

*Lift up your heads, for your redemption draweth nigh*

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Today we celebrate the Second Sunday in Advent and the feast day of a great Advent Saint, St. Nicholas. The very same St. Nicholas who punched the heretic Arius at the council of Nicaea and has evolved into who our culture knows as Santa Claus. The real St. Nicholas lived around the turn of the fourth century and was the Bishop of Myra, a city in present day Turkey. He attended the great church council of Nicaea where he sided with the defenders of the true Catholic and Orthodox faith. St. Nicholas's life is one marked by miracles, wonders, and good works. Among his many miracles he is best known for having saved three girls from a life of prostitution by secretly giving them enough gold for their dowry. He also saved three innocent soldiers from a wrongful execution, raised three children from the dead, and fed his city by multiplying a shipment of flour during a particularly bad famine.

One lesser known legend of St. Nicholas is that he, like Christ, calmed a stormy sea. The story goes that as a young man St. Nicholas went on pilgrimage to the Holy Land. The voyage from Turkey to Israel was uneventful, and while in the Holy Land, walking where Jesus had walked, St. Nicholas felt closer to our Lord than ever before and he was inspired to pray that he might somehow share in the Life of Christ. The voyage back proved that God had taken St. Nicholas up on his prayer when the ship was caught in a terrible storm and began to sink and a sailor swept overboard. In the midst of the storm and the sinking ship St. Nicholas began to pray, and by his prayers God calmed the sea and rescued the sailor that had gone overboard.

A few decades later the ship of Holy Church was rocked and tossed about in the storm of heresy. Arianism, the belief that Jesus Christ became God, and was not the eternal Word of God had spread like wildfire over the known world. This heresy threatened to sink the Church and sweep her members overboard. The outcry of the Church was so great that the Emperor Constantine agreed to call a council of the Church which met in Nicaea. In this episode of St. Nicholas's life though we see that the great saints of the church are still human. St. Nicholas was so horrified and angered by the heretic Arius's claims about the Divinity of Jesus that he punched him in front of the entire council. St. Nicholas was deposed and imprisoned for his fist-fight by Emperor Constantine, after all, it was far from appropriate behavior for a Bishop. It was in the prison cell that St. Nicholas had a vision of Jesus and the Blessed Virgin Mary who restored him to the dignity and status of a Bishop.

Now we certainly encourage a gentler method of converting those who have strayed into heresy, but we see in St. Nicholas the marks of true faith and hope. St. Nicholas put his faith and hope totally in Jesus Christ, which made him zealous for our Lord, for the Gospel, and for our Lord's honor. Yet St. Nicholas discovered that our Lord is fully capable of defending His own honor, and of revealing the truth of who He is, even when it seems that the whole world has been led astray. We should note that it was not St. Nicholas's punch to Arius that helped to eventually defeat the heresy of Arianism, it was the Holy Spirit working through the members of the Church. The power of God revealing His wisdom to the Church Fathers, as He did to St. Athanasius, pointing them back to the Scriptures which *were written aforetime for our learning*. We are reminded this morning that the world may be tossed about and threatened with complete destruction but the Word of Jesus Christ and His promises to us, will never end, they will never be canceled out, they will never fail, they are eternal promises.

We hear in the Gospel this morning, that we like St. Nicholas will face storms; the waves and the seas will roar literally and spiritually, there will be *wars and rumors of wars*, there will be *distress of nations and perplexity*, with *signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars*. And then Jesus tells us, *when you see these things come to pass, know that the Kingdom of God is nigh at hand*. But they had these signs in St. Nicholas's day, these signs were in our grandparent's day, these signs are all around us today. But we should be filled with hope when we see these signs because we know that God is on the way, that our salvation, that our redemption draws near. The ship that is the Church may be tossed to and fro but it is no danger of sinking. The Church cannot be sunk, because the Church places its Faith and Hope in Christ.

Prebendary Melville Scott writes, *Without Christ the course of this world will be without hope. All will be distress, perplexity, fear, and foreboding, and those who have not learned to love Christ will ever dread His appearing*. Yet the Christian should have no reason to fear God or to dread His Advent. When we see these signs we should rejoice and be glad, because we know that the Lord comes to make all things right. The season of Advent is a season of hope, love, and joy, it is a season that should inspire faith. We pray that Advent inspires in us the Faith which St. Nicholas so passionately spent his life defending. Let us have faith, we must place our faith and hope in Jesus Christ. We have wrongly placed our hope in everything else; we have placed our hope in the Herod's, Constantine's, and empires of this world. Let us have hope in the faith that there is a root of Jesse who is Jesus Christ the Lord. Let us enthrone Him over our lives, in our minds and in our hearts. Let us

take to heart the words of our Lord Jesus Christ this morning, *Lift up your heads, for your redemption draweth nigh. Amen*