**Neither Naughty Nor Nice**

**Text: Isaiah 12:2**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

**Third Sunday in Advent**

**December 16, 2016**

Like all of you, I was introduced at a young age to seasonal song that says:

He’s making a list, and checking it twice

Gonna find out who’s naughty or nice

Santa Claus is coming to town.

It would appear that the comic strip character Garfield is familiar with the song too. In a recent cartoon his owner John reminds him what a bad cat he’s been, and Garfield says, “There’s only one thing to do.” Then he sits down at a computer. The next frame shows Santa and an elf looking perplexed at a computer screen, and the elf says, “Somone’s hacked your Naughty file!”

Are naughty and nice the only options? God embraces us with unconditional love whether we are naughty or nice; that’s the truth of the Gospel. But we’ve been taught from an early age to fear an old man in a red suit who’s going to put nothing but coal in our stockings if we don’t behave.

To be sure, this is a handy way for overworked moms to keep overwrought kids under control in the days leading up to Christmas. And if the song and the threats aren’t enough, those moms have brought in reinforcements in the form of an elf sitting on a shelf, spying on those misbehaving kids.

But this is hardly the Gospel. Today’s text says, “Surely *God* is my salvation.” Not some old guy in a red suit, but God. And God’s options are not restricted to the “naughty or nice” binary code.

You see, God is more realistic about the human condition than Santa. God is more likely to look upon us as both naughty and nice. Or maybe even neithernaughty nor nice but sometimes in between these poles, and at other times way beyond them. You see, naughty implies something that’s bad, but not *real* bad. And nice implies being polite and aiming to please, rather than operating in that heroic range where we accomplish things of great significance, even if we offend some people in the process. I mean, Hitler fell way below naughty at the one end, and Lincoln transcended nice on the other. The naughty or nice dynamic encourages little kids to become uptight about behaviors which really aren’t that bad in the long run, and discourages them from pushing the outside of the envelope in ways that might actually change the world for the better. It’s a little tool of social control that – yes – helps parents keep their sanity at Christmastime, but makes kids neurotic for the rest of their lives.

Naughty or nice doesn’t cut it for God, because God realizes that the situation warrants something more than social control. The complexity of the human condition warrants nothing less than grace: the unconditional love of God that accepts us as we are and remolds us into what we’re called to be.

Let’s be clear, first of all, that there’s nothing new about naughty or nice. The history of winter solstice traditions tells us about all manner of characters who went about checking on the behavior of children at this time orf year. Blogger Sarah Philpott tells us that the Germans had a character named Belsnickel. He “was a mean-spirited gift-bringer who beat naughty children.” His name literally means to *wallop* somebody. Early traditions around St. Nicholas had him turning up at houses and punishing children who couldn’t answer his questions about the Bible. In the Netherlands, St. Nicholas morphed into a nice guy, but he was accompanied by an assistant named Black Peter who carried a birch stick with which to beat the little kids who didn’t make the grade. Any number of cultures had mythological figures who went flying through the air around the longest night of the year, destroying property and crops and sometimes killing children who misbehaved. As Peter Hawkins notes in *Bad Santas and Other Creepy Christmas Characters*, one “really did need to be good for goodness’ sake.”

That little spy sitting on your shelf sounds rather tame by comparison!

Now I didn’t need some elf infiltrating the house and spying on me. I was sufficiently afraid of my mother. But that may not have been a good thing. I’m still looking over my shoulder when I’m about to say or do something which on balance will be a good thing, but it may offend someone in the short term; like introducing new music, or proposing that we pause a program that has outlived its usefulness. You know how it goes: you pick some new hymns and somebody’s going to complain that they don’t know them. Or you suggest ending a program and somebody’s going to complain that we’ve always done it that way before. You can’t move forward without offending someone, and that’s just not nice. The naughty or nice dynamic makes us too eager to please, and discourages us from taking risks. We’re afraid to step out boldly and embrace the new because we fear that we might make a mistake or step on toes or otherwise do something that will bring down the wrath of someone’s judgment upon us. And my mother taught me to always be nice. So when I push the outside of the envelope even a little bit, there’s this part of me that’s still afraid of her lowering the boom on me. In your case it may be your father or an older sibling or a school teacher or someone else who’s become the Belsnickel of your subconscious. We’re afraid of getting walloped, so we’re prone to maintain the status quo, to avoid change, to not rock the boat; even if it means going down with the ship.

There’s nothing new about naughty or nice at Christmastime. But these behavior modification strategies come from the pagan side of our Yuletide traditions, not the biblical sphere. The wisdom of the scriptures, as reflected in our fall series on Job, is that we should reject the “reward for being good, punishment for being bad” dynamic because if that’s the way that the universe works, we are *all* in *serious* trouble. Scripture tells us that we’re naughty much of the time. Or worse. Because, of course, we’re all sinners. If the Bible is clear about anything, it’s clear about that. To be human is not only to be in rebellion against God ourselves, but to be the descendants of a long line of people who have similarly dissented against the God of love and justice and gentleness. And the burden of their sin weighs heavily upon us and compounds our own.

