

## 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent-A

The question that poor ole Joseph faces in our Gospel today, is not only an ancient one; it's a question that occurs in every life -- in every age. There are very few of us who are not perplexed with one thing or another who do not ask and ask often; what should I do?

What should I do?

So using that question and asking it of ourselves: What should I do? I would like, if you allow me, to simply offer you a few last minute Advent tips this morning.

The first one: "What should I do to keep Christ in Christmas? And that query is more than something borrowed from a billboard or a lawn sign slogan.

It's a serious question for serious Christians in a highly secularized world where each year with great sophistication our society de-Christianizes the birth of Christ into "Happy Holidays."

Cities and towns no longer have a Christmas Tree a --- they have a "Holiday Tree." Public Schools no longer have Christmas Programs – they have "Holiday Programs" and so on and so on.

What it boils down to is that we are offered an either or choice between Jesus Christ and Santa Claus.

What should I do? The first thing I might do is not dismiss Santa Clause, but reclaim him - put him back in the Christmas tradition as he was meant to be. After all, I am here to tell you - cross my heart and hope to die - that there really is a Santa Clause!

Documented history tells us that Santa – or St. Nicholas, was a fourth-century bishop. He was what he is, not in spite of Christ, but because of him. The two indisputable facts we know about Santa Claus are that he was enormously generous to the poor, a bit plump and was very fond of children.

It is also known that he had a cascading white beard, and that, being a bishop, he wore the customary bishops' robes, which are red and white.

People across the world have tried to secularize him. The British call him Father Christmas, the French Papa Noel. But whatever one calls him, his first name is really “Santa” and that keeps his Christian connection before us for “Santa’ is the Latin word for saint.

When we see Santa Claus, we see one who became a Christian saint because he is inspired by the love of God. So yes, Virginia, there really is a Santa Claus.

What should I do? We can tell our children, our grandchildren our nieces and nephews the deeper truths of ole St. Nick that actually *help us* keep Christ in Christmas.

What should I do? This time the question turns not on *how* to believe, but how to *live* our beliefs. How are we to act if we believe in the Christ in Christmas and Santa Claus? For the answer, let me share with you the true story of an Austrian doctor who tells why he became a doctor.

He says that as a young man he had been conscripted into the German army invading Russia. One morning, on the outskirts of a village, his unit was summoned to parade by the Commanding Officer.

Having told the soldiers to stand at ease, The C. O. said. “This morning we have been ordered to shoot all the Jews of this village.” And then he went on to ask for volunteers to carry out the order.

Not one soldier stepped forward. The officer berated them – called them sniveling cowards and every other name in the book. But still, not one soldier stepped forward.

So the Commanding Officer tried again, and this time he explained that the volunteers need not shoot the Jews immediately. They could use the Jewish women and steal their valuables and shoot them later. And every soldier stepped forward except three.

One, he said, was a Jesuit novice, the second was an actor from Berlin, and the third was himself.

When the others came back at the end of the day. I could not even bear to look at them the soldier said. I could not bear to eat in the same mess hall, to live with them, so he asked and was transferred to a more difficult and dangerous assignment on the northern front where he stayed until the end of the war.

It was that certain incident with that certain Commanding Officer that determined that he would become a doctor and devote himself to healing rather than hurting people.

Now I know none of us, in our entire lifetime, will ever be in circumstances where we will have to make such a huge decision. But there's no question that as Christians we are faced with a hundred little decisions every day.

Decisions about lying or telling the truth, about cheating, about relationships, about fidelity, about business, about everything.

Every day we who celebrate Jesus' birthday and believe in Santa Claus – we who call ourselves Christians - are asked to make these decisions that set us apart and make us different.

The persistent question comes back to us. We Christians, what should we do? The soldier's story offers us an answer.

What should I do? This time the question is not concerned with belief or specific action, but rather the "tone" of our lives – our "aura" so to speak, or if you prefer - our spirituality.

For a reflection that gives us a context for an answer, here is another very short story that a student wrote entitled "Christmas Solitaire."

Deborah Foster sat alone in her apartment on 64<sup>th</sup> Street. Her apartment building was in an old section of town and in desperate need of repair from years of neglect. She sat motionless, gazing at her Christmas tree, or what was supposed to be her tree.

She had found the tree two years earlier, behind some boxes in an alley. The tree was artificial, faded, and broken in many places. The ornaments consisted of a few strands of tinsel, a string of colored lights, and a little plastic angel.

Deborah got up and made herself a cup of tea and sat down to a game of solitaire. Solitaire was her hobby. She would play for hours, sometimes forgetting to eat. The cards were bent at the corners and faded from many years of use.

After a couple of hours of playing, she stretched, yawned, and took another look at her tree. She studied it closely. Funny, she thought, as she keened her eye on the angel. It seemed to be smiling at her. The way the light reflected off it made it glow -- almost filled the room with warmth. The angel's arms were outstretched as if they wanted a hug.

And then she heard it – the faint little footsteps, gradually getting louder; then some Christmas carols being sung. She thought to herself: “If I don’t make any noise, they’ll go away and leave me alone to play my game of Solitaire.

She never finished the thought. A loud crash echoed. The angel had fallen off the tree and was shattered. The angel’s look was different now - she was frowning. End of story.

What should I do? We are Christians. We carry that name.

So, first: we should choose Jesus Christ and believe in Santa Claus.

Second; we are not only on this earth to just live a life – we are on this earth to live a moral life.

Third; we are to love.

Choose, live and love – Choose, live and love are the answers.

They are Advent’s answers. They are Christmas’s answers. They are the answer to one of life persistent questions: What should I do?