The year is 325. The place is Nicaea, a small town near the Black Sea in what is now Turkey. Thousands of priests, 318 bishops, two papal lieutenants and the Roman emperor Constantine are gathered to face a looming church crisis.

The problem? The Holy Trinity. Christian thought will eventually link together Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But in the 4th century, this hasn't yet been hashed out. Reasonable people disagree.

One of the churchmen rises to speak. Arius, from the Egyptian city of Alexandria, tells the gathering that Jesus was not divine. He was just a prophet.

Suddenly, a second man is on his feet, an obscure, cantankerous bishop named Nicholas. He approaches Arius, fist raised menacingly. There are gasps. Would he dare?

He would. Fist strikes face. Arius goes down. He will have a shiner. Nick, meanwhile, is set upon by holy men. His robes are torn off. He is thrown into a dungeon.

Peer down through the bars. Behold the simmering zealot sitting there, scowling, defiant, imprisoned for his uncompromising piety. Recognize his sallow face?

No? Well, no reason you should. But he knows you. He's been to your house many times.

It is the function of newspapers to seek truth and explain it, however the chips may fall. And so it is on this holiday week that we examine the puzzling paradox of Santa Claus. On the one hand, we have the modern Santa, a porcine, jolly man who resides at the North Pole with a
woman known only as Mrs. Claus. He has domesticated a stable of nine deer, and enjoys the cheerful services of a retinue of elfin assistants. He is very, very nice to children.

On the other hand, we have the ancient Santa. Saint Nicholas. Paintings show a thin man. He was spare of frame, flinty of eye, pugnacious of spirit. In the Middle Ages, he was known as a brawling saint. He had no particular sense of humor that we know of. He could be vengeful, wrathful, an embittered ex-con. According to legend, even after death he horsewhipped someone. Yes, he became the patron saint of children, but his was a promiscuous sainthood. Over the years, he was also the patron saint of sailors, whores, moneylenders and thieves. No doubt, Saint Nick was a good man. A noble man. But a hard man. How did time turn him soft?

**In the Beginning.**

We know Nicholas was born in Patara, a small town on the Mediterranean coast, 280 years after the birth of Christ. He became bishop of a small town in Asia Minor called Myra. Beyond that, details of his life are more legend than fact, written hundreds of years after his death; like many legends, they mix the vaguely plausible with the highly improbable. We make no judgments here:

"The Golden Legend," a popular 13th-century myth-book of saints' lives, says Nicholas was a precocious child, pious from birth. He never bothered to crawl. He stood up and walked moments after he was delivered. Baby Nick was so tough he refused his mother's milk on Wednesdays and Fridays. Those are the days he fasted.

He became a priest at 19, and bishop in his twenties. Then things began to go sour.

Diocletian ruled the Roman Empire; it was the early 300s, and Diocletian was not a big fan of Christianity; he thought it profaned imperial pagan traditions. He believed in fire-gobbling gods and worshiped pagan idols and whatnot.

And so began the "Great Persecution." Diocletian ordered all Bibles burned. Priests were to renounce their faith or face death. Christians could not meet together, nor could they hold any government office.

None of that stopped Nicholas. He kept preaching Christianity, and was arrested and tortured for disobeying the new laws. He spent more than a decade in jail. Among his punishments, according to Saint Simeon's 10th-century history, were starvation and thirst. That is how Santa got skinny.

Twelve years later, AD 312, and Nicholas was still in jail. Constantine, a general, was fighting Maxentius, another general, for control of Rome. The two prepared to battle at the Tiber River, just north of the city. Constantine dreamt. He saw a cross in the sky. On the cross was written: "With this sign you will conquer."

Constantine triumphed. He entered pagan Rome with Maxentius's head on a pike and Christian thoughts in his heart. Across the empire, bishops and priests returned to work and Nicholas got out of jail.
He tended to local business. He was not pleasant about it. At the time, Myra was a hotbed of Artemis-worship -- Artemis being the Roman equivalent of the Grecian goddess of the hunt, Diana.

As legend goes, Nicholas prayed for vengeance, and his prayers were answered. Artemis's temple crumbled. "The statues of idols fell down, like leaves of a tree when a strong wind blows in autumn," writes Saint Simeon.

The priests who lived in Artemis's temple ran in tears to the bishop. They appealed to his Christian mercy. They wanted their temple restored. They wanted a place to live. They had been doing no harm, they pleaded: People seemed to like the simple graven images. They were a source of comfort in troubled times.

Nicholas was not moved. Prison had left him in no mood for compromise. "Go to Hell's fire," he is said to have said, "which has been lit for you by the Devil."

**The Time of Nick**

In his lifetime, Nicholas crusaded against official corruption and injustice, seeing both as an affront to God. Supposedly, his intervention -- through fire-and-brimstone denunciations of corrupt officials -- saved at least a half-dozen innocent men from the gallows or the chopping block.

