



A Christ-Centered Christmas

PRESERVING THE MAGIC, LIVING THE FAITH

“There he is! There he is!” My seven-year-old squealed, her pigtails bouncing off her pink puffer jacket. We were gathered in the town square for our annual holiday parade. The high school band marched by, horns blasting, and we turned to face the massive pine tree in Pennsylvania Park. A man in a red suit slowly mounted the steps of the platform from whence he would “magically” light the Christmas tree. Both my girls stared with wide, excited eyes, delighted by the toss of confetti and brilliant flash of multicolored lights come to life.

How would you respond if you knew... neither of my girls believe in Santa Claus? I have three kids, eight, six, and three. And that’s right! We are one of “those” families. Our kids have known Santa Claus (as presented by mainstream society) is not a real being since they first learned who he was. Whenever I share this reactions range from shock to disgust to curiosity. Shock because *how could we take away the magic?* Disgust, because some parents are terrified our children will tell others *that Santa Claus isn’t real*. And curiosity, because a family who celebrates Christmas without Santa Claus is an anomaly.

THE MAGIC OF CHRISTMAS DOES NOT DEPEND ON SANTA

This little guide is not meant to convince you against Santa (clearly our kids enjoy him, and we will get into his history in a moment) but to debunk the myth that Christmas is only magical if Santa is central to the holiday . If you’re questioning the role Santa played in your own childhood traditions, if you’re curious how families celebrate Christmas without “believing” in him, or if you’re trying to figure out holidays in your own family, this short guide will provide some things to think about.

A SHORT HISTORY OF SANTA CLAUS

Santa Claus, the jolly white-bearded character was originally known as Saint Nicholas. Nicholas was a wealthy young man who lost both parents to illness and, instead of living on his wealth, donated it to the poor and needy. He became a bishop and later the patron saint of children in the church. His day was commemorated with gift-giving until Martin Luther suggested gift giving be moved to Christmas Day (December 25th) to celebrate Christ's birth (this may be because he removed all saints' days from the liturgical calendar except those celebrating the biblical saints). In 1647 Oliver Cromwell announced Saint Nicholas Day to be "popish" (associated with Catholicism), and because of the Church of England's split from Catholicism, Saint Nicholas fell out of favor. Traditions with Saint Nicholas were imported to the United States very early, but they were not fully endorsed because of the Puritan influence. In the early 1800s, a revival of Saint Nicholas as patron saint of children began again—this time in the form of Santa Claus.

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FROM CHRIST TO SANTA

Santa Claus is taken directly from Saint-Niklaus, and at first, Santa Claus was a fictionalized adaptation of a truly great individual. But over time, the story of the real Saint Nicholas and his generous heart was forgotten and Santa Claus, elves, naughty-and-nice lists, and long lists of toy requests became a cultural norm in America. Saint Nicholas pointed to Christ; Santa Claus has become a story unto himself, disconnected from his early church roots.

WHY NOT BELIEVE IN SANTA?

Holidays matter immensely because they shape family culture and priorities. In the Masonheimer home, we want holidays to reflect our core family values (one reason we follow the Lutheran church calendar, including Advent and Christmas). While we love the story of Saint Nicholas and our kids are quite familiar with it, we do not teach our kids that Santa Claus is a real, living figure who brings them presents each year. There are a few reasons for this. First, we want the emphasis of our holiday to be fully on Christ. It is “Christ’s Mass”, a celebration of his first coming (and encouragement to look forward to the second, which is how Advent was originally celebrated)! Second, we do not feel comfortable telling our children to trust us, to be fully honest with us (and us, them) while telling them a story that is untrue. This is inconsistent with what we teach them at any other time.

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ISN'T IT JUST A FAIRY TALE?

As classical home educators we put a high value on literature, especially fairy tales! Our kids love Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, and all the classic fictional tales children adore. The difference between reading a fairy tale and teaching kids to believe in Santa Claus is this: *kids know fairy tales are not true*. To believe in Santa a child must be *told* to believe and encouraged *IN* that belief, only to find out later that what they were told was a fun, “magical” lie. While many kids process this just fine and have lots of fun with it, others are crushed and betrayed by such a realization. This wasn’t a risk we were willing to take.

