

# The New Epistle

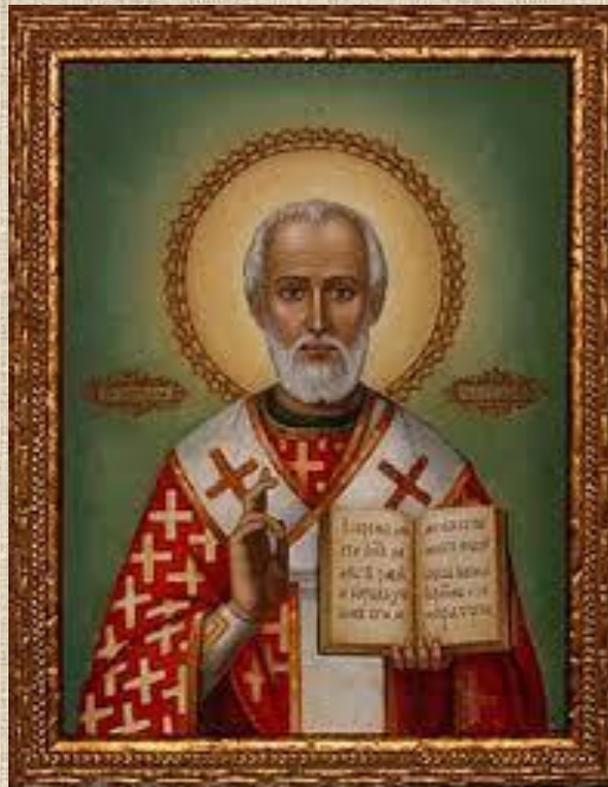
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## December



St. Nicholas of Myra

## St Nicholas of Myra

Nicholas was born during the third century in the village of Patara. At the time the area was Greek and is now 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 suffered for his faith, was exiled and imprisoned. The prisons were so full of bishops, priests, and deacons, there was no room for the real criminals—murderers, thieves and robbers. After his release, Nicholas attended the Council of Nicaea in AD 325. He died December 6, AD 343 in Myra and was buried in his cathedral church, where a unique relic, called manna, formed in his grave. This liquid substance, said to have healing powers, fostered the growth of devotion to Nicholas. The anniversary of his death became a day of celebration, St. Nicholas Day, December 6th (December 19 on the Julian Calendar).

Through the centuries many stories and legends have been told of St. Nicholas' life and deeds. These accounts help us understand his extraordinary character and why he is so beloved and revered as protector and helper of those in need.

One of the oldest stories showing St. Nicholas as a protector of children takes place long after his death. The townspeople of Myra were celebrating the good saint on the eve of his feast day when a band of Arab pirates from Crete came into the district. They stole treasures from the Church of Saint Nicholas to take away as booty. As they were leaving town, they snatched a young boy, Basilios, to make into a slave. The emir, or ruler, selected Basilios to be his personal cupbearer, as not knowing the language, Basilios would not understand what the king said to those around him. So, for the next year Basilios waited on the king, bringing his wine in a beautiful golden cup. For Basilios' parents, devastated at the loss of their only child, the year passed slowly, filled with grief. As the next St. Nicholas' feast day approached, Basilios' mother would not join in the festivity, as it was now a day of tragedy. However, she was persuaded to have a simple observance at home—with quiet prayers for Basilios' safekeeping. Meanwhile, as Basilios was fulfilling his tasks serving the emir, he was suddenly whisked up and away. St. Nicholas appeared to the terrified boy, blessed him, and set him down at his home back in Myra. Imagine the joy and wonderment when Basilios amazingly appeared before his parents, still holding the king's golden cup. This is the first story told of St. Nicholas protecting children—which became his primary role in the West.

Several stories tell of Nicholas and the sea. When he was young, Nicholas sought the holy by making a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. There as he walked where Jesus walked, he sought to more deeply experience Jesus' life, passion, and resurrection. Returning by sea, a mighty storm threatened to wreck the ship. Nicholas calmly prayed. The terrified sailors were amazed when the wind and waves suddenly calmed, sparing them all. And so St. Nicholas is the patron of sailors and voyagers.

Widely celebrated in Europe, St. Nicholas' feast day, December 6th, kept alive the stories of his goodness and generosity. In Germany and Poland, boys dressed as bishops begged alms for the poor—and sometimes for themselves! In the Netherlands and Belgium, St. Nicholas arrived on a steamship from Spain to ride a white

horse on his gift-giving rounds. December 6th is still the main day for gift giving and merrymaking in much of Europe. For example, in the Netherlands St. Nicholas is celebrated on the 5th, the eve of the day, by sharing candies (thrown in the door), chocolate initial letters, small gifts, and riddles. Dutch children leave carrots and hay in their shoes for the saint's horse, hoping St. Nicholas will exchange them for small gifts.

