

# A Christmas letter from St. Nicholas to the accidental Arians of 2020

To the accidental Arians of 2020:

I slapped Arius at the [Council of Nicaea](#), according to the story you like to tell. I can neither confirm nor deny this, since the first rule of Nicaean Fight Club is not to talk about Nicaean Fight Club. It is also the second rule. But whether or not I did what you say I did, I will say this: I would like to slap you.

Let me clarify: I would slap not out of malice but out of charity. You are slumbering in a sadness that dulls all your senses, and I want to wake you up. Without uttering his name, you have pledged allegiance to the teaching of Arius, who revered Christ but did not worship him. You, too, confess Jesus as a superior man, perhaps even the first and greatest among all men, but you do not praise him as the Son of God – consubstantial with the Father. And because of that, you are mired in hopelessness, though you realize it not.

Your studies show that more than half of you say that “Jesus was a great teacher, but not God.” Those of you who profess this imitation of Christianity do not congregate in one church or another; rather, you are spread out among many churches and in no church at all. Perfunctorily, you profess the [creed we crafted at Nicaea](#), but you do not believe what you say. In your thoughts and in your words, in what you do and in what you fail to do, you live as though Jesus were a wisdom figure to occasionally consult rather than the one to whom you ought to give your heart. You would have been quite at home in Arius’ church; you would have enjoyed his preaching.

You find yourself now at the end of a year unlike any other.

Many are quick to declare this year among the worst ever, and certainly, there are plenty of reasons to consider it thus. Gloom persists, and thoughts dwell upon what is lost even as Christmas comes as the calendar prescribes. If you believe in your heart and live as though Jesus was a great teacher but not God, then the feast of his birth is nothing more than the memorial of happier days.

My friend at Nicaea, Bishop Alexander of Alexandria, saw clearly the sadness that the presbyter Arius purveyed. He knew that even as Arians made their arguments sound reasonable and cordial, they were possessed of a “melancholic disposition.” They would see the feast of Christmas as recalling the birth of a man like us: a creature created out of nothing. They claimed there was a time when the Son was not. They did not worship Jesus in his divinity but only revered him in the excellence of his humanity: God’s faithful servant but not the Son of God, one in being with the Father. At Christmas, they saw only the wonder of a new creature coming into existence, wonderful in the same way a child’s birth is always wonderful. What they did not see is what Alexander and I and all who worship Christ is his divinity marvel at each Christmas – that the one born in a manger is “begotten not from nothing but from the Father.” The Son of Mary is the eternal Son who, sharing all things with the Father, is given to this world to share all things with us.

Arius only saw the human being and would not permit himself to see that this human being is God’s definitive and personal gift to us. He would not imagine that a human being could possibly be God. He relied on his own understanding. But Alexander’s secretary and later successor, [Athanasius](#) of Alexandria, knew that Arius and his ilk were stuck on the wrong question and thus missed the truly marvelous thing. Over and over again, the Arians sneered, saying, “How can you, a human being, possibly be God?” Athanasius taught us how to reframe the question to ask, “Why did you, being God, become a

human being?" All the good news from the beginning of time to now is wrapped up in that question.

This is why I want to slap you now. In failing to confess Jesus as fully divine, one in being with the Father, you miss everything about him because, above all, he is the Father's personal gift to us, given to us in the most intimate way. He need not have come among us, for he was in need of nothing. He was in the beginning with God, and he was God, and yet for no reason, except for God's love alone, he "became flesh and dwelt among us."

He came at an inopportune time, amid inhospitable circumstances. He was misunderstood, abandoned and rejected. He experienced both loneliness and sorrow. What's more, he always knew that was the fate that awaited him. But he did not flee, and he did not hold back. He came to us, to this world, to this mess of injustice and inequality and selfishness that we alone have created. Christ himself is the descent of loving-kindness come down from God on high. He was and he is and he ever shall be the Father's definitive decision to love us and save us from our sadness.

Alexander railed against Arius in his letters because Arius led people to abandon this marvelous gift. Athanasius never tired of refuting the wolves who appeared in sheep's clothing, saying such reasonable sounding things to Christians like yourselves but all the while leading them away from worshipping Christ in his divinity. I myself was so frustrated I could have slapped someone. Without welcoming and worshipping Christ as God, we would leave ourselves subject to the winds of chance. In a bad year, we would mourn; in a good year, we would celebrate, and all the time we would conform ourselves to the prevalent mood of the age. This world remains mercurial, and those who do not cling to Christ as God-with-us are left to grieve as ones without hope and rejoice as ones without gratitude. If God has not come to us in the Incarnation, then we are alone in this world, and this world

will become only what we make of it.

Do not remain in sadness. Rejoice, with gratitude! God has crossed the divide between heaven and earth. He who was God did not deem that equality something to be grasped, but [emptied himself](#) and took on our likeness. In Christ, the world of 2020 and of all the bad years and good years before and after have all been claimed in the one who became a child for us. He makes all things new.

This Christmas is a season to begin to heal from your slumbering sadness. Certainly, it is not enough to just suddenly say, "OK, I accept Christ as God!" You have to feel it in your fingers, feel it in your toes. You must profess it and live it. That it is a hard thing to will all at once.

So here, then, is some advice from your jolly old [St. Nicholas](#): Just let yourself rejoice. Even if you do not feel joy, follow others who do. As the gloom of this year seeps into next year, focus on giving thanks during this Christmas season. Choose to give thanks rather than remain melancholic and anxious. It is not right for us to weep in a time of celebration, and Christmas as the feast of the Incarnation is a time of great celebration. Let Christ dictate [your mood and your actions](#). Treat him as if he were God-with-us, as if you believed it, even if you do not fully. In return, he will do what he always does, which is to reward your willingness with the gift of true belief. From your simple willingness, he will create the belief he desires in you, and you will hope in him in good times and in bad.

The Lord of all has come among us, and he will come again. Awake and be of good cheer!

*In Christ,*

*Nicholas, Bishop of Myra*

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