

# “The Wish List”

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First Unitarian Congregation of Toronto  
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**Reading**            “An Encounter with Santa” - William Barnett

There he sat, red suit, conical hat, fur-trimmed and all,  
on that chilly park bench, glancing skyward  
as though assessing the chance of snow.

I sat beside him. “How come you’re not out there  
on the corner with your iron pot and bell?”

“I am not one of them,” he replied, “I happen to be Santa Claus.”

I smiled, pleasantly enough, but my doubt must have showed.

“I really am,” he said, a trifle wistfully.

“But how can I tell if you are the real Santa Claus?”

“That is the question,” said he, “How tell the true prophet from the false?”

“But do you really live at the North Pole?”

“Legend,” he replied, “The fact is that I am everywhere.”

“Are you also omniscient and omnipotent?”

“You mistake me for a friend of mine.”

A little embarrassed, I yet persisted.

“Perhaps you only think you are Santa Claus.”

“That would be my problem, not yours.

But I might point out that there are no children around.”

“That is odd,” I conceded.

“The reason,” he said, “is that I cannot be seen.”

Like a chess player crying out “Check-mate” I said, “I see you!”

“And that is your problem, not mine.”

We both looked up at the sky.

“It might snow,” he said,

“It’s better when it snows. But snow or not I must be going.”

“Going where?”

“To distribute toys, of course.”

“One last question. What is the spirit of Christmas?”

“Well, if you want to sound scholarly

you might call it the ultimate potential.

It’s the moment when the best that is human

surmounts all the stumbling blocks on the path to becoming.

You care, so you help.

You love, so you give.

And you dream...

you dream of the time when this brief season

will be extended to the whole year.”

“Don’t you sometimes get discouraged?”

“Dear me, I’ve only been at this for a few centuries. Give me time.”

Then he called out: “Blitzen, Blitzen! Where is that dratted deer?”

Suddenly there came a whole cloudful of snow, right upon us,  
and by the time I had wiped my eyes clear, I was alone on the bench.

But there were hoofmarks in the snow

and one dry spot on the bench,

a very broad spot where he had sat.

### **Sermon: ‘The Wish List’**

A few days ago, I was zipping through the mall,

there to pick up a watch I had taken in for repair,

when I came upon a most surreal scene.

Sitting in his big, red velvet chair

was Santa, wearing a surgical mask.

His elves were wearing masks, too.  
And each holding what looked like a vat of hand sanitizer.

But there in that little outpost of the North Pole,  
the place where children come each year in pilgrimage  
to whisper their secret hopes and dreams in Santa's ear,  
there were no children to be found.

Only a little red house bearing up the weight of a drift of spray-on snow.

And inside, were Santa and his helpers,  
who were, by all signs, having a very slow day.

It may be going too far to say that Santa looked sad.  
But he was sort of slumped to one side of his chair.

And, somehow, through his mask,  
signalled the frustration and disappointment  
that many of us may be feeling right about now,  
as we gird ourselves against this new wave of the pandemic.

The scene, as I said, was surreal.  
Frankly, it was strange to see Santa subject  
to the same safety protocols as the rest of us.

And it was sobering to come upon this iconic seasonal scene  
and see it devoid of children.

Yet, somehow, this same scene filled me with a strange sense of hope.

The presence of Santa and his elves, even with their masks on,  
felt like a determined candle burning bright  
against these worrying times that we are in.

It felt like an acknowledgement that when so much seems so hard,  
there is still a place for magic, and mystery, and miracle.

A place we can carve out of our present circumstances  
to affirm all that is good in this world, and in each other.

A few years ago, James Di Fiore, writing in *The Globe and Mail*,  
shared his experience of donning the red suit himself,

and serving a stint one December in the big chair at the mall.<sup>1</sup>

He quickly learned that Santa's life is no cake-walk.

But he said there were unexpected blessings, too.

He “was warned that having more than 1,000 children climb onto [his] lap would require a level of patience [he] had never reached in [all his] years.”

Then there was, he said, “the emotional gauntlet” he was “forced to navigate each day.”

After all, “Santa is privy to more than just kids’ material wishes. Dreams, confessions, worries—all wrapped and ribboned for the one adult who still holds some sway in a child’s life when [their parents] just won’t do.”

