

December 10, 2011 Florida Hospital Seventh-day Adventist Church
Titus 3:3-7 Christmas Stories: The Unselfish Story by Andy McDonald

I think I know at least part of the reason that so many love Christmas so much.

Here's the reality—we live in a very messed up world. You don't have to be a genius to recognize that reality all you have to do is just for a day, a week, or whole year look back at the stories we call "news!"

People killing each other, warring with one another, crooks stealing from people by holding them up—snatching a purse—or siphoning off so much profit from a retirement fund as to leave it nearly bankrupt, Abuse of children, use of people as if they were a disposable commodity, selfishness on nearly every front, and I could go on and on our world is messed up, and then comes Christmas.

And for a day and when we are most fortunate for a whole holiday season there seems to be a shift in the atmosphere.

There's the office where the pursuit of financial success nearly consumes everyone. Where the pressure to perform, to produce an every increasing EBITDA (earnings before interest, taxes, depreciation, and amortization) drive people to cold cruel Ebenezer Scrooge like living, but then here comes Christmas and that office adopts a family to gift and they bring in gifts or donate and gifts are purchased and then a little party is thrown for the family and for a moment in time compassion and caring sneak into that place that normally doesn't seem to care about the human need.

The festivity of the lights and decorations transform the common place into a thing of beauty. That which is so ordinary ordinarily becomes mysteriously spectacular especially at night when twinkling lights challenge the darkness, and even the incessant ringing of the Salvation Army collector's bell somehow adds cheer!

What is amazing is how the celebration of the event that alters the reckoning of time....

How the origin of what makes the season worth celebrating, can in our culture today even among all this Christmas spirit, get pushed to the periphery.

You see I'm not sure whether Santa got created from our warped views of God or if our relationship with Santa has warped our understanding of God but I'm pretty sure that both have been influenced by the other, and for many, a great many in America, this season of celebration of the birth of the Savior of the world in that baby born in Bethlehem, that story has been overshadowed with the guy in the red suit sitting in the mall.

Listen to these amazing and sad statistics:

There are more Americans (38%) who teach their children to believe in Santa Claus than there are those (28%) who tell the biblical story of the birth of Christ at this time of year. It's a dismal statistic, especially when considered in the larger context that 9 in every 10 Americans celebrate Christmas.

What is it about jolly old saint nick,
 What is it about this pleasingly plump man in red
 What is it about Santa Claus that is so appealing?

Maybe it's the red suit—the complimenting white trim on the red suit and the white beard, maybe it's the grandfatherliness of the whole look.

Of course it is important to remember that the whole Santa appeal may not work for everyone. I mean that jolly old fella may appeal more to some mom's and dad's than he does to the younger set.

Here are some photo's of some who missed the appeal!



For some of us parents it brings back memories and for some of you who are parents of small children right now that memory may more current!

This week I've read some very interesting and scholarly histories of Santa Claus. I've watched some silly and simplistic video's comparing Jesus and Santa, and I saw some really crass South Park pieces contrasting the two. I've re-read the Christmas story from the Gospels, and some interesting articles on Christmas philosophy, and I have to say unfortunately Santa may be gaining some ground on Jesus in this season of celebrating.

Santa fits our culture of consumerism. In Erin Haire and Dustin Nelson's essay entitled, "Crummy Commercials and BB Guns" they use the movie "A Christmas Story" to make their point. This 1983 film focuses on Ralphie Parker's craving and lusting for an "Official Red Ryder carbine action 200-shot range model air rifle." And his mother's horrified response to his request is, "You'll shoot your eye out!" The movie shares his pushing for his ideal present, and the Parker's messed up Christmas. As this 1940's set movie progresses, one of the things that might strike the viewer is the absence of religion. There's no church, no nativity, no carols of the traditional story of Christmas. "In the Parker family it is not necessarily the absence of religion that is so noticeable, but rather its replacement with a new American institution: consumerism." It points out the reality that our culture isn't so much becoming more secular, we are simply shifting the focus of our reverence to the system of consumerism.

And at so much of the heart of Christmas today is the notion that we can receive something wrapped up under our tree or that we can select and wrap a gift for someone else and place it under the tree and that our lives will be somehow transformed, that our way of life will be altered that we will be better people by consuming.

So much of the Christmas spirit that should be about giving has warped into getting. I want or I need is all about me and what I can consume.

It even spills over into the Christmas programs at churches as I decide where I can go so I can consume the best most spiritual Christmas program, or consume hearing the best Christmas music, so I can be filled and made rich in this season of consumption.

Consumerism is defined this way:

1. The protection or promotion of the interests of consumers.
2. The theory that an increasing consumption of goods is economically desirable.
3. The preoccupation of society with the acquisition of consumer goods

And all of this is driven by marketers who are seeking to convince us that our lives will be changed for the better, transformed if we consume the product they are selling.

But the pitch isn't one of reality.