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I grew up in Key West, the son of an American Presbyterian minister and a Dutch mother. St Nicholas was very much part of my childhood! Sinterklaas (as he is called by us Dutch) arrived mysteriously every year in the evening of December 6, leaving a laundry basket (which looked suspiciously like my mother's laundry basket) filled with all manner of wrapped presents. The night before, we had all put a shoe in front of a closed-and-curtained-for-the-winter outer door in the living room (no fireplaces in tropical houses, in front of which the shoe is supposed to go). In the morning, we would find a small gift, perhaps a candy bar. A bag of salt meant you had been naughty, and didn't deserve a treat. (For the record, one year I *did* get a bag a salt.)

If you had been naughty, it might happen that when the Good Saint came to your house, he might discover his bag of presents was empty. If that was the case, he would put you in his bag and take you back with him to Spain, to work in his shops and factories making presents for all the good children.

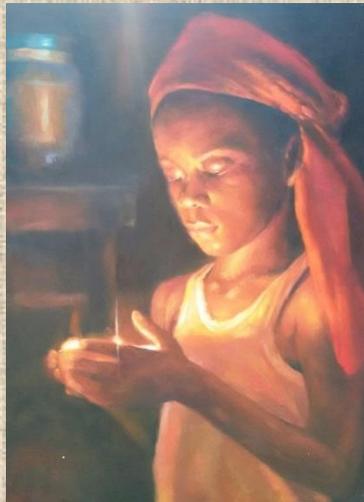
Part of the gift tradition involves the occasional package wrapped in multiple layers of wrapping paper. For this reason, wrapping paper is always carefully removed and kept intact, rather than ripped off as Americans tend to do. The reason is that any present – especially a large one – may well have another layer of paper under the first, and someone else's name might be on it! After 5-6 layers of paper have been unwrapped and the present has gone to everyone in the room, you come to a cardboard box. You open it, only to discover another wrapped box inside! Once again, you discover multiple layers of paper, and a present that goes around the room. Finally, you get to the last small cardboard box. Inside is an envelope with your name. You open the envelope, and find a poem, one that is humorous, and also points out your quirks and shortcomings (like perpetually misplacing your keys, or losing your socks, or (if you are a man) leaving the toilet seat up), and then compliments you on your persistence through all these layers of wrappings; the poem then instructs you where you will find your present, which is likely to be in another room of the house; perhaps under your bed, or in the linen closet behind the towels. You go, and there indeed is a wrapped something with your name, only one layer of paper, and it is something that is truly nice, a very special present. (Poems are a big part of the Dutch Sinterklaas tradition.)

It was just such a present that ended up with me, and instructed me to go upstairs to my bedroom where I would find the present under my bed. I was terrified!!! I knew I had been less than stellar in the past year, and I knew Sinterklaas would be up there waiting to take me back to Spain. It took very considerable begging and pleading on my part to convince my very skeptical parents to have one of them come up with me. You see, their refusal to accompany me up the stairs only confirmed the truth that the Good Saint was up there, waiting. Eventually my father agreed to come halfway up the stairs, and promised that if I started screaming, he'd come and rescue me.

Turned out there was no Saint lurking in my bedroom waiting to snatch me away to Spain, but there was a nicely wrapped box under my bed. I no longer recall what was in it, but boy do I remember the rest of it!

+Thurlow

The Leadership & Clergy of  
the Progressive Episcopal Church  
wish everyone  
a blessed Holy Season.



May we all be the Light of Christ  
in the world around us.



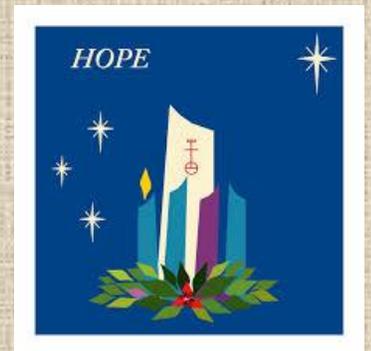
## From the Secretary General ...

What a year it has been! We continue to witness considerable political turmoil throughout the country, and rampant racism and xenophobia. Too many incumbent politicians seem intent on making life very difficult for many Americans, and seem to have no regard for even basic human needs. Our political landscape can well be described in one word: *depressing*.

As you know, I recently lost my mother, and now that most of the estate administration is done, I can start really digging in to the abundance of boxes occupying my dining room and vestibule – all by inheritance. Before I can unpack the bags and boxes of bed linens, the upstairs linen closet must be excavated from the catch-all that it has become .... Two steps backward to go one step forward, it seems. But I will finally have time to mourn and more fully reflect on my mother's 88 years.

Fr. Tommy Spain has also just lost his mother, and no doubt is going through the same reflections and emotions as I am, as have any of us who have lost a parent in or near the end-of-year holiday season.

But how appropriate that Advent is upon us – the Season of Hope! Jesus was regarded as the Second Moses. Despite the political gloom we see all around us, we see people resisting that gloom, doing their part to counter the gloom, counter the darkness with the Light of Love. There is a slow uprising, much of it behind the scenes and underground, but it is there. From time to time we catch wondrous glimpses of it. These glimpses give us hope, and the call to love one another is even greater than before. Remember the words of the prophet Micah: *“But what does the Lord require of you, but to seek justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God?”*



Jesus taught us that the kingdom of heaven is within us, and he also gave us the key to unlocking it. That key is found in the quote from Micah, and it is found in the Great Commandment. We each have the key to unlocking the kingdom of heaven within ourselves, and that same key can unlock the kingdom of heaven in those around us as well. Yes, I know ... it sometimes feels as if we need more than a key to help open the kingdom of heaven in those around us ... perhaps bolt cutters and blow-torches!

