

Jeff's Jottings

St. Nicholas

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This note: it has been a startling and difficult week on many fronts. Words like tax plan, Jerusalem, revised travel ban, sexual harassment, all are calling up deep emotions. There is deep division. We are polarized in significant ways. I admit: I started two or three different Jottings trying to say something about that, and realized I wasn't ready to speak well about these issues on a short deadline. And so I hope you'll receive this Jottings, this originally planned Jottings, with the invitation, as we anticipate the coming of the Prince of Peace, to continue to reflect with me on how we think and speak and live in the world today. Thank you.

I did not leave my wooden shoes by the fireplace this week. Too much going on, I guess.

For those who don't know, this past Wednesday, Dec. 6, is the annual commemoration of Saint Nicholas, known as *Sinterklass* in my Dutch heritage and language. My particular Dutch tradition holds that, on the evening of Dec. 5, *Sinterklaas* leaves presents, including in the form of chocolates or an orange, in the shoes of Dutch children. We leave our shoes — often a ceremonial wooden shoe — in front of the fireplace or near the door for *Sinterklass*.

Saint Nicholas, of course, is a real person on which these traditions of *Sinterklass* and Santa Claus are based. The real Nicholas was born during the third century in the village of Patara, on the southern coast of Turkey. His wealthy parents, who raised him to be a devout Christian, died in an epidemic while Nicholas was still young. Obeying Jesus' words to "sell what you own and give the money to the poor," Nicholas used his whole inheritance to assist the needy, the sick, and the suffering. He dedicated his life to serving God and was made Bishop of Myra while still a young man. Bishop Nicholas became

known throughout the land for his generosity to those in need, his love for children, and his concern for sailors and ships.

Under the Roman Emperor Diocletian, who ruthlessly persecuted Christians, Bishop Nicholas was exiled and imprisoned. After his release, Nicholas attended the Council of Nicaea in AD 325. (We still occasionally say the creed written there!) He died Dec. 6, AD 343, in Myra and was buried in his cathedral church. The anniversary of his death became a day of celebration, St. Nicholas Day, Dec. 6 (Dec. 19 on the Julian calendar).

Through the centuries many stories and legends have been told of St. Nicholas' life and deeds.

One legend tells of a poor man with three daughters. In those days a young woman's father had to offer prospective husbands something of value — a dowry. The larger the dowry, the better the chance that a young woman would find a good husband. Without a dowry, a woman was unlikely to marry. This poor man's daughters, without dowries, were therefore destined to be sold into slavery. Mysteriously, on three different occasions, a bag of gold appeared in their home, providing the needed dowries. The bags of gold, tossed through an open window, are said to have landed in stockings or shoes left before the fire to dry. This led to the custom of children hanging stockings or putting out shoes, eagerly awaiting gifts from Saint Nicholas. Sometimes the story is told with gold balls instead of bags of gold. Those gold balls have been for generations represented by oranges.

We all have our own particular traditions during holiday season. It might be a family tradition, or one from our ethnic forebears. Almost always, these traditions are intended to tell a story and carry on a message. In Dutch, *Sinterklass* is also called *De Goedheiligman* ("The Good Holy Man"). In this month often known for its hustle and bustle — in reality, often for its excesses — Saint Nicholas is a reminder of who the season calls us to be.

For more information on St. Nicolas (and with thanks for much of the history on which I drew for this Jottings), visit the Saint Nicholas Center online (<http://www.stnicholascenter.org/pages/home/>).