

Christmas Midnight Mass - Luke 2:1-14

On this Christmas night it is important to keep certain things straight. On this feast we must not confuse Jesus and Santa Claus.

Now the difference I have in mind is not the usual complaint that Santa Claus is associated with buying gifts and commercialism. The difference I am thinking about goes much deeper.

Both Jesus and Santa have a story. Their story reveals who they are and what they stand for. When you compare the two stories, it becomes clear that there is a significant difference between Jesus and Santa.

So what's Santa's story? You hear it in many places, but perhaps the clearest summation is found in a song that we hear this time of year. I am sure you know it:

You better watch out. You better not cry. You better not pout. I'm telling you why. Santa Claus is coming to town.

He's making a list. He's checking it twice. He's going to find out who's naughty and nice. Santa Claus is coming to town.

He sees you when you're sleeping. He knows when you're awake. He knows if you've been bad or good. So be good for goodness sake!

This is Santa's story. It tells us who he is. And who is Santa? He is a wonderful old man who brings gifts to those who are good. But only to those who are good.

If you cry or pout, if you're nasty or bad—forget it—Santa is not coming to you. Now I'm not here to complain about Santa or his story. There is nothing wrong with being good.

In fact, parents find Santa and his story very useful this time of year. They remind their children that Santa is watching and that they should be good for goodness sake.

Santa's story is fine. But it is different from the story of Jesus. That difference can be heard in today's gospel.

It is expressed in the song of the angels. They reveal who Jesus is. Jesus is the one who brings "joy to all the people." Jesus is the one through whom God's favor rests on all.

You see, Santa comes to those who are good. Jesus comes to those who are good and bad alike. What is revealed in the story of Jesus is that Christmas is not about our goodness, but about God's goodness.

What we celebrate on this feast is not the good things that we have done, but the **great** thing that God has done in Christ Jesus. Jesus' story reveals the love of God, which is prior to any of our merits and present despite all of our sins.

So, unlike Santa, Jesus comes to us, not because we are good, but because we need him, because we are sinful and broken and weak.

What that means is that there is no person in this church tonight whom God does not love. No matter how much we have sinned; no matter how deeply we have failed; no matter how selfish we have been, God still loves us.

God's love is not based on our goodness, but upon God's free choice. Therefore the love of God that we celebrate at this Christmas feast comes to everybody.

It comes to those who are healthy and to those who are sick. It comes to those who are happy and to those who are grieving a loss. It comes to those who are hopeful and for those who are struggling with despair.

It comes to those who are holy and to those who are sinners. In fact the whole message of Christmas aims to move us off of ourselves, around our troubles, out of our successes and failures, and enfold us in the universal love of God. This is Christmas joy. This is the Good News.

Now Santa has his good news. Santa's news is that if you're good, you might get a Play Station or maybe even a Lexus. But Jesus' news is better.

Jesus' news is that **anyone** who opens his or her heart can receive the love of God—a love that can destroy evil, a love that is stronger than death itself.

This is why we must not confuse Jesus and Santa. We must keep their stories straight. I know that this task can be difficult. So I thought that if Santa has a song for his story, maybe Jesus should have a song for his story. So try this one on for size and see if it works.

There's no need to watch out. It's okay if you cry. You can sing or you can pout. I'm telling you why. Jesus Christ is coming to you.

He's forgotten his list. He forgives more than twice. He's the Lord of us all, both the naughty and nice. The Prince of Peace is coming to you.

He sees you when you're sleeping. He knows when you're awake. He saves you if you're bad or good, with a power no sin can break.

So—put sadness aside. Let loose with a cry. There's no reason to hide. I'm telling you why. The Love of God is coming to you.

Merry Christmas!