

The Advent Saint
Isaiah 11:1-9
November 29, 2009

The season of Advent is a time of waiting. When we think of waiting, we think of waiting in line at the post office to mail a package or buy stamps. We wait in the car on a long drive to reach our destination, often asking, “Are we there yet?”

There is a man known as the Advent saint who teaches us what waiting through this season of Advent is about. He teaches us that we are to actively wait for Jesus to come by quietly doing things for people in need. Listen to his story.

A very long time ago, during the last half of the third century, a devout Christian couple lived in Patara, an important port on the Mediterranean Sea in Asia Minor (now in modern Turkey). This is one of the cities Paul had visited while he was on his missionary journeys (Acts 21:1).

Theophanes and Nonna rejoiced when their son Nicholas was born. They chose his name in honor of the child’s uncle, who was a priest named Nicholas. This uncle was the abbot of a nearby monastery. It is also a biblical name, for a man named Nicholas was one of the first chosen to serve as a deacon in Jerusalem (Acts 6:5).

Nicholas was taught by a local teacher, studying the classical subjects of the time. He liked to visit the monastery where his uncle lived. There he joined in the daily worship, chanting prayers with the monks. He learned to love and serve God from his parents and his friends the monks.

Sadly Nicholas’ parents died of the plague when he was a teenager. He went to live with his Uncle Nicholas and the other monks of the monastery. His parents left him a large inheritance of money.

There was a once rich man who fell on hard times. Now poor, he had three daughters who were old enough to be married. In those days a young woman’s family had to have something of value, called a dowry, to offer prospective bridegrooms. The larger the dowry, the better the chance a young woman would find a good husband. Without a dowry, a woman was unlikely to marry. Without any money, this poor man’s daughters might be sold into slavery, or worse.

Word of the family’s misfortune reached Nicholas. Using part of the money received from his parents, he secretly went to the family’s home at night. He tossed a bag of gold through an open window and it landed in a stocking left before the fire to dry. What joy in the morning when the bag of gold was discovered! The first daughter was soon married.

Not long after, another bag of gold mysteriously appeared. The second daughter was married. The father, now very curious to know who the secret gift-giver was, kept watch during the night.

A third bag of gold landed inside the house and the watchful father leaped up and caught the fleeing donor. "Ah, Nicholas, it is you!" cried the father. "You have saved my daughters from certain disaster."

Embarrassed and not wishing to be known, Nicholas begged the man to keep his identity a secret. He said, "You must thank God alone for providing these gifts in answer to your prayers for deliverance."

As a young man, Nicholas wanted to make a pilgrimage to the birthplace of Christianity, the Holy Land. He set sail on an Egyptian ship. The first night he dreamed a storm would put them all in danger. When he awoke in the morning he warned the sailors that a severe storm was coming, but they need not fear, for "God will protect us."

Almost immediately the sky darkened and strong winds roared around the ship. The wind and waves made it impossible to keep the ship under control. Even with lowered sails, the sailors feared for their very lives and begged Nicholas to pray for safety. While Nicholas prayed, the storm did quiet. The sailors felt secure once again. The ship made it safely to the Holy Land. Sailors often think of Nicholas as their patron saint.

When it came time for a new Bishop to be selected for Myra, the other bishops gathered to pray and discern who God was calling to be the new Bishop. One night the oldest and wisest bishop heard a voice in the night telling him to watch the doors of the church the next morning. The first person to enter the church by the name of Nicholas was to be the next bishop. As the time for Morning Prayer drew near, the first person to arrive was a young man. The waiting bishop asked, "What is your name?" "I am Nicholas," came the reply. The bishop said, "Nicholas, servant and friend of God, for your holiness you shall be bishop of this place."

Nicholas protested that he was not worthy; he was too young and inexperienced for such great responsibility. All the bishops, however, believed it was God's will for Nicholas to be the new bishop. They brought him into the church and placed him in the bishop's seat. They consecrated him as Bishop of Myra. Nicholas promised to bring the Gospel of Christ to the people and to defend the Christian faith from all who would attack it.

Bishop Nicholas lived his life in service to God. He was a protector of the poor and helpless, an advocate of justice for people in need, and a defender of the Christian faith.

One time there was a food shortage in his land. The people of Myra were very hungry. Bishop Nicholas was concerned about their health.

In far off Italy, a merchant loaded his ship with grain to sell in Egypt. That night Bishop Nicholas appeared to the merchant in a dream. He pledged payment of three gold coins, and commanded the merchant to come to Myra and sell the grain. The merchant was amazed and frightened when he awoke to find three gold coins miraculously in his hand.

Afraid to ignore such a powerful dream, the merchant sailed to Myra and sold all his grain. The people had food and would be able to survive. Still amazed, the merchant told everyone about his dream and the gold. The citizens of Myra listened to his story and were amazed. They thanked God for their good fortune and for their extraordinary bishop, Nicholas.

In the year 325 Emperor Constantine called all the bishops to a meeting named the Council of Nicaea. They talked about the meaning of the Holy Trinity, God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. One man from Egypt, named Arius, taught that Jesus the Son was not equal to God the Father. He argued this point so much that Bishop Nicholas became angry. He went to Arius and slapped him across the face! The bishops were shocked. This was not appropriate behavior for a bishop. They made Nicholas take off his Bishop's robes, chained him, and threw him into jail.

Nicholas was ashamed and prayed for forgiveness. During the night, Jesus and Mary his mother appeared asking, "Why are you in jail?" "Because of my love for you," Nicholas replied. Jesus gave the Book of the four gospels to Nicholas. Mary gave him a bishop's robe so he could be dressed as a bishop again. Nicholas peacefully read the Gospels the rest of the night.

In the morning, the jailer found the chains loose on the floor and Nicholas dressed in bishop's robes. Constantine asked that Nicholas be freed. He was returned as Bishop of Myra.

These are some of the stories of Bishop Nicholas of Myra. He was so beloved that long before the Roman Catholic Church started the process of declaring saints in the late 10th century, Bishop Nicholas was known as Saint Nicholas. He died on December 6, 343, a day now known around the world as St. Nicholas Day. Many children in Europe, especially Holland, leave carrots and hay their shoes for the saint's horse the night of December 5, hoping he will exchange them for small gifts.

Nicholas is the Advent saint who shows us that while waiting for Jesus' birth, we are called to be gift givers, showing generosity to those in need. St. Nicholas' life is an example of how to faithfully follow Jesus Christ. In the spirit of St. Nicholas, may we quietly go about doing helpful things for people in need and for those we love this Advent season.

Information was gleaned from the website of the St. Nicholas Center, www.stnicholascenter.org.