

THE HERALD

Newsletter of the Orrville Grace Brethren Church

I Believe in Santa Claus

By Kevin Bauder

The apostle Paul was under arrest, being transported to Rome by a military guard. Along the way, his ship put in at the Lycian port of Myra, where the Roman centurion found a different ship that was sailing to Italy (Acts 27:5-6). The book of Acts does not tell how long Paul was in Myra between ships.

Nobody knows when or how the Christian church was established in Myra. Paul had previously ministered in cities near Myra, so perhaps missionaries from one of those churches may have gone to that town. Or perhaps Paul himself was able to do some preaching while waiting for the centurion to locate a ship to take Paul to Italy.

What we do know is that the church in Myra survived until persecution came under the Emperor Diocletian. The Diocletian persecution was the most widespread and deadly harassment of Christians in Roman history. So systematic and thorough was the

persecution that the emperor believed he had wiped out Christianity forever. He even minted a coin to commemorate the event.

Well into the Diocletian persecution, the church in Myra found itself without a pastor. Unable to locate a new shepherd (pastors were special targets of the emperor), the church sought counsel from neighboring pastors. These church leaders gathered in Myra to pray and to seek the Lord's provision of a new bishop for the church. When they had exhausted every alternative, they gave themselves to a night of prayer. They asked God to send His choice as the first person to enter the church building in the morning.

In the church at Myra was a very young man named Nicholas. His parents were wealthy and privileged, and they were also Christians. Somehow they had escaped the persecution. Though no record exists of Nicholas's conversion, he clearly was reared in the Christian faith. As he approached manhood, many opportunities were open to him in commerce and civil affairs. He sensed, however, that God had something else for him. He did not know what, but he began to pray for the Lord's leading. Each

period of prayer seemed to bring a greater sense of his unworthiness and sinfulness.

After one long night of struggle, Nicholas determined to go to the church to pray. Arriving early in the morning, he was surprised to find the building occupied by pastors from the surrounding churches. These men asked him who he was, and he replied, "I am Nicholas, a sinner." Delighted with such a humble response, the pastors announced to Nicholas that God had called him to become the next pastor of the church. Nicholas took this as the answer to his prayers and the Lord's direction for his life.

Though Nicholas had learned the Scriptures from his childhood, he pondered how a young man could pastor a church during persecution. He knew that Christians had to be taught to live by faith—but how could he teach them? The answer was obvious. He had to teach by modeling, and for Nicholas, modeling faith meant living in complete dependence upon God. Shortly after becoming the pastor in Myra, Nicholas gave away all of his wealth and possessions, committing himself publicly to live only by what God provided.

The city of Myra was dedicated to the worship of Diana—not the Roman goddess, but a goddess similar to Diana of the Ephesians. She was a fusion of the worst features of European and Asian deities. Nicholas abominated this goddess, but he was moved with compassion toward the people who ignorantly worshipped her.

Once the persecution ended, Nicholas determined to attack this pagan worship directly. He announced publicly that he intended to demolish the temple of Diana. If she was truly a goddess, then she could stop him without human help. Day after day Nicholas carried his tools to the temple. He dismantled the whole structure stone by stone, preaching Christ while he worked. When he stood triumphant among the ruins, many of the people of Myra abandoned their paganism and turned to Christianity.

There is an old story that Nicholas attended the Council of Nicea. Subsequent researches have shown that this legend is probably untrue, but Nicholas was certainly aware of Arianism. This new heresy denied that Jesus was truly God. It insisted that Jesus was the first and greatest of God's creatures, but that He was not eternal and did not share the divine nature. The task of the Council of Nicea was to answer Arianism and expose it as a perversion of Christianity. Even if Nicholas never attended the council, he certainly agreed with its decisions. He was a true worshipper of Jesus Christ, the God-man and Savior.

Through the years many stories have been told about Nicholas of Myra. Most of these appear to be fabrications, but some might likely be true. One of these concerns a poor man who had three daughters. Because he could provide no dowry, the daughters could not marry. The father determined to sell them into prostitution as they came of age. Nicholas heard about the

