



Santa Claus: The Journey from Early Christian Saint to Modern Global Citizen

Rev. Dr. Roger Jones, preaching
Yule Service, Sunday, December 21, 2025
Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Hymns: Deck the Hall; Twelve Days of Christmas (embodied version); People, Look East.
Special Music: (choir, instruments): Thirty-second Merry Christmas (Donald Moore), Silver Bells (Jay Livingston & Ray Evans, arr. Mark Hayes), Christmas Time Is Here (piano solo, Vince Guaraldi & Lee Mendelsohn), Deck the Hall (piano solo, arr. Linda Dawson (1940-2022))

Homily Part 1

Good morning and Happy Yule to you all. The Winter Solstice marks the starting point of returning warmth and sunlight in the Northern Hemisphere. Human beings have celebrated this moment in time for thousands of years in so many ways. Ancient Roman Pagans hung evergreen boughs, for example, and Germanic and Scandinavian Pagans burned a Yule log. Winter Solstice festivals were so popular that early Christian leaders officially established a date right after the Solstice to celebrate the nativity of Jesus Christ, which gives us December 25.

Religious and seasonal festivals are enduring and reliable. Yet they are also adaptable, and they have been adapted over the centuries. So have the identities of the characters whom we identify with particular religious festivals. And one of those characters is... Santa Claus! I'd like to tell you about his journey from early Christian saint to modern global citizen, and tell you how he became recognized the world over for his universal kindness and generosity.

Saint Nicholas was a priest in the Eastern Christian Church in the 4th century. He was born of Greek parents in the land which is now Turkey. He became the Bishop of Myra.

[Slide up.](#) [You can click links here or at the end for the slides or websites I used]

As you can see on this slide of an icon, he was bearded, like Santa. But maybe a lot of bishops had beards in those days. Because of his kindness, Nicholas is known as the patron saint of children, and their protector. In the centuries after he was made a saint, adults gave gifts to children in his honor. His saint's day on the calendar is the 6th of December.

Starting around 500 years ago, folk traditions around Europe reimagined Nicholas as Father Christmas. He began making the deliveries of snacks and other gifts to children himself. For centuries, people thought he gave gifts only to Christian children. By the 20th century,

however, Santa Claus had gained a reputation for showing love to all children of all faiths, all over the world. [Slide down.](#)

You might have a picture of Santa Claus in your mind if you have seen him on Christmas cards or holiday specials on TV. You might understand his job if you've heard songs on the radio, or in the shopping mall, or on YouTube. But do you know how we discovered all of these details? It happened in the United States of America nearly two centuries ago. First, there was a famous poem, "A Visit from St. Nicholas." It starts like this:

'Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house
Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse;
The stockings were hung by the chimney with care,
In hopes that St. Nicholas soon would be there.

The poem was printed in a newspaper in Troy, New York, in 1823. Fourteen years later, Clement C. Moore claimed to be its writer. Later, however, the descendants of the late Major Henry Livingston Jr. say that Livingston had written the poem to read to his children, and *he* had published it anonymously in the local paper. There is an ongoing scholarly controversy over who gets credit for it.

In any case, thanks to this famous poem we know a few things, like the names of those eight reindeer who pull Santa's flying sleigh. We know that he carries a bundle of toys on his back, comes down the chimney, and fills stockings hung by fireplace (Note: if you don't have a chimney or a fireplace, Santa will find a way). Also from the poem we get a glimpse of his "little round belly." We know that he smoked a pipe. He was dressed in fur from head to toe. However, the poem says nothing about the color of Santa's suit. For all the other details about Santa's looks and his job, we have another American to thank. I'll tell you about him in Part 2.

Homily Part 2

Thomas Nast was a painter, sketch artist, and engraver. And he was the most well-known political cartoonist in U.S. history. And he was an immigrant. In 1840, he was born in a city in Bavaria, which at the time was an independent German kingdom. His father opposed the government and was getting into trouble for it. So he decided to send his wife and children to the United States. Next his father enlisted in the French navy and served at sea; then he served on an American ship. Four years later, the father was able to move to the United States himself. Little Thomas was six at the time of his immigration, and ten when his dad was reunited with the family.

