



John 4:13-14
What Might Jesus Say To...
Santa

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December 24th, 2023

Tonight, we begin a new series of sermons looking at what Jesus might say to some famous people: Santa Claus, The Beatles on January 7th, then Bill Gates on the 14th, Time Magazine Person of the Year for 2023 – Taylor Swift on the 21st, and we'll close it out on the 28th of January with looking at what Jesus might say to the most famous person any of us could ever think of: You. Ourselves. I invite you to join us for the rest of this series beginning on the 7th of January (pick up a card in the lobby).

So tonight, we look at what Jesus might say to Santa Claus. I doubt that Santa needs too much of an introduction. But here's a little background: The current image of Santa as a jolly fellow in a red outfit and white beard has been around since the 1800's, if not earlier.¹ For instance, in 1823 Clement Clarke Moore published a little poem that was originally titled, “A Visit from St. Nicholas” that begins, “’Twas the night before Christmas and all through the house, not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse.” But the roots of Santa go back further, to the original Saint Nicholas, a 4th Century church leader in modern day Turkey. He was famous for his generosity toward the poor, giving them gifts in the name of Jesus so their lives would be better. Today, while Santa has been celebrated primarily throughout European and North American culture, people throughout the world are familiar with Santa and his gift giving tendencies.

In fact, it may be that no other person – be they real or imagined – is as recognizable as Santa Claus. He is universally acknowledged as one who loves children, brings good gifts, and spreads good tidings of joy, except when the gifts are useless such as hairdryers and clothes from the big and tall store. But Santa has overshadowed Christmas to the point that many people don't know why Christmas exists outside of him and the giving of gifts.

An excerpt from one of my favorite books illustrates this. The book is titled *Lost in America* and the author, Tom Clegg, relates an experience he had, prior to the Internet as we know it and long before smart phones²: “One evening after a speaking engagement in Peoria, Illinois, I didn't feel sleepy. I

saw a Barnes & Noble bookstore outside my hotel window, so I wandered over, ordered my usual [coffee]...rambled through the bargain section, and sat down in an armchair to read. At a table nearby sat six university students. They were hotly debating a trivia question: What was the skipper's name on *Gilligan's Island*? As their debate went on, I leaned over and said, "I know."

They all stared at me, waiting for the answer. Here was my moment to find value in all the time I had wasted watching television in junior high. I explained that his full name had appeared only in the pilot [first show] and in two other episodes. "Actor Alan Hale played the skipper. His character's name was (anyone know?)...Jonas Grumby," Slack-jawed, they responded, "You must be really old." I scooted up to their table, and we began talking... They chatted with me about my life, and I asked them about theirs. **"By midnight, I'd discovered that not one of these kids could identify the historical significance of Easter. Two could do Christmas, but the others [4 of them] didn't understand why anyone would celebrate the birth of a "mythical" Jewish carpenter. All of them had zero cultural connection with who Jesus is, why churches exist, and what authentic Christians do or believe"** (Tom Clegg, *Lost in America*, p. 61).

In other words, for these intelligent, educated college students, Christmas was all about Santa and gift giving, and Easter is all about a bunny and eggs. So, what might Jesus say to Santa? There could be any number of things, but I think he might say something stemming from what he once said to a woman he met at a well outside her village. This woman had experienced a lot of pain in her life. She'd been divorced several times. She was living in shame because of her relationship with her current boyfriend. Her identity was completely aligned with the shame that she had, and the judgment people had toward her.

So, she goes to the well outside of town to get water at midday day – when it's hot outside – to avoid running into anyone. But Jesus is there. He asks her for a drink of water, and it leads to a conversation where Jesus later says, **"Everyone who drinks this water [from the well] will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the**

water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life” (Jesus in John 4:13-14).

This is a conversation that starts out about physical water that we drink, and ends up as a conversation with “water” as a metaphor for our spiritual vitality and our identity. His invitation to her is to find her identity in him. John goes on to tell us that in spite of her shame because of the labels and the identity given her by the townsfolk, she goes back there, tells them about Jesus, and invites everyone out to meet him. Jesus ends up staying a couple days, and the result is that they believe and acknowledge him as the Messiah, as the savior. It all starts with Jesus’ invitation to her: to find her identity not in what others say about her or in how she’s living her life, but instead, to find her worth, value, and identity in him. All the other stuff just obscures what Jesus has to offer.

