

THE EPISTLE

Saint James' Episcopal Church
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December 2021

This Month's Cover

This month we diverge from our usual religious art and present a secular illustration instead. It is Thomas Nast's *Merry Old Santa Claus*, first published in *Harper's Weekly* in 1881. It was this cartoon, based on Clement C. Moore's 1823 poem *A Visit from Saint Nicholas* ("Twas the night before Christmas"), that established the image of Santa Claus that has been known around the world ever since. Up to that time he had always been portrayed as Saint Nicholas, a tall thin man in modified bishop's robes. He was based on the legends of Saint Nicholas of Myra (AD 273-343), the patron saint of school-boys, sailors, money-lenders and wolves (!). He was associated with gift-giving because he was generous with his own wealth in helping the poor. His feast day is the day of his martyrdom, December 6, but over the centuries he came to be increasingly associated with Christmas, possibly because of his gift-giving.

The Dutch name for Saint Nicholas is *Sinter Klaas*, and that is what he was called by the Dutch settlers in New Amsterdam (New York). Many of them migrated to the western territories during the American expansion. Even though they then spoke primarily English, many retained their old Dutch traditions, including calling Saint Nicholas *Sinter Klaas*. Bret Harte, the great chronicler of the Old West, had heard these legends, but had never seen the name written. In 1872 he spelled it as it sounded to him when he published his short story "When Santa Claus Came to Simpson's Bar." That spelling stuck, and from that time on Santa Claus had his name. He had been given a description by Clement C. Moore in 1823, a name by Bret Harte in 1872, and in 1881 Thomas Nast gave him an image.

Richard R. Losch+

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A Word from the Editor

Despite all the grouching about celebrating Christmas during Advent and the commercialism and secularization of the feast, one of the reasons most people love Christmas so much is because of the excitement that all that commercialism and secularization generates. The frenzy of decorating, scheduling, partying, general good fellowship, and even shopping, is stimulating. Even though in many ways we dread all that Christmas shopping, down inside many people like it because it marks off this time of year as something special. Not all that long ago we would pore over Christmas lists trying to decide on just the right gift for each person, but nowadays there is a tendency just to try to outspend the other guy. All these things, secular as they may be, can be good. At this time of year people tend to be a little less selfish, a little kinder and more thoughtful, and thus a little happier. There is something pleasant about hearing “Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire,” especially when you actually smell eggnog and chestnuts roasting on an open fire. Christmastime a happy time for most people.

The only thing that is all too often missing in this pleasant atmosphere is the remembrance of what it is really all about. It is the celebration of the birth of Christ, the incarnate Son of God who came into the world to redeem us from sin and death. For all the horrors that have been perpetrated throughout history by sinful humans in the name of Christ, the world is nonetheless a far better place because of the values and perspectives that Christianity has brought into it. The joy of the gift of Christ is the reason for the joy that we experience at this time of year, and we must not forget that. We do not have to discard the secular aspects of the celebration—there is much positive to be said for many of them—but they become meaningless and will not last if we fail to remember the real reason for them. As hackneyed as it is, there is truth in the old saw, “Jesus is the reason for the season.”

Father Rick Losch

Be Wordly Wise

Prophet

To the average modern speaker, a prophet is someone who foretells the future (as in calling a meteorologist a “weather prophet”). In correct usage, however, a prophet is not a seer, but someone who says what someone of higher authority has told him to say—he is, in a sense, a spokesman. The word is most often used in a religious context, where the prophet speaks for God. The Old Testament is full of situations where God calls someone to be a prophet and he resists, saying that he does not know what to say. God says, in effect, “Don’t worry about it. I’ll tell you what to say.” The prophet foretells the future only if God tells him to say something about the future, which is a very small part of most of the Old Testament prophecies. Most of these are to the effect of, “If you do (or don’t do) such-and-such, then such-and-such will happen.” In this sense all of us can foresee the future. I can foresee that if you jump off a high cliff you will be injured or killed.