He had been baptized Roman Catholic as a baby in Bavaria and attended Catholic services for a time in New York City. However, when he got married at age 21, he converted to a Protestant Christian church. His wife's family was connected to a number of leading artists in New York, and soon Thomas Nast's work began to be recognized. His engravings were published in magazines and newspapers, especially *Harper's Weekly* magazine, where he worked for 25 years.

[Slide up.](#) On the next slide is his own drawing of himself, Nast the artist.

By publishing nearly 1,000 images over his career, he had a political impact on his country and a lasting impression on the public imagination. For example, the reason that the Republican party in this country is represented or symbolized by an elephant is because Nast created it. He was an anti-slavery Radical Republican, and he said elephants are a sacred animal.

Slide down.

It was other political cartoonists who had made the donkey into the symbol of the Democratic party and others who had created the figure of Uncle Sam to be a symbol of the United States. However, it was Nast who used those images so frequently that he imprinted them on our minds.

And he gave Santa Claus to us. On your order of service is a famous engraving of Merry Old Saint Nick, by Nast. [Slide up.](#)

And here is a slide of that picture. What do you notice? A red suit with white trim, a doll and other toys in his arm, red cheeks from the cold air, a long pipe, and a pack on his back. There's holly in his hair. From this point forward, everybody would learn what Santa Claus looked like. Slide down.

He published around 70 different pictures of Santa Claus, so he must have loved Santa. From all these engravings we know that Santa wears the red winter suit, *and* we know that he enjoys cookies if you leave some out for him on Christmas Eve. We learned that he makes a list of children who have been naughty or nice in the past year. And we understand that he learns this information, among other ways, by reading his mail. [Slide up.](#)

On the left side of this engraving, Santa's reading from a big stack of letters. In the center, you can see that he reads letters not only from kids, but he also reads "Letters from Naughty' Children's Parents" and guardians. You can see a stack of them in the lower middle of the slide. Here's one: "Dear Santa, Tommy has been such a naughty boy that we think you had better not bring him anything this Christmas. Momma and Poppa." Fortunately, you can see on the right side that he is holding that letter while he accepts an apology from Tommy, who says, "I'll never do it again." Slide down.

In addition to all the charming details Nast has given us about Santa Claus, it's worth noting that he used Santa Claus for political purposes, especially during the American Civil War.

[Slide up.](#) Here is a picture of Santa Claus in a battlefield camp. He's pictured as one of the soldiers of the Union army. Nast was bitterly opposed to slavery and frequently harsh toward the Confederate rebels. In this picture, instead of a doll, Santa is holding a puppet in his arm with the name *Jeff* printed above it. This puppet represents Jefferson Davis, the president of the Confederacy. Thomas Nast has drawn a noose around the puppet's neck. Slide down.

Amid the holiday charm of Nast's engravings about Santa Claus, I think it's important to remember that he did not shy away from challenging what was unjust and unfair about his adopted country. For example, he attacked the greed and corruption of New York City's Tammany Hall. That's the name of the political machine of the Democratic Party which controlled City Hall and much of the state government for decades in the mid-1800s. There was graft, bribery, and violence for years. While reporters from the *New York Times* exposed the facts of the corruption, Nast's cartoons attacked the politicians and stoked the public's outrage.

[Slide up](#). For example, here is his 1871 engraving entitled a *Group of Vultures*. The flesh-eating birds have the faces of William “Boss” Tweed and other leaders of the powerful Tammany machine. Skulls and skeletons near their clawed feet identify the victims of Tammany corruption: the taxpayer, the rent payer, the New York City Treasury, liberty, justice, and [the rule of] law. This all sounds too familiar today, doesn’t it? [Slide down](#).

Though he had been Catholic as a child, Nast became a harsh critic of the leaders of the Catholic Church and Irish Catholic Americans in particular. Irish American politicians led the Tammany Hall machine and instigated violence by gangs of Irish men. Nast may have been attacked by some of them. This is no excuse, however, for the vicious anti-Irish stereotypes he put in his cartoons. That’s a serious deficiency and flaw in his legacy.