On Day 1, he was asked:

“Santa, can you bring Mommy back from heaven?”

“And here we are,” he thought.”

“Is there a more efficient way to test the fortitude of a man in a [red] suit?”

“She was maybe 4 and her father wasn’t in earshot.

It was just her and Santa.”

“‘Your mommy is always with you, right here,’ he said, pointing to her heart. ‘And she loves you very much.’”

He said he “wiped away the tears welling in [his] eyes when she climbed off Santa’s knee.

In that moment, he knew “the job was more than just a paycheque—it was a privilege.”

Things weren’t always so heavy.

On Day 3, he was asked: “Santa, is it true that you ate your reindeer?”

“It took [him] a moment to gather [him]self before asking... [how the little girl had come] up with this question.

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<sup>1</sup> James Di Fiore, “I played a mall Santa Claus,” *The Globe and Mail*, 22 December 2011.

“My teacher said Santa ate reindeer!”

“Oh! No, my child, Santa has *eight* reindeer.”

“So you won’t eat them?”

“Of course not! How would I get to your house to deliver your presents?”

“She was more than pleased to know Santa was not a fan of venison.”

On another day, he was asked: “Santa, how many elves are there?”

He knew “never [to] try to answer questions like this.”

“There are 1,000 elves!” [he] said with a wink at the curious child.”

“Really? What are all their names?”

With that, Santa sighed.

When his last shift was coming to an end,  
and he was asked, at closing time,  
to take one more photo, he said he “didn’t want it to end  
and stayed until the last kid was gone.”

Looking back, he counts his time in the big chair as  
“the most humbling, eye-opening, [and] moving moments  
[he] had ever experienced.

He was, he said, a facilitator of the spirit of Christmas.

Or what I would describe as someone sharing light in this season.  
Someone serving as a candle in the night.

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Martha Brockenbrough gets at the sacred collaboration  
that is at the heart of Christmas.  
The sacred scheme we are all invited into each year.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Martha Brockenbrough, “The truth about Santa.” <http://martha-brockenbrough.squarespace.com/blog-1/2010/12/2/the-truth-about-santa.html>

She tells of the time when her daughter, Lucy,  
began to ask some clarifying questions about who Santa is  
and just how he manages to deliver gifts  
to so many kids around the world in a single night.

In a letter to Lucy, this is what she said:

Santa is bigger than any person, and his work  
has gone on longer than any of us has lived.

What he does is simple, but it is powerful.  
He teaches children how to have belief  
in something they can't see or touch.

It's a big job, and it's an important one.

Throughout your life, you will need this capacity to believe:  
in yourself, in your friends, in your talents and in your family.

You'll also need to believe in things  
you can't measure or even hold in your hand.

Here, I am talking about love, [she said,]  
that great power that will light your life from the inside out,  
even during its [hardest], coldest moments.

Santa is a teacher,  
and I have been his student  
and now you know...  
how he gets down all those chimneys on Christmas Eve:  
he has help from all the people whose hearts he's filled with joy.

With full hearts, people like Daddy and me  
take our turns helping Santa do a job that would otherwise be impossible.

So, no. I am not Santa.  
Santa is love and magic and hope and happiness.  
I'm on his team, and now you are, too.

\* \* \*

I don't know about you,  
but I don't have much in the way of memories

of actually sitting on Santa's lap  
and regaling him with my own wish list—  
though I have certainly seen photographic evidence  
that such visits took place when I was a child.

I remember those weeks leading up to Christmas,  
perusing the pages of the Sear's catalogue,  
which was aptly named *The Wish Book*.

And I recall creating an annotated list of the things I wanted,  
which I shared with my parents, who I took to be Santa's trusted intermediaries.

My memory is that Santa tended to come through,  
though part of me now looks back in horror  
at the excesses of commercial consumption  
that marked this annual ritual in my family:  
this yearly ritual to show love through stuff.

What is striking to me is how so much  
of what shows up on my wish list has changed over time.

Of course, I'm no longer really interested in the toys I once felt I had to have.

I have tried to hold in more recent years to the guidance  
from UU minister Forrest Church  
that we learn to "want what we have."

This was a key part of his theology.  
And something he talked about and wrote about  
before his death several years ago from esophageal cancer.

It was wisdom he held to firmly, even as, and especially as, he was dying.