I mean, when I lose my temper, it’s not only my mother’s sometimes short fuse that I’m channeling, but also that of *her* father; who I’m sure was reacting to *his* less than healthy mother. Now, in defense of my great-grandmother, if I’d lost both a daughter and a husband at an early age I might have some mental health issues too. But the point is that the crazy-making circumstances of our lives and our self-centered responses to those circumstances make sinners of us all. And, as scripture says, the sins of the fathers (and mothers) are visited upon the third and fourth generations (Exodus 34:7).

It’s hard to be nice all the time when the circumstances of our lives tend to make us naughty. Or, as the Bible says, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). And the crazy thing is that in our attempts to avoid what feels like sin – in our attempts to get it right and not make mistakes and not get our perhaps long dead parents and teachers angry at us – we sometimes fall into *deeper* levels of sin. Because, of course, when you’re in a dicey situation you have to take bold action to get out of it. But the very action that might rescue you might also blow-up in your face, and make you guilty of making a bad situation worse. Like the late Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas who, as a young man, was rock climbing without any kind of protective gear and he found himself stuck on a ledge. There was another ledge above him, but it was just out of reach. The only way to get to it was to jump up and grab it. If he got his hands on it, he could climb to safety. But if he missed, he’d fall to his death. Talk about being afraid of making a mistake! So he jumped. He grabbed the ledge, and he pulled himself up. Soon he was safely at the top of the cliff.

We fear failure in the face of the bold actions that will save us. And with good reason. But in that fear of making a mistake, we do nothing. You see, we want to be nice to everyone. Thus our fear of offending someone, or being judged by someone, encourages inaction. But doing nothing is sometimes the *worst* option. If Justice Douglas had done nothing, he probably would’ve died of exposure on that ledge. You have to risk making a mistake in order to make it right. To take action in such a situation is, in the words of Martin Luther, to “sin boldly.” But so often we fail to sin boldly, and we thereby embolden sin. As Abraham Lincoln said, “It has been my experience that folks who have no vices have very few virtues.”

You have to risk being naughty in order to accomplish something that goes way beyond being nice. Like leading a nation to a new birth of freedom. Or leading a church to new birth, period.

I was talking to one of our guests at the Men’s Warming Center a week ago Tuesday and he was telling me about the sermon that the minister at Hillcrest Christian Church preached on Dec. 2. He said that Pastor Mark Fugate had taken as his text Matthew 1:1-16, which lists all of the ancestors of Jesus, from Abraham, through David, down to Joseph. Mind you, I’m not sure how Jesus could be a descendant of David through Joseph, while at the same time being born of a virgin; I’d like to hear a literalist explain that one. But that’s the subject for another sermon.

Anyway, Pastor Mark preached this sermon on all of those “begats” in Matthew, so I asked our guest what his take away was from the sermon. He thought for a moment, and he said, “Jesus descended from a bunch of sinners.”

Which underscores the powerful possibilities of grace. If God can raise up a Savior from a long line of scoundrels that includes murders and adulterers, then we don’t have anything to worry about. “Surely God is my salvation; I will *trust*, I will *not* be afraid.” So says the prophet Isaiah in foretelling the coming of the Lord. Who needs to be afraid of Santa Claus when you’ve got Jesus on your side? More to the point, who needs to be afraid of an overbearing parent, or a nasty aunt, or your 9th grade English teacher? You don’t need to be held captive by your fear of their punishment anymore. “For freedom Christ has set us free,” Paul says (Galatians 5:1). He does so by embracing you with a love that will not let you go. Always…always. It doesn’t matter how badly you’ve messed-up. It doesn’t matter how naughty you’ve been. That’s the purpose of confession. We come to God just as we are – with all of our regrets, with all of our guilt, with all of our sorrow and fear – we come to God just as we are, and we speak the truth about what we’ve done or failed to do, and we say, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

And God does. That’s the miracle of grace. God has mercy upon sinners like you and me. And God came to us in Jesus Christ to offer us such mercy in the flesh. Because there’s nothing quite like a human being saying, “I forgive you.” There’s nothing quite like a human being offering us unconditional love. And when we experience such love from another person, we are experiencing the grace of God made flesh in Jesus; and made flesh as well in the likes of you and me, and all of those who embrace us.

You know, Santa can check his list all he wants; but I’m not worried. I *know* that I’ve been naughty! Santa won’t find anything on that list that God doesn’t already know. And any wallop from Belsnickel’s birch stick won’t hurt nearly as much as the pain that I’ve already experienced by looking within and seeing all of that guilt. The One who is coming brings grace upon grace to sinners like you and me whose lives frequently fall in between naughty and nice and sometimes go way beyond those poles. The law may’ve been laid down by your big brother or your big sister, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (John 1:18). And it is such grace that embraces us, in the thin place that is Advent. Amen.