The word prophet comes to us from the Old French *prophete*. That in turn is from the Latin *propheta*, which is from the Greek *prophētēs* (προφήτης), spokesman or agent. That comes from the prefix *pro-*, for or in place of, and the root *phae-*, speak (*phanai*, φαναι, to speak). In the Septuagint (the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures), *prophētēs* was used to translate the Hebrew *navi* (נָבִי), prophet or spokesman. In the Vulgate, Saint Jerome chose the Latin *vates*, seer or soothsayer, to translate the Hebrew *navi*. This may have led to the popular misconception of a prophet being a seer. Probably a better choice would have been the Latin *propheta*. *Vates* also derived from the same Indo-European root (*bha-*) as the Greek *phanai*, speak. Interestingly, the archaic English word *fane*, meaning temple, and the word *profane*, meaning unholy, come from the same root. A temple is where one speaks to a god, and profanity, whose roots literally mean “out in front of the temple,” is unworthy or worldly speaking.

Richard R. Losch+

Annual Parish Meeting

Our Annual Parish Meeting will be held on Sunday, December 5th immediately following the 11:00 a.m. service. Reports of various parish organizations will be given, and two new Vestry members will be elected to replace Joe Moore and Rosalie Dew, whose terms expire December 31. They will not be eligible for re-election to the Vestry for one year. Other members of the Vestry are Roy Underwood and Ethel Scott, whose terms expire on December 31, 2022.

To be eligible to serve on the Vestry, one must be:

- an active confirmed communicant in good standing at St. James' (communicants' names are printed in bold type in the Parish Directory);
- frequent and regular in worship attendance;
- a supporter of the work of St. James' by an annual financial pledge to the operating budget;
- willing and able to attend Vestry meetings and perform the work expected of a Vestry Member. Vestry meetings are normally scheduled after Sunday services on as as-needed basis.

Hiram Patrenos

Wilmer Hall Christmas Contribution

St. James' will be making a special gift to Wilmer Hall for its Christmas needs this year. Last year because of your generous contributions, we were able to contribute \$1500 and we hope to be able to make that same gift this year or perhaps an even larger one. Envelopes are available on the table at the back of the church and contributions should be made payable to St. James' and designated for "Wilmer Hall Christmas". Envelopes may be placed in the Alms Basins or given to Hiram Patrenos. So that we may forward our contribution to Wilmer Hall in time for use this Christmas, the last day for making a contribution for this year is Sunday, December 5th.

Hiram Patrenos

Christmas Service

Because of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, we will be keeping our celebration simple again this year. Our Christmas service will begin on Friday, December 24th, Christmas Eve, with our traditional Christmas Eve Mass at 5:30 p.m. Father Losch will be the celebrant and our nursery will be open for this service. At this time, we DO plan to have our parish Christmas party immediately following the service. We will be closely monitoring our local data and conditions and will announce if it should be necessary to cancel.

Hiram Patrenos

The Mandela Effect

A recent poll showed that a large number of people clearly remember that Nelson Mandela died in prison in the late 1980s. The only problem is that Mandela died at his home in South Africa on December 5, 2013 at the age of 95. As a result of this, the phenomenon of large numbers of people remembering the same incorrect thing has come to be known as the Mandela Effect. There are three classic examples from the movies of the Mandela Effect that most people will recognize. One is Cary Grant, with his unique British-American accent, saying, “Judy, Judy, Judy.” Many people remember it clearly, but it never happened. Another is Humphry Bogart in *Casablanca* saying, “Play it again, Sam.” What he said was, “Play it, Sam,” yet countless people vividly remember the “again” that was not there. The third is Darth Vader saying, “Luke, I am your father.” What he said was, “No. *I* am your father,” with the emphasis on “I.” Unfortunately, the Mandela Effect runs rampant in people’s memories of quotations from Shakespeare and the Bible. A survey a few years ago showed that 65% of people who claim familiarity with the Bible think that “God helps those who help themselves” is in the Bible. It isn’t.