"Want what you have."

In his book *Freedom from Fear*,  
Church urged us to avoid certain disappointment  
by replacing wishful thinking with "thoughtful wishing."<sup>3</sup>

"Until we learn to wish for the right things," he wrote,  
"what we wish for will only come true by accident.  
What's worse, if we wish for the wrong things,

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<sup>3</sup> Forrest Church, *Freedom from Fear*, 90-92.

the fear of disappointment will dog us from one broken dream to the next.”

“Happiness,” he said, “doesn’t follow when we long for what we lack—  
for things we have lost or shall likely never find.  
Longing for something we may find in the future  
distracts us from enjoying the present.”

For this reason, Church counted wishful thinking to be  
among the most “traitorous” enemies in our search for meaning—  
because “fulfillment [is] forever beyond our reach,  
in what we do not have,  
in what we cannot do,  
in who we shall never be...”

He said that: “We should wish to think instead for things closer at hand,  
like the sun’s kiss good morning when it breaks through the blinds  
to inaugurate another miracle, another day.”<sup>4</sup>

Church’s guidance echoes for me in the chorus  
of the Christmas pop song that has been popular for the past 30 years.

No more lives torn apart  
That wars would never start  
And time would heal all hearts  
And everyone would have a friend  
And right would always win  
And love would never end, no  
This is my grown up Christmas list<sup>5</sup>

I wonder what, for you, is on your grown-up wish list.

Whatever holidays you celebrate.  
Whatever your take on Santa.  
What do you, in this season, most deeply long for?

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Yesterday, I read about a ten-year old boy named Jonah.<sup>6</sup>

Last year, he wrote to Santa with one thing on his list.

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<sup>4</sup> Forrest Church, *Love and Death*, 39-40.

<sup>5</sup> Linda Thompson/David Foster, “Grown-up Christmas List.”

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.cnn.com/2021/12/18/us/jonah-santa-letters-covid-cec/index.html>

Dear Santa,

I don't want anything for Christmas,  
but I would like to ask you if you can do me a favour.

Can you please find a cure for Covid-19  
and give it to us to save the world?

Thank you.

Love,  
Jonah.

This year, he followed up with another letter mailed to the North Pole,  
and another request.

Dear Santa, it's me Jonah.  
Do you remember me?  
I was the one who asked for a covid cure.

[By the way, thank you] so much for the vaccine!  
You helped save lives.

This year, can I please have a Santa costume  
to spread your joy around the world?

According to his mom, Jonah wants to go around the neighbourhood,  
in a Santa suit, asking people what they want for Christmas.

Now, it should be noted that this kid  
has had some practice building up his own grown-up wish list.

Last year, for his birthday,  
he raised \$1,000 to give to his local children's research hospital.

He did it by growing out his hair down to his shoulders—  
and convincing some of his friends to do the same—  
so that their hair could be donated to kids with cancer  
who have lost theirs due to chemotherapy.

I am moved by his deep spirit of generosity.

And I am impressed that he's decided to don a red suit himself

to take part in the conspiracy of love unfolding in the midst of these trying times.

Similar to seeing Santa last week at the mall,  
Jonah's heart is also, for me, a sign of hope—  
a candle burning bright.

Happily, Jonah is not alone.

So many are in on this plot.  
This scheme to reshape our world through the power of love.

My wish for each of you in this season  
is that you may find moments  
to bask in the light of love in the days ahead.

And that you, in turn, may play your part  
in spreading love and light in whatever ways you can.

For this is how we give substance to our hopes.  
And how we change this world for good.

So may it be.

Amen.

**Benediction** - G.K. Chesterton

Once I only thanked Santa Claus for a few dollars and crackers. Now, I thank him for stars and faces [on the street], and... the great sea. Once I thought it delightful and astonishing to find a present so big that it only went halfway into [my] stocking. Now I am delighted and astonished every morning to find a [gift] so big that it takes two stockings to hold it, and then leaves a great deal outside; it is the large and preposterous present of myself, as to the origin of which I can offer no suggestion except that Santa Claus gave it to me in a fit of peculiarly fantastic goodwill.

Let us savour the gift of our being, in this season and in every season.  
And may we share that gift with the world around us,  
now and for all the days we are given.  
Happy Holidays to you all.