

Hebrews 13:7–17
Wed. of Populus Zion
(St. Nicholas and St. Ambrose)
Kaiserslautern Ev. Luth. Ch.
December 7, 2022

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dearly bought hearers by the blood of Jesus Christ,

This evening we focus on two bishops of the church who lived about 300 years after Jesus walked the earth. St. Nicholas, whose feast day falls on December 6, was a bishop in the eastern Roman Empire in what is today the country of Turkey. St. Ambrose, whose feast day is today, December 7, was bishop in the western Roman Empire in the city of Milan, Italy. Like all good bishops and pastors, Nicholas and Ambrose were models of defending the Christian faith and helping the poor. We honor St. Nicholas and St. Ambrose as the Book of Hebrews tells us: “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith” (Heb 13:7).

To understand the lives of the orthodox Christians Nicholas and Ambrose, we first need to understand a little something about an early Christian heresy called Arianism. Arius was a presbyter, or priest, in the city of Alexandria, Egypt. Like so many people throughout history and still today, Arius used the philosophy of this world to determine his thinking about God rather than relying on Scripture alone. Arius simply could not believe God would impart His essence to anyone else, so he began teaching that Jesus Christ is not exactly God and not exactly man, but a middle being, some sort of creature less than God but greater than man.

According to our human reason, this might make sense. But it’s not how God’s Word speaks about Jesus Christ. From the Bible we know that Jesus *is* God. The Gospel of John begins: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . .

and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.” Jesus is the Word of God who is God, the God who took on human flesh and became man to die on the cross for the sins of the world. Jesus Himself claimed to be God, for example in John 8[:58]. Jesus says to the Jews who did not believe in Him: “Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.” These Jews picked up stones to stone Jesus because they knew He was claiming to be the God of the Old Testament, the I AM WHO I AM, the only true God. The evidence is all over the Bible that Jesus Christ is both true God and true man, a mystery we can hardly wrap our human reason around, but a fundamental truth of our Christian faith.

After Arius began teaching that Jesus is not true God and true man, faithful teachers of the church rose up to defend the scriptural understanding of who our Lord is. The controversy became so intense that in the year 325 Emperor Constantine called for all the bishops in the Roman Empire to convene at Nicea, which today is located in Turkey. The bishops were to settle their differences for the sake of unity, in the Roman Empire and more importantly, in the church. The church council settled on the scriptural doctrine of who Christ is and condemned Arius as a heretic. According to tradition, one of the bishops at the Council of Nicea was Nicholas, Bishop of Myra in what is today Turkey. A medieval tradition holds that Nicholas became so upset when he heard Arius’s false doctrine that he slapped Arius across the face.

St. Nicholas is also known for his charitable giving. There is a story about a poor man who had three daughters. With no money for a dowry, the girls risked ending up in a life of slavery or prostitution. Bishop Nicholas is said to have snuck bags of gold from the church’s treasury into the man’s house in the middle of the night allowing the girls enough money for a dowry to get married. The generosity of St. Nicholas is why his feast day on December 6 is all about giving presents. In many ways the traditions of St. Nicholas Day have been transferred to

Christmas and Bishop St. Nicholas has morphed into Santa Claus, whose name came into English from the Dutch for St. Nicholas: “Sinterklaas.” The tradition of gift-giving is still here. What about the tradition of correctly understanding the Christian faith and fighting for the truth?

The second bishop we remember this evening is St. Ambrose of Milan. The lives of Nicholas and Ambrose overlapped on this earth for two years: Ambrose was born in A.D. 340, and Nicholas died two years later in 342. Ambrose was actually born in the city of Trier, less than 1.5 hours from here. At that time, Trier was perhaps the most important city in the Holy Roman Empire. Ambrose’s father was a Roman governor in the region. After Ambrose’s father died and Germanic tribes began taking over the region, Ambrose moved with his mother and brother to Rome, where he was educated in law.

Ambrose then became governor in Milan, Italy, another prominent city in the western Roman Empire. As governor, Ambrose saw how divisions in the church were threatening the peace of the region. Even though Arius had been condemned as a heretic, Arian thinking was still prevalent. When the old bishop died, there was a dispute about who the successor would be. The governor, Ambrose, went to settle down the mob when all of a sudden, the people began shouting: “Ambrose, bishop!” The Emperor agreed, and within a week, Ambrose, who was still going through adult catechesis in the church, was baptized, consecrated a deacon, ordained a presbyter, and consecrated a bishop on December 7 in the year 374.

As bishop of Milan, Ambrose fought against the Arian heresy in his diocese and throughout the empire. He had no problem standing up to the highest authorities when they threatened the Christian faith and life. The emperor’s mother was an Arian who wanted to give the Arians a church outside of Milan, but Ambrose refused. Then the emperor’s mother tried to acquire the Arians a church within the city. Ambrose responded: “The emperor has his palaces,

let him leave the churches to the bishop.” The emperor then sent soldiers to take the church, so Ambrose and his congregation protested by remaining in the building and singing psalms and hymns until the soldiers went away.

Another case of Ambrose standing up to the leaders of this world was after the emperor squashed a rebellion in Thessaloniki, killing 7,000 in a fit of rage. Ambrose exhorted the emperor to public repentance and in the meantime would not allow the emperor to commune. Ambrose had no problem standing up for the truth, even against the most powerful political rulers of the day. He spoke the Word of God in season and out of season (2 Tim 4), when it was popular and expedient and even more so when it was not. St. Ambrose worked tirelessly to promote pure doctrine until he died of natural causes in A.D. 397.

Like St. Nicholas, St. Ambrose, too, cared deeply for the poor. When he became bishop of Milan, Ambrose gave all his worldly possessions to the poor and to the church. When many Christians were taken captive in battle with the Germanic Goths, Ambrose sold church possessions to redeem his Christians. As Hebrews 13[16] says: “Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.”

Both Nicholas and Ambrose used their earthly talents (Matt 25:14–23) and treasures to defend the faith and support the needy. Besides giving away his earthly wealth, Ambrose also used his God-given abilities to write music for the church. All three hymns we are singing this evening are attributed to St. Ambrose (LSB 332, 874, 890), as well as the Te Deum we sing at Matins. Both Nicholas and Ambrose knew that “here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.” With that eternal perspective, Nicholas and Ambrose could focus on preserving true doctrine and helping the poor, in spite of any worldly hindrances, including persecution from the highest levels of government. They bore the reproach that Christ endured.

They knew that the Kingdom of God is not of this world, and so they could face any opposition in this life.

Remember your leaders, St. Nicholas and St. Ambrose, bishops of the church, who spoke to the church the Word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith in standing up for the truth of God's Word and in helping those who are in need, even as Nicholas and Ambrose followed the example of our Lord Jesus Christ. In the name of Jesus, Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen. We stand for the Magnificat.