Richard R. Losch+

Heart, Soul, Mind and Strength

The Torah says, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength” (Deut. 6:5). When the scribe asked Jesus what is the greatest commandment (Mk. 12:28ff), he quoted this. All three synoptic gospels in telling the story, add “and with all your mind,” a phrase which is not in the Deuteronomy passage. In almost every case when the New Testament quotes the Old Testament, the quotation is almost identical to the Septuagint (Greek) passage. Why, then, does this extra phrase appear?

The answer is because of the readers for whom the evangelists were writing. Luke wrote primarily for a Gentile readership, and Mark for both Jewish and Gentile readers. This is why they so often explain many Jewish words or customs. Matthew wrote primarily to the Jews, but he also knew that many Gentiles would read his gospel. It all hangs on their understanding of the functions of the human body. The Jews anciently believed that the heart is the center of feelings, emotion and thinking. The Gentiles, on the other hand, accepted the Greek idea that attributed feelings to the liver, emotions to the heart, and thinking to the brain. To a Greeks, the phrase, “heart, soul and strength” did not include thinking or any mental process, while to the Jews “heart” included those. For that reason the evangelists added “mind” to Jesus’ statement in order to make its intent clear to all readers, Jews and Gentiles alike.

Richard R. Losch+

Crusader Sword Discovered

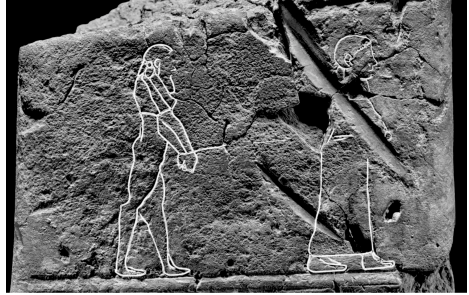
A very well-preserved 12th century Crusader sword has been discovered by a scuba diver off the coast of Haifa, Israel. It is over 4 feet long, and undoubtedly belonged to a Crusader knight who was shipwrecked there. It is covered with barnacles, but the sword and its hilt are in amazingly good condition. It has been turned over to the Israel Antiquities Authority.

Richard R. Losch+

How to Get Rid of a Ghost

There is nothing new about ghost stories. Almost 150 years ago a 3,500-year-old Assyrian stone tablet was discovered and registered with the British Museum, although it was never put on display. It bore a strange cuneiform inscription in Akkadian, the language of ancient Assyria. If you are being haunted by a lonely ghost, this tablet will tell you how to get rid of it. First, you must make a statue of the ghost, or rather of the dead person whose spirit is now the ghost. Next make a statue of someone with whom the ghost could fall in love. Put the two statues together and say the proper prayers and incantations, and the ghost will fall in love and leave you, leading its lover into the underworld to be together forever. This may not make the lover particularly happy, but at least you will be rid of the ghost.

For well over a century the tablet, ignored and deemed unimportant, lay in a drawer with many other inscribed stones of the same era. Earlier this year Dr. Irving Finkel, the curator of the Middle Eastern Department of the British Museum, was sorting and cataloging them when the lamplight happened to hit the back of the tablet at



just the right angle. It is so badly worn that no one had ever noticed it before, and they did not realize that there is anything there. To Finkel, it was like one of those visual puzzles where once you see the image you can never again unsee it. It is the image of a female ghost leading a bound man, presumably into the underworld place of the dead. The man does not look at all pleased by his situation. In the illustration the lines have been outlined in white to make them clearer. What makes this unique is that while ghost stories are probably as old as language, this is by far the oldest image of a ghost ever found.