He was forgiven for punching Arius and rescued from the dungeon. In the end, his views on the Trinity were vindicated by the adoption of the Nicene Creed, which declares Christ divine.

Saint Nick died on Dec. 6. The year could be 326 or 343 or 352, depending whose account you rely on. Why we know the day of the year, but not the year itself, will be explained forthwith.

**A Saint's Good Deeds**

For some people, death is a deterrent to one's life's work. Not for Nicholas. His deeds grew and grew.

A story from the 9th century tells of pilgrims on their way to Nicholas's tomb.

An old woman appeared (she was a demon, but the pilgrims didn't know that) who said she was too old to travel to Myra. Could the pilgrims take a small flask of oil to the tomb and use it to light the lamps? They agreed. The vial was filled with explosives and other vile things. After the ship set sail, one sleeping passenger had a vision of Nicholas. "Hurl the container into the sea!" warned the saint. The pilgrim awakened and flung the vial overboard. Flames burst from the waves. The sea boiled and the air smelled rank and filthy. The terrified passengers huddled on the deck as the ship listed.

On came Nick. The deceased bishop calmed the sea, exorcised the demon and banished it to the sea floor.
Was this the beginning of the resurrection of Nick? Had he finally become a benign character? Not yet. Not by a long shot.

In 1057, Dom Ytherius, prior of an order of monks in Cluny, France, refused to let a musical rendition, or historia, of Nicholas's life be sung in his church. The historia was something of a new art form in the 11th century, a blending of song and myth about the lives of saints. One Santa biographer, Charles Jones, calls it "rock liturgy." The prior considered the historia too fancy-modern.

According to "The Golden Legend," and a version of Nicholas's life written by a Belgian order of monks, the prior said: "Never shall I allow the new canticles, which sound like minstrel's songs, be chanted in my church."

The monks retreated, and the first day of the feast proceeded glumly, without the Nicholas historia. That night, the prior retired to his bed. Saint Nick made a house call.

Supposedly Nicholas dragged the terrified prior out of bed and threw him to the floor. Standing over him, he withdrew a whip from his tunic. The saint sang his historia, while drumming the beat on Dom Ytherius's back: "O eternal shepherd . . . " Crack. "O kindly and good guardian . . . " Crack. "Who dost attend the prayers of the devoted flock . . . " Crack.

As recounted in "The Golden Legend," Nicholas continued until he had taught the prior "to sing the whole from beginning to end."

Funny thing, Dom Ytherius soon had a change of heart. The canticle was sung.

**Nick and Kids**

In all, Nicholas of Myra might not seem like the kind of person who relates to kids, and few acts attributed to him involve children. There are two, though neither is exactly the stuff of sugar plums and Christmas stockings.

In one tale, widely told, Nicholas secretly delivers three bags of gold to a penniless father. The debtor dad uses the loot as dowries so his three girls do not have to become prostitutes. This story has not survived, however, primarily as a tale of kindness to children: The three bags became the familiar three globes of the pawnbroker's shop, symbolizing fiscal prudence in times of destitution. Finding money from an unexpected source.

The second anecdote involving children sounds more like Brian DePalma than Currier and Ives.

This tale, related by the 12th-century French poet and 13th-century Saint Bonaventure, tells of the time a tavern owner robbed, murdered and dismembered three children, hiding their remains in pickle barrels.

The child-parts were salted and cured for customers to eat. Fortunately, Saint Nicholas happened to walk first through the tavern-keeper's door. You hungry? asks the host. Not for
what you're serving, Nicholas replied darkly. Soon, all three boys, parts reattached, were back home, reeking of pickle juice. What became of the shopkeeper is unrecorded.

This legend was too juicy to die. By the Middle Ages, Nick had become the patron saint of children, and he had a new gig: gift-giving. Throughout Europe, the legend spread: He delivered trinkets to good kids and twigs to naughty ones. It was an uneasy transition -- from curmudgeon to cuddle-bear.

One period portrait shows Nick working his new job. He has a glum expression, wears sackcloth robes and sits on a gray horse. He doesn’t seem excited. He hasn’t gained any weight yet.

Nick delivers his gifts on the sixth of December, the anniversary of his death. It was his own special holiday. Saint Nicholas Day.

**A Christmas Comeback**

In 1687, Christmas was on the ropes. Increase Mather, the Puritan preacher in Massachusetts, penned his "Testimony Against Several Profane and Superstitious Customs Now Practiced by Some in New England." "It can never be proven that Christ was born on December 25," Mather wrote. "It was in compliance with the Pagan saturnalia that Christmas Holy-dayes were first invented."

Pagans and Puritans? Not the best fit. Christmas was shunned in New England. Just a few years later, Mather's son, Cotton, helped instigate the Salem witch trials. This was not a fun family.

In England in the mid-1600s, Oliver Cromwell led a Puritan takeover of Parliament. They accomplished what the Grinch can only dream of doing: Christmas was banned.

