

## St. Nicholas Day

Every evening over the past few weeks Adah has told me "Santa is coming." And every time it caught me off guard. You see, our family has not talked about Santa before and our kids have never received gifts from him. So each time Adah said he was coming, I played it off by talking about how yes he did come in her Peppa Pig book or yes we did see a statue of him in the grocery store. But I have never encouraged her imagination. So imagine my surprise when I was proven wrong!

On Friday (12/4), it was my turn for carpool and I picked the kids up from school. When I got to Adah's classroom, she bounded out of the room and squealed that Santa came and brought her presents. I looked at the teacher for more information but she was busy speaking to another parent. So I gathered all the kids up, got them to the car, buckled them in, passed out snacks, and started plying the kids with questions.

Me: So, you saw Santa today?

Girls: YES!

Me: What do they call him in French. Père Noël? (Father Christmas)

Elijah: No, St. Nicholas (Ni-cola...like Ricola the cough drops but with an n)

Girls: Oui! St. Nicholas donné-moi des bonbons (he gave me candies)

Elijah: St. Nicholas was big! I even measured him! He was so big!

Ruth: Il donné des bonbons à mes amis. (He gave candies to my friends)

\*The kids proceeded to correct one another on their pronunciation on St. Nicolas (NEE-cola vs. NI-cola...I couldn't tell the difference but they could). This followed by the kids pulling out their bag filled with small taffies and a package of Speculoos cookies and caressing it with much relish.

After talking to some of the other moms, one was able to talk to a Belgian friend to get more information. December 6th is St. Nicholas Day, a day where the patron saint (Catholic) is celebrated. He comes to town mid-November and travels to churches, schools, and businesses delivering treats to all, usually special cinnamon biscuits (Speculoos). On December 5th, there is a feast in his honor at all households where he could show up as an honored guest if he wanted. That night, children place their shoes by the chimney or in the foyer by the door along with hay and carrots for his horse and beer or coffee for him. During the night, St. Nicholas will go door to door with his assistant Père Fouettard (Black Peter) who will place chocolate letter candies or small toys in the shoes for all good children. For the naughty children, they will wake up to see a birch branch stick for which their parents are to punish them or if they are especially naughty, Black Peter (either a black man or a man with soot covering his face, interpretations vary) will place the child in the sack and send him to Spain! Sometimes when St. Nicholas is in a hurry, he will leave a bag of gifts on the door step and will knock on the door as he is leaving.



St. Nicholas and Black Peter

What? You were expecting something a bit different, weren't you?

He wears a Bishop's rope and red cape with a miter

After learning more about the holiday and knowing that Adah goes to a Belgium school, I now realize that Adah had been studying him over the past few weeks, even learning cute songs which I mistook for regular nursery rhymes (I had to look them up after paying attention to the lyrics). So, we decided to celebrate the holiday by making cookies and setting out our shoes for candies. Since Adah is only 3 and actually saw the character I felt kind of bad saying he wasn't real when in fact, he was very much real to her, I didn't mind playing along this year. Especially since it emphasizes that "Santa" has nothing to do with Christmas which is a celebration for Christ. So we can keep our Advent countdown traditions, birthday party, and Christian songs separate.



Cookies for the feast



Making cookies



Making cookies



St. Nicholas came!!!