Richard R. Losch+

The Salt of the Earth

In the ancient world there were many places where salt was so hard to come by that it was equivalent to money. We tend to take it for granted today because it is so readily available, but this was not so in ancient times. Salt is essential for life, and was even more so before refrigeration and modern chemistry made food preservation so simple. In ancient times salt was used as we do today to improve the flavor of food, but that was one of its least important uses. In warm climates, as any athlete knows, sweating removes a lot of salt from the body. This is an essential electrolyte, and if it falls below a critical level the body can weaken and even die. The Romans understood this, so part of a soldier's pay was a *salarium*, a salt allowance, from which we get the word salary. Salt was often used as money, and was accepted for tax payments. It was also used as part of sacrificial offerings (Lev. 2:13) and as topical medicine on wounds to prevent infection (ouch!). It was a necessary chemical in many industries, including leather curing and textile processing, and it was the primary means of preserving food, equal in importance to drying. When Jesus told his followers, "You are the salt of the earth" (Matt. 5:13), he was referring not to flavor, but to spiritual survival.

One of the few places in the world where salt was plentiful was Judea, because the Dead Sea is liberally surrounded with it. Slabs of dry salt are there just waiting to be picked up. The problem is that mixed throughout it are large amounts of other mineral salts that are considerably less desirable, thus limiting its usefulness.¹ It is fine for most industrial uses and for food flavor enhancement, but it is a mediocre preservative. In the rainy season there was always a risk that the salt, which attracts water, will leach out of the slabs, leaving just the other useless and less soluble minerals behind. When that happened, the slabs were broken up to be strewn on pathways. This is what Jesus meant when he said that if the salt has lost its saltiness it

¹ Among these is magnesium sulfate, which has a laxative effect.

is good only to be thrown out and trampled underfoot.

Recently a team of archaeologists from Haifa University found evidence that salt production was an important industry in Judea. It was not from the Dead Sea region, however, but on the northwest coast around Haifa. The team has found dozens of salt installations there, many of which seem to have been used for centuries between 200 BC and AD 1300. Although there is no archaeological evidence yet to substantiate it, there are hints that salt production might have gone back as far as Canaanite times. For example, there are two references in the Bible to a now unknown town of Misraphoth-Maim, which means “Burning Water” (Josh. 11:8, 13:6). This may refer to the evaporation pools used in extracting salt from sea water.

The coast around Haifa is perfect for salt harvesting from sea water. It consists mainly of hard rock and thick clay beds, where natural inlets and man-made pools can collect water that will evaporate in the sun and dry air. That area is ideal for this industry, both because of its geology and because for a long period in the summer it was hotter and drier than almost anywhere else on the Mediterranean coasts. During the summer season the salt can be harvested, and it is as pure as modern commercial sea-salt. When properly sealed in clay pots it will remain dry even in the rainy season, and could be shipped to its buyers anywhere in the salt-hungry Mediterranean world.

Richard R. Losch+

The First Mortal Sinner

If you were to ask who, according to the Bible, brought sin and death into the world, you might get a disagreement as to whether it was Adam or Eve, but those would be the only candidates. Some say it was Adam, because Saint Paul says so (Rom. 5:12,14); some say it was Eve, because it was she who first ate the forbidden fruit and then gave it to Adam (Gen. 3:12); and some say it was both, since it was a joint action and Adam, who was there, could have stopped Eve before she ate.

In ancient times, it was not quite so clear as to who was

responsible. The argument was not whether it was Adam or Eve, whom they held equally responsible for their action, but rather whether it was they or Cain who brought death into the world. The very first death, many argued, was not because of Adam and Eve's disobedience, but because Cain allowed his jealous rage to supersede his wisdom, and murdered his brother Abel. Many of the ancient scholars argued that Adam and Eve's disobedience subjected us to pain and toil, but it was Cain's sin that introduced death into the world and made us all subject to it. In the Book of the Wisdom of Solomon, in which the words Wisdom and God are usually interchangeable, the disobedience of Adam and Eve is glossed over as a lapse of Wisdom (i.e. a temporary retreat from God), not as a death-causing sin. Cain, on the other hand, was unrighteous and rejected Wisdom, thus committing murder and bringing on the conditions that necessitated the Flood, in which he died:

“Wisdom protected the first-formed father of the world, when he alone had been created; she delivered him from his transgression and gave him strength to rule all things. But when an unrighteous man [Cain] departed from [Wisdom] in his anger, he perished because in rage he killed his brother. When the earth was flooded because of him, Wisdom again saved it, steering the righteous man [Noah] by a paltry piece of wood” (Wisdom of Solomon, 10:1-4, NIV).