In 1809 Washington Irving, author of "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" and "Rip Van Winkle," found himself longing for Christmas. Irving remembered the traditional British holiday, with Yule logs (huge chunks of firewood that burn throughout Christmas Day) and feasting and wassail bowls (big decanters filled with toxic concoctions of wine and spice) and mincemeat pies.

In America, Thanksgiving and July 4 were much bigger deals than Christmas. Many Americans didn’t observe Christmas at all. Even in England, the bawdy 12-day Christmas celebration was in decline.

So Irving conjured up his own holiday legend. His vision would be the first step toward creation of the modern-day Santa.

In Irving's fanciful "History of New York," Nicholas appears as a favorite and somewhat daffy saint brought to America by the Dutch. (The Dutch, indeed, had their own version of the gift-giving Saint Nicholas. He was closer to the dyspeptic gift-giver of earlier times, but the Dutch added one fillip that stuck like hasty pudding: the name. Corrupting and contracting "Saint Nicholas" with the singsong Dutch meter, they called him Sinterklaas.
As in earlier legends, Irving's Saint Nick delivers gifts to good kids on Dec. 6, and rods to bad ones. But Irving's Nick is a bit different. He appears in a dream to Oloffe Van Kortlandt, a Dutchman shipwrecked in America in the 17th century.

This Nick arrives in a flying wagon. He smokes a long pipe. He is decked out in "a low, broad-brimmed hat" and "a huge pair of Flemish trunk hose." Hose? In the vision, mushroom clouds of smoke billow from St. Nick's pipe -- so much that Oloffe climbs a tree to catch a breath. He sees Nick's smoke gathering over a piece of land in the distance.

The wisps form towers and streets. They will have names in the future -- Wall Street and Fifth Avenue. Oloffe looks back at Nicholas, who puts his finger on his nose and disappears.

Oloffe and the other Dutchmen buy New York City from the Indians for a double sawbuck worth of baubles, and the Big Apple is born. Another gift from Saint Nick -- if you believe in Washington Irving, that is.

**The Poem**

In 1822, Clement Clarke Moore was rich and pretentious. How rich? He owned Manhattan's Chelsea section; it was his family's farm. How pretentious? You shall see.

Moore was a biblical scholar whose proudest achievement was compiling a massive "Lexicon of the Hebrew Language." He also fancied himself a poet on the side, though he never was very successful. Almost never.

He wrote a simple little poem for his six kids, and read it to them on Christmas Eve in 1822. It was just a trifle, he said. The poem started like this: " 'Twas the Night Before Christmas and all through the house, Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse . . . "

Just the year before, a small kids' book, "The Children's Friend," pictured a thin, red-bearded "Santeclaus" riding a sleigh drawn by a single, somewhat exhausted-looking deer.

Moore further embellished this embellishment of Irving's tale. The Brawling Saint is long gone. "A Visit From St. Nicholas" describes Santa as "chubby and plump" and "a right jolly old elf." His belly shakes like jelly.

Nick, scourge of Artemis . . . an elf? To make matters worse, he drives a sleigh pulled by eight reindeer -- Dasher, Dancer, Prancer, Vixen, Comet, Cupid, Donner and Blitzen. He doesn't even get to keep his own special day. Now Nick is the delivery stooge of "the night before Christmas."

Here's how pretentious Moore was: He tried to keep the story quiet. He insisted that "A Visit From St. Nicholas" remain a family secret. What would his scholarly brethren think of a man
who wrote Christmas confections? Nevertheless, a family friend had the poem published, unsigned, in a New York newspaper in 1823 (Moore would not claim the work until 14 years later).

What was the response? The Library of Congress currently has one copy of Moore's Hebrew dictionary, sandwiched among 128 versions of " 'Twas the Night Before Christmas," ranging from "3-D Night Before Christmas" to "Redneck Night Before Christmas" to "Care Bears' Night Before Christmas."

Final Transformation

In the Civil War era, Santa was poised for the final step in his 1,500-year metamorphosis. Enter Thomas Nast. You may not know him, but as with Irving and Moore, you know his work.

The Democratic donkey? The Republican elephant? Both are Nast's doing. The German-born artist was the greatest political cartoonist of his day, and probably the greatest ever in America. Nast was fearless. Nast could be nasty. But he had a soft heart.

Inspired by Moore's poem, he first drew Santa in 1862. The lean stud of old became a hugely fat old man. Seventy years later he became even stouter, when artist Haddon Sundblom realized our modern Santa as a Coca-Cola pitchman.

The transformation was complete. Santa, finally, was rendered in four-color magazine graphics. His suit was as uncompromisingly red as a maraschino cherry. His eyes twinkled with merriment, his skin as rosy as dawn.

One might wonder what grumpy old Saint Nicholas would think of what he has become over the years. He has returned to Earth in human form. Perhaps he walks among us even today, wandering the streets of our cities and towns, a prophet of doom, unrecognized, unheralded, railing pitifully against materialism and commercialism and the plastic lawn ornaments that bear his name.