

Three Bags of Gold

“Simply serve the Savior.”

Isaiah 35:1-4

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I Want

I haven't decided which place had the real St. Nick. It could have been the old Ford Rotunda. I still have lasting images of a long line of happy children surrounded by science exhibits and decorations. The man in the big chair with the white beard and the red fur suit just had to be him. Something of the mounting excitement still lingers and the fear I felt when my turn neared and I saw the man who slipped down chimneys and flew in a sleigh giving individual attention to each child perched on his knee as they told the Old Saint, himself, exactly *what was wanted*.

One year I went with my friends to Muirhead's, where we were taken by train through a fairy land that magically brought us to the North Pole. Mrs. Claus welcomed us to the igloo home of the Old Saint himself. And there, I could tell the real Santa, *exactly what I'd want*.

But there were other years my mother took my sister and me downtown to Hudson's. We'd make our way, either in the elevator operated by the man in the white gloves; or ride an endless series of escalator segments up and up to the twelfth floor where Christmas Carol welcomed us to Toyland and we'd sit on the lap of the *real* jolly old elf. That's where *I'd tell him exactly what I want* for Christmas.

And each year I would almost always get exactly what I'd want. Because, that's what Christmastime is about, isn't it? Everyone makes their lists and then gets – like we are all entitled.

One time I overheard a mother's question; you could sense an edge of anxiety in her voice. She was asking her boy, “Was your Christmas alright? Did you get what you want?”

That *is* what Christmas is all about, isn't it? Get what we want...our very economy depends on it.

Who Gives

A few years ago I read something about Cliff Richard, a very popular musician in Britain. He'd released a Christmas song called "Saviour's Day" with lines like "Life can be yours on Saviour's Day, don't look back or turn away..." A review of Christmas songs in a teen magazine assessed it. The writer said, "This song is OK, but there's no holly, no mistletoe and wine, no presents around the tree, no snow, no Santa, in fact this song hasn't got anything to do with Christmas at all!"¹

Hmmm, what would a savior have to do with Christmas?

To which the Prophet Isaiah, if he could foresee Christmas, would answer: "Everything!"

Everything: because more than anything else, what he really wanted, and what he and his readers really needed was nothing short of rescue; the restoration of all they had lost.

The word Isaiah wrote here probably came in the last years of his people's captivity.² They had suffered for so long – generations – away from home in utmost poverty. The landscape they saw was metaphorically and actually barren: dry land yielding little fruit. Their captors were often severe: the weak knees the prophet referred to were faltering from fear.

Life was brutal – a stark difference from those who enjoyed power and plenty. This was their economy: one that had to have winners and losers; and for so long it was the others who had won it all at the expense of those who lost everything.

So when the prophet promised the desert bursting forth with a praise of blossoms, rivers running through it springing to life, and joy and singing everywhere...he was announcing salvation. Salvation would mean the end of poverty and homelessness; a new economy: an economy of God's abundant grace for those who had been casualties of the old.

What does a Savior have to do with Christmas? Isaiah would answer, "Everything!"

It's a theme that would be taken up again when a young girl of Nazareth became an unlikely, expectant mother. You know the story: an angel visit, Mary's welcome, a trip to Cousin Elizabeth, and her magnificent song of hope:

*(God) has shown strength with his arm:
He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
he has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.³*

Salvation. She knew the baby she held in her arms was the Savior.

I think if Isaiah could have visited the twelfth floor of Hudson's there were some things he would have liked. He would have liked the joy and the songs in the air, the lights of celebration, and shelves full of abundance. He would have liked the spirit of giving – the sharing of all God's fruits.

But he would have been troubled if he looked around the corner and seen the other side: the poor who were just as left-out as in days of old.

That's why I think he would have liked something in Santa; especially the real St. Nick. In history St. Nicholas loved the Savior. He was born to a wealthy Third Century home on the southern coast of what is now Turkey. His mother and father died when he was young; but his devotion to Jesus inclined him to spend his inheritance on those in need. He was dedicated to serving God and was made Bishop of Myra when he was still a young man. Nicholas became widely known for his generosity and love for children.⁴

A story about Nicholas goes that there was a family that was destitute and starving. The father had no money for food, much less the dowry needed to marry off his three daughters; he was on the verge of sending his oldest girl out on the street.

One night, Nicholas threw a bag of gold coins through the family's window. In the morning the father discovered the gold. Salvation: it changed everything; a daughter's honor was preserved by a dowry for her marriage secured. In the same way, Nicholas later secretly provided a dowry for the second daughter; and still later for the third.

But on the third occasion, the father stood watching, and as soon as the bag of gold landed on the floor, he chased after Nicholas and caught him. Nicholas was mortified and made the father promise not to tell anyone who had helped his family.⁵

'Something about St. Nick Isaiah would have liked. He was about God's new economy of compassion. His generosity was not about giving children everything they wanted. It wasn't about creating a society of consumers prone to fight over the last i-Pad on the shelf or fall into a funk when the holidays were *not enough*. For him, Christmas and everyday was all about simply serving the Savior.

I Give

Such service can create a different economy: one that doesn't depend on losers in order for there to be winners; and one that is focused on giving to the weakest and most vulnerable instead of obsessing over getting everything on the list. The different economy is more concerned with gifts than lists. And it blooms from the love born one night long ago... The new economy insists that poverty be replaced by generosity and resplendent, universal joy.

This is, I believe, what God wants for Christmas.

A long time ago I saw a drawing in material distributed by *Alternative Celebrations*. Asking, "Whose birthday is it, anyway?" the picture was of a little stable filled with cattle and sheep and hay. A baby lay in a manger, father and young mother watching over him. The scene had this one addition: with his back toward the viewer, on bended knee, before the child was a jolly old man in a red fur suit and a long white beard.

At the manger on bended knee: worshipping God; serving the new-born King.

I think *that's* how you'll always find the real St. Nick.

¹ Carol Wallis, "Putting Herod Back Into Christmas," Sojourners, December 22, 2004.

<http://www.sojournal.net/sojourners/2004/12/22>

² Gene M. Tucker, "The Book of Isaiah 1-39," The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary vol. VI. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press. © 2001. p 280.

³ Luke 1:46-56

⁴ "Who Is St. Nicholas?" *The Saint Nicholas Center* website. <http://www.stnicholascenter.org/pages/who-is-st-nicholas/>

⁵ Ralph F. Wilson, "The Real St. Nick," *Joyful Heart Renewal Ministries* website. <http://www.joyfulheart.com/christmas/st-nick.htm>