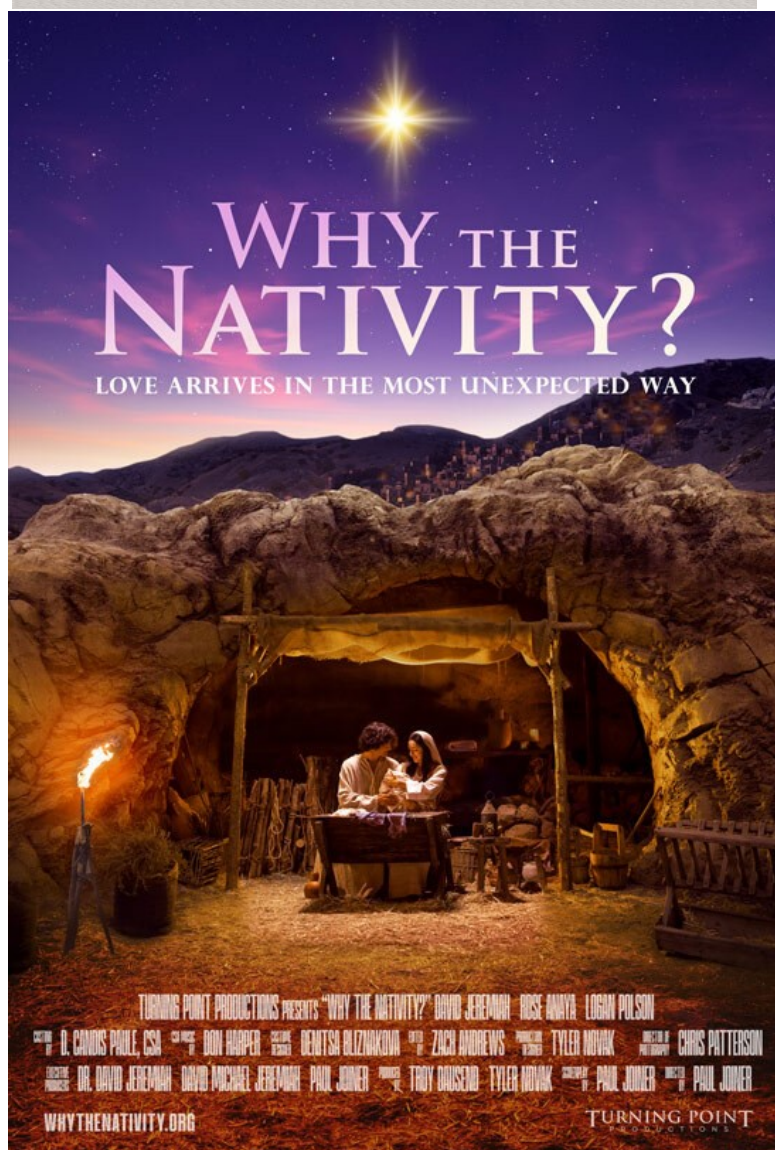
plan. The night before the eldest daughter was to be sold, the pastor crept to the man's home and left a bag of gold for her dowry. As each of the daughters came of age, he duplicated this generosity. For the third daughter, however, the father was watching and caught Nicholas in the act of leaving the money. The story is that Nicholas told him about the forgiveness that Christ offers, and the man repented and became a Christian. Incidentally, the symbol of St. Nicholas is still three gold balls, representing the three bags of gold.

Whether the story is true or not, it almost certainly bears the stamp of Nicholas's character. His generosity was legendary. That is why he became associated in myth with the giving of gifts, and that is why people still give gifts in his memory.

Saint Nicholas—Santa Claus—was not a fat man in a red suit who drove a sleigh pulled by reindeer. That character was invented by Thomas Nast and other merchandisers during the late nineteenth century. Saint Nicholas was a pastor. He was a man of faith, courage, and generosity. He was a true worshiper of Jesus Christ. Every indication is that he was genuinely a saint, according to the biblical definition of that term.

When children ask if I believe in Santa Claus, I tell them the truth. I most certainly do believe in him! Then I tell them who he was. More importantly, I tell them who he worshiped.

Coming Christmas Eve at 6:00pm



*Travel back in time and experience
the SIGHTS and SOUNDS of the very
first Christmas.*

*Why the Nativity? is a new Christmas
film about the birth of Jesus.*

Invite your friends and family!

FUNNIES

While carpooling, we pulled up to the driveway for our next passenger. We honked and waited, honked and waited and honked again.

Our coworker finally came out. "I'm sorry I kept you waiting," she said, climbing into the car. "But I only heard the third honk."

An optimist and a pessimist spend a week together on a tropical island. "Isn't this ocean just amazing?" the optimist says. "The endless horizon, the crashing waves, the soft sand...it makes you appreciate the beauty of this planet."

The pessimist says, "I don't think that rescue plane saw us."

A young father took a seat on the crowded bus next to an elderly man and plopped his one-year-old on his lap just as the little boy began to cry and fidget.

"That child is spoiled, isn't he?" the old man remarked.

"No," said the dad. "They all smell this way."

A young boy was staring intently at a neighbor's newborn when he announced, "We have a baby just like that at our house! He just has a different head."

Two hefty men came to install a new kitchen floor in a woman's house. After moving the stove and refrigerator, the job went pretty quickly.

As the two men were getting ready to leave, the woman asked them to move the heavy appliances back in place.

The two men demanded \$45, stating it was not in their contract.

Disgruntled, the woman paid them. A minute after they left, however, the doorbell rang. It was the two men. "Your car is blocking our van," they gruffly informed the woman, "and you need to move it."

"Sure," the woman said sweetly. "That will be \$45 please."

School had just started and the teacher was asking the class about their summer vacations. She turned to one boy and asked him what he did over the break.

"We visited my grandmother in Punxsutawney, Pennsylvania," he replied.

"That sounds like an excellent spelling word," the teacher said. "Can you tell the class how you spell that?"

Without hesitating, the boy said, "you know, come to think of it, we went to New York City too."

Teacher: "Yes Johnny, what is it?"

Johnny: "I don't want to scare you, but Papa said if I don't get better grades someone is due for a licking."