

Poem puts Santa in service of Christ

On the first Sunday of Advent, I visited the Festival of Trees at the Timonium Fairgrounds. Among the many vendors, I discovered Gizmo's Art, and I found a framed early representation of Santa Claus, and a poem I had never seen before. It was dated 1899, but no author was credited and no newspaper cited. I felt like I had discovered something from a time capsule, so I'd like to share sections of the poem with you as an early Christmas present. It's simply entitled "Santa Claus."

The poem begins:

"Your mommas have told you, I have no doubt, of what the Christmas is all about. How once in the sky a fiery gem was called the star of Bethlehem. And you'll soon be older, to understand of the glad new joy in all the land. When the people heard that Christ was born, just as the night gave way to morn. And the wise men bent o'er a cot of hay where the Virgin and the Savior lay."

It continues:

"The wise men turned, and to their surprise, a tree was growing before their eyes.

And on the top branch, cooing low, a dove was sitting as white as snow. And this was the Christ-tree, which shall bear gifts to good children everywhere. ... And one wise man who was old and gray, whose snowy beard on his bare breast lay, reached upward his hand and handed to all - the oldest and youngest, the big and the small - some shining token of God's great love."

The poem ends:

"And I am Santa Claus, just the same as the gray old man, when the Savior came; and I bring the same gladness and mirth and joy to each little innocent girl and boy that he brought, that never forgotten morn, when in the manger the Christ was born."

An interesting poem, isn't it? I have a couple of reasons for quoting part of it.

First, we see how easy it is to confuse traditions. Actually, shepherds were at the stable, not Wise Men. Luke's tradition has Jesus born in a stable. Matthew's tradition has Mary and Joseph living in a home in Bethlehem, with the Magi visiting some time after the birth of Jesus.

Second, it shows how gift giving evolved from Christ's gift of Himself to us, the 'Christ-tree,' a tree of life, into the image of Santa, giving gifts in Christ's name.

Third, it shows the power of sentimentality. I'm a big believer in feelings and sentimentality. But sentimentality can turn a feast of Salvation into a feast of feelings. In truth, this little baby will have a tragically short life. It will be a life lived for others, for the salvation of the world. Giving gifts is indeed a nice gesture. But giving of our lives to this Christ, and giving our lives for each other in the name of Christ is the far more important message. As much as we love Santa, we can't allow him to obscure Christ. The beauty of the poem is that it allows us to keep both Santa and Christ in Christmas!