You can get the perfect perfume but it won't produce your Mr. Right!
 You can purchase your dream car, or motorcycle, or boat, or mansion and it won't assure you the girl of your dreams.
 You may find under the tree that elegant outfit that is supposed to make you look thin but even if it works the optical illusion won't remove those extra pounds.
 Finding that great piece of work out equipment to be your gift doesn't mean that hanging your clothes on it will transform you into a hard body.

Consuming things is not the path to the transformation we need.

We have imbued Santa with some very God-like attributes.
 We hear them in that simple song.

“He sees you when your sleeping,
 He knows when you're awake.
 He knows if you've been bad or good

That sounds a lot like David's description of God in Psalm 139

O LORD, you have examined my heart and know everything about me. **2** You know when I sit down or stand up. You know my every thought when far away. **3** You chart the path ahead of me and tell me where to stop and rest. Every moment you know where I am. **4** You know what I am going to say even before I say it, LORD. **5** You both precede and follow me. You place your hand of blessing on my head. **6** Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, too great for me to know! **7** I can never escape from your spirit! I can never get away from your presence! **8** If I go up to heaven, you are there; if I go down to the place of the dead, you are there. **9** If I ride the wings of the morning, if I dwell by the farthest oceans, **10** even there your hand will guide me, and your strength will support me. **11** I could ask the darkness to hide me and the light around me to become night -- **12** but even in darkness I cannot hide from you. To you the night shines as bright as day. Darkness and light are both alike to you."

Not only have we given Santa some of the God like qualities of omnipresence and omniscience (all knowing) but we have unfortunately projected some of the Santa Claus fantasy onto God.

He's makin' a list and checkin' it twice he's gonna find out who's naughty and nice.

Probably the most diabolical characteristic we could project onto God is that he loves those with good behavior and rejects those with bad behavior. Like Santa he knows when you've been bad or good! The blatant teaching of Santa is that by doing good actions we accumulate "goods" that we can trade for other rewards. All our good behavior is like making deposits in an account from which we can draw rewards on Christmas morning.

And this is a system that suits us. Really the attraction of the Santa way is that it fits our human nature. We so desperately want to deserve what we receive. We want to earn what we get.

There's something sort of sinister in us that likes the idea of that bully down the street, or that bully in our college class, or that bully in our office, or the bully at the country club, we like the idea of that mean spirited pushy bully getting a lump of coal in his stocking and a bundle of sticks as his present under the tree, because it is clear to us that is just what he deserves!

But not us. We look back at our year and if we imagine an encounter with Santa we imagine ourselves coming out okay. We've been pretty good or at least not as bad as the really bad people.

But we don't come to Santa. We stand before the holy and righteous God of the universe. The one who is like none other. Our God is unlike any god we could have created from our imaginations.

But again the Psalmist writes Psalm 7:9 For you look deep within the mind and heart, O righteous God.

And when he looks deeper than Santa ever could what does his all seeing eye see?

Paul tells us in Romans 3:10 As the Scriptures say, "No one is good -- not even one. 11 No one has real understanding; no one is seeking God. 12 All have turned away from God; all have gone wrong. No one does good, not even one."

Listen, if our standing with God like that with Santa is based upon our watching out, our not crying, our not pouting, our avoidance of being naughty and our consistently being nice then we can count on a barren Christmas, a barren life, and a barren eternity.

The great distinctive of the love of the Christian God is that there are no strings attached to it. God simply loves us. It is unconditional and absolutely radical.

How he treats you is not based on his observations of your behavior or his lists of your moments of naughty and nice. Our God says everything I demand of you I give to you to meet my demands. I could have hold up in the courts of paradise and let you self destruct but instead I've emptied heaven. I am the God Emmanuel, not a distant God, not a separated God but God with man. Jesus didn't cling to his rights as God but set them aside and came to show us God and to save us from our sin. He is the great rescuer and we are simply the sometimes naughty and sometimes nice people he rescues!!

Philip Yancey has written, "The Buddhist eight-fold path, the Hindu doctrine of karma, the Jewish covenant , and Muslim code of law— each of these offers a way to earn approval. ONLY Christianity dares to make God's love unconditional."

Everything within us as humans and everything modeled in the story of Santa tells us that the universe must be organized according to a principle where we get what we deserve. But God is about giving what we do not deserve and in his wonderful amazing grace is freedom from guilt, freedom from a sense of need to earn God's approval, freedom to genuinely love God and others.

Our sin goes deep. We want so much to earn what we get—to even earn the love we seek, to be so loveable that God will have to love me. But the reality is that God loves me and God loves you not because of who we are or what we've done but solely based on who He is. He is love, perfect love and that perfect love casts out our fears.

Sitting on Santa's lap can be a scary event. We know that if he's really seen me when I'm sleeping and he knows when I'm awake. That if he knows if I've been bad or good I'm fearful. But when I come God I can come covered with the absolute perfection of Jesus Christ. And when God looks at me he doesn't see all those things he could have listed He only see's Jesus perfect life.

And just like Moses overwhelmed with his inadequacy questioning how he could go forward. God simply told him “I will be with you” Exodus 3:12 and This Christmas he says the same to us and that is enough Emmanuel, God with us. That’s the unselfish story of Christmas.