

You wanna know what I love most about Christmas? If I'm really being honest? Obviously, there's much to love about Christmas – and of course I love our worship services, the carols and music, the beauty, the candle light, the decorations, poinsettias and parties, retelling the story of baby Jesus born in Bethlehem under a star, the gifts and surprises, the sense of love, generosity and goodwill of the season, and the feeling that all is well in the world, if just for a moment. But if I'm being honest – what I love most, is that Christmas invites all of us to step back and look at the world with the eyes of little children again - to have that childlike faith and wonder that believes and hopes in something so much bigger than ourselves – all that is amazing and mysterious, far beyond what we can see here and now. It's the thrilling invitation at Christmas to child-like joy, hope, grace, and wonder that's borderline magical. Somehow, this never fails to renew my faith in God. Every Christmas, at some point, I feel this pang of child like joy and wonder that absolutely dazzles me.

I truly enjoy reading stories about children at Christmastime to be reminded of their unique perspective that we grownups can lose over time. Plus, children's honesty is so disarming and great. Like the little boy who sent a thank you letter to his aunt for his Christmas gift and wrote, "Thank you so much auntie, the gift you gave me was almost as good as the gift I really wanted." Or like the little boy who approached Santa in a department store with a long list of requests. He wanted a bicycle, a skateboard, a chemical set, a set of trains, a baseball glove and ice skates. "That's a pretty long list," Santa said sternly. "I'll have to check in my book and see if you were a good boy." "No, no," the youngster said quickly. "Never mind checking. I'll just take the skateboard."

But this child-like perspective, this faith, is something truly beautiful because it invites us to see God at work in the world in ways we might otherwise forget....to notice the ways that God breaks in to our reality, just as God did on the first Christmas. Some of you may recall the famous editorial in the New York Sun affectionately entitled, "Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus." If you don't know it, you need to hear it and if you do know it, you need to hear it again (it is the most reprinted editorial in the English language) - so allow me to read from it tonight ...it's from the NY Sun, 1897:

"Dear Editor,  
I am 8 years old. Some of my little friends say there is no Santa Claus. Papa says, 'If you see it in The Sun, it's so.' Please tell me the truth, is there a Santa Claus? –  
Virginia O'Hanlon

Virginia, your little friends are wrong. They have been affected by the skepticism of a skeptical age. They do not believe except what they see. They think that nothing can be which is not comprehensible by their little minds. ... Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus. He exists as certainly as love and generosity and devotion exist, and you know that they abound and give to your life its highest beauty and joy. Alas! how dreary would be the world if there were no Santa Claus! It would be as dreary as if there were no Virginias. There would be no childlike faith then, no poetry, no romance to make tolerable this existence. We should have no enjoyment, except in sense and sight. The external light with which childhood fills the world would be extinguished. Not believe in Santa Claus! You might as well not believe in fairies. You might get your papa to hire men to watch in all the chimneys on Christmas eve to catch Santa Claus, but even if you did not see Santa Claus coming down, what would that prove? Nobody sees Santa Claus, but that is no sign that there is no Santa Claus. The most real things in the world are those that neither children nor [adults] can see. Did you ever see fairies dancing on the lawn? Of course not, but that's no proof that they are not there. Nobody can conceive or imagine all the wonders there are unseen and unseeable in the world.

You tear apart the baby's rattle and see what makes the noise inside, but there is a veil covering the unseen world which not the strongest [person], nor even the united strength of all the strongest [persons] that ever lived could tear apart. Only faith, poetry, love, romance, can push aside that curtain and view and picture the supernal beauty and glory beyond. Is it all real? Ah, Virginia, in all this world there is nothing else real and abiding. No Santa Claus! Thank God! he lives and lives forever. A thousand years from now, Virginia, nay 10 times 10,000 years from now, he will continue to make glad the heart of childhood."

My friends, it's true: those things that really matter- are not those things that can be seen or proved – but love has come into the world and it exists and we call his name Jesus. As the writer of the epistle we read tonight describes it, "the grace of God has appeared." The

Christmas story is a story about a moment when heaven came down and touched the earth and earth touched heaven. And children, often more than adults get it. The grace of God has appeared...and on Christmas we're invited to again feel and know it – this grace, this love, this reality...this mystery of the unseen and useable world.

There are other times we may experience the grace of God -the moments when God's grace appears on earth. I won't ever forget the day when I had one of those experiences when it seemed that heaven touched the earth in a moment of stunning grace. It was a sunny day in Portland, Oregon, and I was officiating at a memorial service for a young widow- a woman who had lost her husband unexpectedly and tragically. She was a faith-filled woman and a lifelong member of our church. Her husband wasn't and he didn't want any kind of traditional funeral service or anything done at the church, religious faith was not for him. He had a dry sense of humor, had been a fisherman, he loved classic rock, and he was a loving husband and father, but he was not religious. And so his widow and I planned a very unusual memorial service for him outdoors at a lovely park that sat high above the banks of the Willamette River...a service that simply gave thanks for his life and invited people to share their memories. Wonderful stories were told and many tales of fish caught were shared. And after awhile it grew quiet. But the silence was suddenly broken when a boat pulled up to the bank of the river several feet away -- it was out of sight down below the high hill we were on...but we knew it was there because it was so noisy and was blasting music from the boat's radio. Annoyance overcame me and many of us – was the boat going to leave or just sit there and disturb our special time? To this day no one knows who was on that boat or why it docked where it did for what ended up being about 5 minutes. But just then a song came on- it was so loud we could only sit and listen. The song that came on the radio then was Led Zeppelin's "Stairway to Heaven." I looked at the widow and she looked back at me- wide eyed – and we nodded, knowingly as it played and we listened. Then the boat pulled away, as if on cue, and we heard the last notes of the song as it faded into the distance. When she and I spoke of it later she told me there wasn't anything that could have brought her more comfort in that moment...and we agreed it was a gift from God, a magical thing – as if the heavens had opened up for just a moment, to remind us, there really is more to this life than meets the eye...and that the

most important and real things in this world are the things we can't see. The love of God is preeminent among them...a love that was demonstrated on a dark night in a lonely stable when a baby was born who would change the world forever- a life with one simple purpose: to remind us that God loves us.

So, yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus. And nobody can conceive or imagine all the wonders there are unseen and unseeable in the world.

God bless you with a deep, profound yet childlike faith this Christmas Eve. Merry Christmas!