A MAGICAL CHRISTMAS... WITHOUT SANTA CLAUS

if you're baffled by how Christmas could be fun, joyful and magical without Santa Claus, I hear you. We get this all the time. I would ask a counter-question: *What about Christmas is magical to you, an adult who doesn't believe in Santa anymore?* Chances are the things you find magical (lights, baking cookies, sitting around the fire) are also magical to your kids. They are certainly magical to ours! I'll give you a list of traditions in a moment, but I challenge you to ask yourself: *Why do my kids NEED Santa to love Christmas? Am I giving them a Christmas experience that will outlast their youngest years?* So often parents aren't really thinking about their kids' experience but about their own childhood, attempting to replicate what they think is essential without asking, "Is this really the best choice for us?"

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THE JOY OF CHRISTMAS

The joy of Christmas is in the *people* and the traditions which facilitate greater *intimacy* with those people. If Santa is a distraction from the values you want to teach your kids, Christmas can still be joyful without him! For our kids there is great joy in secretly stashing presents in stockings throughout December, in seeing presents show up under the tree over the month, and to see mom and dad whispering about what we've planned. The “magic” is the love of us, their parents, building a beautiful celebration over the Advent season. The joy is in giving, receiving, and being loved.

HOW TO TALK TO KIDS ABOUT SANTA

If you grew up with Santa Claus, the idea of celebrating without him might be a bit intimidating. If you currently use Santa as part of your Christmas celebrations and wish to stop, you might be wondering how to transition to a more Christ-centered holiday. Josh (my husband) and I both grew up without Santa, and my first encouragement to you is this: Christmas is just as exciting and fun without him! Santa isn't necessarily harmful to your kids' faith, but he also isn't necessary for your kids to love Christmas!

If you choose to do Santa, be sure you are discipling your kids in the true meaning of Christmas, the Christmas story, and the gospel. Make sure they understand the difference between Santa and Christ, and ensure that the focus of the holiday is appropriate as you synthesize the two. Do not compare Santa and Christ or make any equivalencies of existence.

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If you choose NOT to do Santa, utilize the story of Saint Nicholas (and even his saint day!) to teach the kids how his character points to Christ. I would also encourage having a conversation with your kids about Santa in culture. In our home, we don't portray Santa and his cultural adaptations as evil or wrong (we even watch the Tim Allen movies!). But we do articulate the truth about Santa and we focus the holiday on Christ. This is more simple to us and helps them have a foundation that is clear.

Lastly, I suggest talking to your kids about other families who do practice Santa. We say: *“Other families and kids like to pretend Santa is real. While we know Santa is not real, we don't need to tell other people that. Their parents will tell them at the right time.”* If you are transitioning your kids from believing in Santa to a more Christ-centered holiday, I suggest sitting the kids down and explaining that daddy and mommy have been playing a game for the last few years pretending to be Santa. Don't make it more emotional (on your end) than it needs to be.

CREATING YOUR CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

The greatest concern of parents who are considering a Santa-free Christmas is *what to do instead*. But a Christmas focused on generosity, family, homey activities, and community is what Christmas used to be! We aren't finding an "instead", we're returning to a Christmas focused fully on Christ and others. That said: What are some traditions and activities that you and your kids love? List them below. You can include activities that *aren't* specific to Christmas, too.

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

MAGICAL CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

The most magical thing about our Christmas is seeing our kids light up with joy at the gifts we gave them... and seeing them turn to us with gleaming eyes, knowing we were the ones who bought those gifts. It brings tears to my eyes! But there are *so many* other traditions you can incorporate into your December to make it a special holiday season. Here are some Masonheimer traditions to help you brainstorm!

TRADITIONS:

Bake cookies and take to your neighbors.

Borrow 25 Christmas books from the library, wrap them, and open one a day in December!

Visit a live nativity.

Drive through a light show or look at neighborhood Christmas lights and vote on the best!

Attend Handel's *Messiah* or *The Nutcracker* at a local arts center.

Go to your church's Christmas Eve service.

Buy a new Christmas ornament for your kids every year. Let them open it when you put up the tree!

Have every family member make a list of gifts they'd like to give friends and family. Do a family shopping trip.

Read the Christmas story from Luke on Christmas Eve night.

Light Advent candles at lunch every Sunday in December!

Any questions?

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