But might we take a cue from the headlines from not so long ago, the ones that said, “Yet she persisted”? We too should persist! Persist in showing kindness to all people! Yes, this is a challenge at times, but Matthew's gospel teaches us in Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman (Canaanites were regarded by the Jews as the lowest “scum of the earth”) that God and his love are big enough for ***all*** people! When we show kindness, when we love mercy, we bring Hope and the Christ-Light to the world around us, and the world is the better for it. May we share (and live!) the Light of Hope with the world around us!

Blessings & Peace!

A wonderful interview with Mike Morrell and John Pavlovitz on Making Advent Great (Again). Why do we want to make Advent great again? What's happened to make Advent not-so-great? Many of us are struggling. What on earth does 'Emmanuel' mean when the world's going mad? Also reflections on the first year of Trump's presidency, the fate of progressive Christianity, and where we're finding hope for the holidays.

"A religion based on the teachings of Jesus? We should try that!"

**MAKE  
ADVENT  
GREAT  
AGAIN**

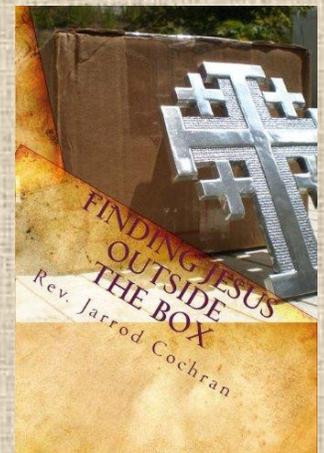
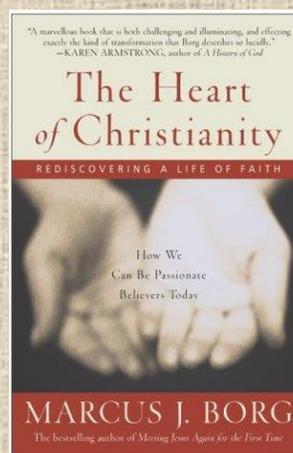
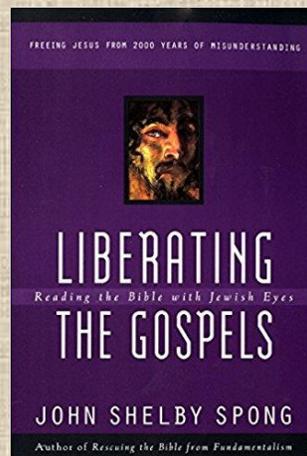
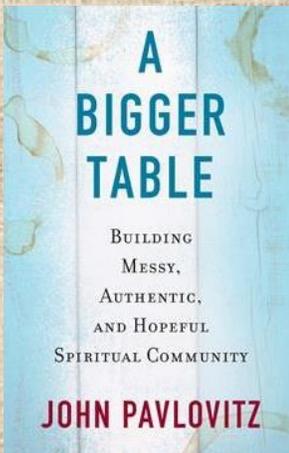
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## Winter Reading

Winter is rapidly approaching, and many a cold night lends itself to curling up with a good book (or two, or three, or four ...) to read. If you are lucky enough to have a wood-burning stove or a fireplace, then a comfy chair next to it, along with a cup of tea or cocoa are wonderful accompaniments to reading!

Here are some excellent books to consider for your winter reading, and note that they also make wonderful gifts as well. #4 is by our own Rev. Jarrod Cochran!



1. [A Bigger Table](#), John Pavlovitz, 2017, Westminster John Knox Press, ISBN-13: 978-0664262679
2. [Liberating the Gospels](#), John Shelby Spong, 1997, HarperOne, ISBN-13: 978-0060675578
3. [The Heart of Christianity](#), Marcus Borg, 2015, HarperOne, ISBN13: 978-0060730680
4. [Finding Jesus Outside the Box](#), Rev. Jarrod Cochran, 2008, Doulos Christou Press/Progressive Christian Alliance Press, ASIN: B002L16L6I



St. Nicholas astride his white horse, accompanied by his Moorish assistant, Black Peter.

Or in this case, multiple Black Peters.

St Nicholas arrives on a steamship from Spain, accompanied with a team of Moorish assistants to help hand out presents and candy and other yummy edibles.



Sinterklaas (St Nicholas) has a Book with the names of ALL children. The book has two sections, one each for good children and bad children. Here is checking his book to see in which section this young boy's name is listed. (And tell him that if it's in the "Bad" section, what he can do to move it to the "Good" section.) But where it is now determines what he will get out of the bag that Zwarte Piet (Black Peter) is holding in the background! It could be a bag of salt!