There is nothing in Scripture that identifies the serpent in the Garden of Eden with Satan. In fact, the concept of Satan as a personified evil enemy of God did not crystallize until the Babylonian Exile. To the ancient scholars, the serpent was just a snake, which on its own merits (or lack thereof) was considered a vile and loathsome creature. They did not see the fall of man as the result of Satan's intervention, but as the result of man's rejection of Wisdom. As late as the 1st century AD the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus said that the punishment promised if Adam should eat the forbidden fruit was not death, but “destruction” or “ruin” (Antiq. 1:40). He argued that aging and the eventual cessation of life was part of God's original

plan, but that it was to be a slow, gentle and not unpleasant process. Adam's sin simply made it faster and fearsome, but still natural. Josephus said that the death of Abel was unnatural not because it marked the end of a life, but because it was violent and premature (Antiq. 1:46). Because it was unnatural it tore the fabric of creation and thus introduced violence, discord, and sudden, cruel and unexpected death into the world.

For Christians, Saint Paul pretty well closed the issue by blaming Adam for the presence of death, but even so there was still some theological discussion in the early Church as to whether the blame lay on Adam or Cain. Jewish scholars, on the other hand, continued to argue the matter for centuries. To us today, Saint Paul's condemnation of Adam seems pretty obvious and clear-cut. To his first century readers, on the other hand, it may not have been at all that obvious.

Richard R. Losch+

The Venus of Willendorf

Every Anthropology 101 class roars with laughter the first time the professor shows a slide of the "Venus of Willendorf." She is a 25,000-year-old nude, obese 4.5" tall statuette of what is thought by many to be a fertility goddess. In fact, no one is quite sure what she really represented. The figurine was discovered in 1908 in an archaeological site outside Willendorf, Austria, but it is carved out of a type of stone that is not found in the region. This means it was imported from somewhere else. In fact, she is not alone. A great many similar figurines have been found in paleolithic sites all over Europe. Since she predates the Roman goddess Venus by thousands of years, some archaeologists object to the use of the name Venus. They say it has too many associations with much later mythology (the earliest reference to Venus is only 4,000 years old), and they prefer to call her the Woman of Willendorf.



The fact that there are similar figurines from all over Europe indicates that there was communication between widely

dispersed paleolithic tribes, and that they shared at least some cultural traits. Like all the other similar figurines found, she has no arms or feet, and scholars agree that she never did. If she was ever intended to stand erect, it would have been by embedding the bottoms of her legs in sand or soft clay. She also has no face, her head being completely surrounded by what may be either plaited hair or some kind of headdress. Her exaggerated sexual features are what make many believe that she represented a goddess either of erotic love or of fertility, or that she was a fetish that would insure fertility by being held during sexual activity. Some also suggest that she may represent a “mother goddess,” a deity common to ancient religions. A mother goddess is a goddess of the earth from which the world and most of the other gods emanated, like the Greek Gaia or the Norse Jord¹. It is interesting that the anatomical accuracy of the folds of fat indicates that her sculptor was familiar with that much obesity, which is something one would not normally have expected in a “cave woman.”

Another interesting speculation is that these figurines may have been children’s toys, or that they may have represented the ideal physical form for women. The latter is not out of the question, as many ancient and modern cultures have shown a preference for obese women. This is true even in some modern American subcultures. When we think of these figurines as possible children’s toys, it opens a whole new area of speculation. What would archaeologists digging in a 20th century landfill 25,000 years from now make of the discovery of a plastic Barbie doll with her grossly exaggerated body proportions?

The lesson we can learn from this is that we must not be too quick to think we understand the customs, beliefs and values of other peoples about whom we actually know very little. Those people might be just as interested, shocked or amused by our cultural standards as we are by theirs.

Richard R. Losch+

¹ Her name is actually Jörð, pronounced Yurth, from which we get Earth.

