist actually says is, "Get ready for the Messiah. I know no one has been completely good, so if you have been bad, come get baptized and say you are sorry and you will be forgiven." The modern commercial Santa in cartoons doesn't seem to allow for forgiveness in the way that God does. John was preaching repentance and reconciliation.

With God, you don't have to worry if you've been bad. He knows who's been naughty or nice, but that doesn't mean you will get coal in your stocking. Say you are sorry and try to do better, and you will be ready when Jesus arrives on Christmas, and every day. Amen.