And so, I think Jesus might say something like this to Santa Claus: **“Mr. Claus, you bring much happiness into people’s lives. But I want to challenge you to give them a gift that helps people find their true, lasting value, worth, and identity in relationship with me. Help them know they are loved, and can find lasting hope, joy, love, and peace in me.”**

I don’t know what each of you are facing or going through in life right now or where you find your identity and sense of worth in the midst of all that. I do know that there is immense pressure here on the Eastside in school and work to succeed and find our identity there; some of us maybe find our identity in financial wealth and stuff which is another huge pressure around here; raising kids is tough and it’s easy to find our identity in doing that; cancer or other health things may threaten your quality of life or even life itself and finding our identity in our physical bodies is a major temptation; maybe your identity is bound up in some other relationship and how people view you and treat you – a spouse, a former spouse, neighbor or someone else. Life can feel like an emotional yo-yo when these are the places we gain our sense of worth and our identity.

But: Jesus offers something else: a never-ending supply of “water” that brings value and worth because you are loved by him with an unchanging love. It is this love of his that brought him to the manger and

would later lead him to the cross. In other words, Jesus gives you and me a whole new identity: child of God, loved by Him. This is his gift to you. You don't have to earn it, work for it, pay for it, stress out about whether it's true for you or not. It is his gift to you, and you can receive that gift any time.

To a certain degree, I think we all realize this. We're here tonight, because we know Christmas isn't just about gifts and trees and Santa and flying reindeer. We are here to be reminded that the identity of Christmas is found in Christ. It's not called "Giftmas" or "Santamas" – it's called Christmas, because it is all about the gift of Jesus Christ that God has given. And yet Jesus can be obscured by all the other stuff – like Santa and his gifts – this time of the year, just as he can be obscured by so much other stuff the rest of the year, and it's all stuff that beckons us to find value, worth, love, and identity in them.

The story is told about a mother who was running furiously from store to store on Christmas Eve with her three-year-old son, trying to find those last-minute gifts. (Any of you going shopping tonight? ☺) At one point, she realized she'd lost track of her son. In a panic, she retraced her steps, looking everywhere. She finally found him gazing at a Manger Scene in the picture window of a big department store.

When the boy heard his mother call his name, he turned and shouted in innocent glee: "Look Mommy! It's JESUS! Baby Jesus is in the hay!" The frazzled mom grabbed his arm and jerked him away, snapping at him, "We don't have time for all that! Can't you see that Mommy's trying to get ready for Christmas!?!?" And off they went, leaving Jesus behind as they filled their lives up with all the other stuff. Totally distracted from Jesus.

I recently read a true story about a young man from Malawi, Africa. A year ago or so, he was spending his first Christmas in America. He was asked in a Sunday church service about how he enjoyed his first Christmas in America. He said, "**It's very different here. In Malawi, Christmas is mostly about Jesus.**" I would love to hear his thoughts on Easter. We are so indoctrinated with the cultural Christmas that we don't even realize how much Jesus has been obscured by it all

This is still the challenge for each of us: not letting the stuff of the world pull us away from, or clouding our view of, the one who gives us our identity. Coming to Jesus like the shepherd and the wise guys... but not just the baby Jesus we celebrate at Christmas, but also the grown up, crucified, and resurrected Jesus, like the woman at the well, the others who followed Jesus in his lifetime and became the nucleus of the church after his resurrection.... We need to come to him, stand before him with our eyes fixed on him like that little boy at the department store, and find our true self in him. This is the invitation Jesus gives us. To find our true identity. Like the woman at the well who was given a false identity by the people around her, but given a new one by Jesus as she came face to face with him, so he can also do with you.

You are a child of God your Heavenly Father, created in His image, and deeply loved by him. You are beloved. And: **Just as Jesus said to this woman at the well, and as he might say to Santa, he invites you this evening, and this Christmas, to cease finding your worth and identity in the things of the world and instead to find your identity, and your worth, in Jesus.** He invites you to cease finding your identity in what others say about you, be it praise or condemnation; He invites you to cease finding your identity in your work, or your scholastics, or your finances, or your health, or your hobbies or your relationships, or whatever else may suck you in and beg you to find your identity there...and instead He invites you, as he did with this woman, to find your true self, in him.

Whether you've opened the gift before, or not, I pray that this Christmas, even tonight, you'd receive this gift of Jesus, and find your identity as a child of God, deeply loved by him. Let's pray...Amen.

¹www.wikipedia.com has a good amount of information on Santa Claus, if you're curious.

² "Lost in America," Tom Clegg and Warren Bird, p. 61.