Rome and the Volcano

The volcano that we usually associate with ancient Rome is Vesuvius, which destroyed the resort cities of Pompeii and Herculaneum in AD 78. There is another volcano halfway around the world, however, that may have been a major contributor to the collapse of the already unstable Roman Republic in 27 BC. A century before Christ was born, a series of land-reform conflicts between populist politicians and powerful landowners had already been chipping away at the foundations of the Republic for fifty years. By the time Julius Caesar was born in 100 BC, tensions had built that eventually resulted in a series of civil wars. By his victory in one of these, Caesar had been able to take control, and in 45 BC he declared himself Dictator for Life. This resulted in his assassination a year later in 44 BC, which prepared the way for the final civil war between Marc Antony and Octavian. Octavian's victory thrust him into sufficient power that he became Rome's first Emperor, marking the end of the almost 500-year-old Republic.

There was civil unrest among the people all around the Mediterranean at that time. One of the contributing factors to this was a great famine that had begun shortly after Caesar's assassination. Octavian (Caesar's grand-nephew and adopted son) was very unpopular at the time.¹ He had been brutally ruthless in his rise to power against the popular and charming Antony, but he was a brilliant politician and propagandist, which Antony was not. He milked this famine for all it was worth as propaganda against Antony, claiming that the gods were angry because of Antony's abandonment of Rome in favor of Cleopatra's Egypt. His supporters in Egypt, where the famine also raged, claimed that it was punishment from the gods because Cleopatra had prostituted herself to a Roman.

¹ He remained unpopular (but feared) during his first few years as the Emperor Augustus, but he turned away from his open ruthlessness after he had gained power. When he died he was the most beloved emperor until Titus, 65 years later. Behind the scenes both he and his wife Livia remained ruthless, however, as many closest to them were painfully aware.

One of the duties of the divine Pharaoh (Cleopatra) was to insure Egypt's prosperity, and the famine showed that she had clearly failed to do so. The morale game paid off for Octavian when his outnumbered military defeated Antony's forces at Actium in 31 BC. Antony committed suicide, leaving Octavian as the sole ruler of Rome. The famine had been his best friend.

Research published in 2020 by the National Academy of Science identified the cause of the famine. It was the eruption of the volcano Okmok in the Aleutian Islands in 43 BC, a year after Caesar's assassination. It was the strongest volcanic eruption on earth in the previous 2,500 years. It spewed so much ash into the atmosphere that the following decade was unnaturally cold and rainy. The temperature around the Mediterranean world dropped 7°C (12.5°F) for two years, and there were flooding rainfalls that entire time. Crops failed everywhere. Rome was dependent on Egyptian and Sicilian grain, both of which diminished greatly, so both Romans and Egyptians were on the verge of starvation. Such conditions historically have caused major civil unrest regardless of the political situation. Geologic events, especially those that influence climate, can have lasting effects on world history. The volcano caused the famine, and the famine is believed to have been a major factor in Rome's becoming a monarchy. The Republic was doomed to fall sooner or later, but if, despite its turmoil, it had lasted another century, Christianity might never have gotten a sufficient foothold to have changed world history as it did. The eruption of Okmok changed the world forever.

Richard R. Losch+

The Epistle is Online

The last eight years of *The Epistle* are now online. Go to <http://rlosch.com> and click on the "Epistle" tab at the top. On a mobile device, click on the blue menu at the top right and select the "Epistle" page. You can read it online or download it as a .pdf file. This is an easy way to share articles with others.

Richard R. Losch+

A Touch of Trivia

Don't be offended if you see an upside-down Christmas tree. It is not a modern corruption, but a Polish tradition called *Podłaźniczka*, "doing it the Polish way," that long predates the 16th century Christmas tree. In 12th century Poland the tradition began of hanging a spruce tree by its trunk from the rafters and decorating it with painted pine cones, fruit, nuts, ribbons and other bright objects. It symbolizes God's bounty funneling its way down to earth. It is still common in some parts of Poland and eastern Europe.

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JAMIE

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