In contrast to that failing, however, Thomas Nast was one of the few political cartoonists in this country who defended the rights of Chinese immigrant workers in the face of bigotry. According to scholar Michele Walfred, most other cartoonists made use of derogatory images and words to fuel violent anti-Chinese hysteria, especially in California. [I’m not quoting them in this service.] It’s frightening to me that hostile words used now by our current President to target all kinds of immigrants were the same words used by white Americans in the 19th century. In 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act became law in the U.S., which banned an entire ethnic group from immigrating here. Through his cartoons, Nast opposed this law and attacked its proponents. He defended the dignity, safety and freedom of the immigrant workers.

One more of his engravings is called Uncle Sam’s Thanksgiving Dinner. [Slide up](#). He published it in 1869, a few years after the Civil War had ended. President Lincoln had proclaimed the holiday in 1863, and by 1869 it was possible for the whole country to celebrate it. Remember that Uncle Sam represents the U.S. Also at the table is Lady Columbia, also a symbol of America. Around the table is a picture of who belongs. Groups at the table include men, women and children. There are Chinese immigrants, formerly enslaved African Americans, Native Americans, European Americans, men, women and children. In contrast to Nast’s ugly cartoons about Irish immigrants, in this one they also have places at the table. Uncle Sam’s Thanksgiving Dinner is Nast’s vision and his hope of the kind of country we could become—a place where everyone belongs. It is still our vision and our hope that we can become that place.

Speaking of place—there’s one more thing which Nast’s cartoons revealed about this jolly old elf in a red suit. He told us that Santa Claus is from the North Pole. This is important, because the North Pole exists in international waters. For the past several decades it’s been protected by a United Nations agreement. It is not in any country.

The North Pole does not belong to any one country. And because Santa lives there, this means that he does not belong to any one country. *Santa Claus belongs to everyone*. And everyone belongs to Santa Claus. Everyone. Thanks to Thomas Nast and artists like him who came later, Santa Claus has become a reminder of our shared humanity. Whoever you might be, wherever you have come from, and wherever you live, you deserve respect and love. We all do.

In this Yuletide season, let us be inspired by our knowledge of his deeds of universal generosity and kindness. And let us be Santa’s helpers. We can be helpers and participants in the work of recognizing every human being as worthy of respect, fairness, dignity, and love. Let us remember and celebrate the spirit of love which knows no borders. Amen.

SELECTED SOURCES

John Adler, Nast Cartoons, a page in the website: <https://thomasnast.com/cartoons>

Wikipedia: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Nast

Robert McNamara, ThoughtCo. Thomas Nast's Campaign against Boss Tweed: <https://www.thoughtco.com/thomas-nasts-campaign-against-boss-tweed-4039578>

Michele Walfred, Illustrating Chinese Exclusion: <https://thomasnastcartoons.com>

SOURCES OF SLIDE IMAGES

Saint Nicholas 4th Century icon

<https://www.saturdayeveningpost.com/2023/12/considering-history-how-santa-claus-and-america-evolved-together-across-the-19th-century/>

Nast the artist—a self-caricature

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Nast#/media/File:Thomas_Nast_self-portrait_cph.3a00742.jpg

Merry Old Santa Claus

<https://www.saturdayeveningpost.com/2023/12/considering-history-how-santa-claus-and-america-evolved-together-across-the-19th-century/>

Santa Claus reading his piles of mail and Santa Claus's Rebuke

<https://thomasnast.com/cartoons/santa-clauss-mail-santa-clauss-rebuke/>

Santa Claus visiting Union Army troops during the American Civil War

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Nast#/media/File:Santa_Claus_1863_Harpers.png

1871 Tammany Hall – vultures

<https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/e/ed/Nast-Prey-Harper%27s-Weekly-1871.jpg>

Uncle Sam's Thanksgiving Dinner 1869

<https://thomasnastcartoons.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/uncle-sams-thanksgiving-dinner-11-20-69.jpg>