

Santa's First Stop

Cecelia Reynolds

Kristen Edwards, Illustrator

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Santa's First Stop is an optimistic Christian picture book that blends two Christmas traditions together.

In Cecelia Reynolds's picture book, *Santa's First Stop*, Santa visits Bethlehem.

This picture book is focused on delivering the message that Christmas centers on "Jesus and Jesus is LOVE." As such, while Santa's elves prepare his sled for taking off, Santa discusses how lucky he is to be able to visit "the sweetest baby" with Jeremiah, his head elf. Santa and his reindeer leave for the Middle East, where he greets Mary and holds the baby.

Within the sparse story, which is set with generic characters, Santa—who is sometimes referred to as St. Nicholas—is an eager lead, though little else is shared about him. Jeremiah is efficient, but speaks in a formal, explanatory way. Most of the story is devoted to preparations for Santa's trip, and the visit itself is short-shrifted.

Some intriguing details arise, including that Jeremiah has been at his work for 482 years, though this information confuses why this specific occasion of Santa's Bethlehem trip stands out. Santa's remark about seeing the baby every year also impedes the book's sense of time and its biblical tie-in. A concluding note emphasizes that Bethlehem is always the first stop because Christmas wouldn't exist otherwise, but this repeated message is too forceful a solution.

The text includes an excess of details, including minute actions that are shown in the pictures, too, from handing over a clipboard to walking out to the sleigh. Its adverbs further slacken its tension, and its overt messaging leaves little room for the audience to make its own subtle discoveries.

The book's page layouts are static and predictable, with a few paragraphs on one side of each spread, accompanied by a colorful illustration on the other. Its computer-generated illustrations include flat renderings of Santa, Jeremiah, the reindeer, and the manger. Without shadows and contours, the characters are straightforward types more than evocative personalities, while their backgrounds consist of gradient skies—a plain choice, given the seasonal wonder that the story suggests.

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KAREN RIGBY (September 9, 2020)

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