

“IT’S BEGINNING TO LOOK A LOT LIKE CHRISTMAS!”

II – CHRISTMAS TREES

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Genesis 3:1-8

Luke 3:1-6

O Christmas tree! Oh, Christmas trees! They’ve been a part of our lives as long as any of us can remember. They light up our homes, and fill a darkened room with a lovely glow. They touch our heart with memories brought forth through the ornaments hung on each bough.

They fill the cold winter season with bits of joy – when we come around the corner and see the lights of the Christmas tree above the hospital, or the beautiful tree at the corner of Main and North Streets. They bring a tear to our eyes when we watch the thousands of lights burst forth when the switch is thrown on the Rockefeller Center Christmas Tree or the National Christmas tree in Washington.

Oh Christmas tree! What a wonderful symbol of Christmas is the tree, but it is ever so much more as well – which is why I chose to use it for this Advent sermon series. For the tree is much more than a symbol – it actually provides a golden

thread through the story of God and humankind, which today I'll present as the tale of five trees.

But before I do that, let me give you a little history lesson on Christmas trees. It used to be, ages and ages ago, that just before winter struck, bringing its cold and brutal winds across the land to freeze everything in its wake, families would bring some greens inside of their homes, as a sign of life in the midst of death. Those greens would serve as a reminder as winter continued on so harshly, that spring was coming, new life was coming.

So that is, most assuredly, a good thing that has carried on through the ages. The green trees we put up are visual reminders of life – life that goes on even in the harshest of circumstances.

But there's something more that I learned, more than just bringing greens in the house – that is about how the practice of putting up a Christmas tree probably started. It's credited to an 8th century Christian missionary by the name of St. Boniface. Legend has it that, in the year 722, Boniface encountered some pagans getting ready to sacrifice a child at the base of a huge oak tree. Boniface cut down

the tree to prevent the terrible act, and lo and behold, a fir tree grew up at the base of the oak stump. He then told everyone that this lovely evergreen, with its branches pointed toward heaven, was a holy tree – the tree of the Christ child, and a symbol of his promise of hope and eternal life.

And so people began to put evergreen trees in their homes to celebrate Christ's birth, and legend further has it, that all of the lights put on the trees were symbolic of every soul saved by Christ.

Let me ask you a question this morning. When you put up your tree, do you see it as a symbol of your faith? I'm just wondering, because it's so easy to just see it as a decoration for the season, filled with things that are special to you, for sure, but do we really look upon it as a symbol of our faith? I hope we do, but if not, perhaps some of the things I'll tell you this morning will help you do that.

So let me turn now to my tale of five trees. It's a bit of a take-off on a story someone once wrote called "Story of the Three Trees," which, when I looked it up, had on it "source unknown." But as I said, I'm going to add a few trees to show you

what I mean about the golden thread running through the story of God and humankind.

Once, on top of a mountain, was a group of five lovely evergreen trees. They stood next to each other and each one dreamed of what they wanted to become when they grew up.

The first tree said, “I never had to dream about what I would be, because God created me and put me right in the middle of the most beautiful garden you could ever see. It was perfect, absolutely perfect. And everything was wonderful in that garden – there was peace and harmony – and one day God put two people right down in front of us. He named them Adam and Eve, and he told them that everything in that beautiful place was just for them – they could enjoy everything they wanted – except, well, except for the fruit of my tree. Because you see, God made me to be the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.”

“Like I said, everything was beautiful and perfect, just as God planned it to be. Until, until that beautiful couple did what God told them not to do. They came and ate of the fruit on my tree, and suddenly, everything changed. Perfection was

gone. Peace was shattered. I know it had to make God cry, and I watched as Adam and Eve were filled with shame. It was a sad, sad day when things seemed to turn upside down, and the people to whom God had given so much, turned away from him. Things were not as they should be.” And that evergreen tree on top of that mountain turned away from her tree friends as tears ran down her branches.

After some awkward silence, the tree next to her spoke, sharing her dream with the others. “Oh friends, I want to hold treasure when I grow up. I want to be covered with gold and filled with precious stones. I want to be the most beautiful treasure chest in the world!”

The tree next to her, the third tree, spoke up next. She looked out at a small stream trickling by on its way to the ocean. “When I grow up, I want to travel mighty waters and carry powerful kings. I want to be the strongest ship in the world!”

The fourth tree, next to her, looked down into the valley below where busy men and women worked in a busy town. She said, “I don’t want to leave this mountain top at all. I want to grow so tall that when people stop to look at me,

they'll raise their eyes to heaven and think of God. I want to be the tallest tree in the world.”

Finally, the fifth tree, looking pensive said, “You know what? I just want to be a tree in a beautiful, perfect garden, just like our first friend was. I want to spread my branches in a place where everything is as it should be, just as God wants it to be.”

Well, years passed after these trees shared their dreams with one another. Rains came, the sun shone, and the trees grew tall. One day, four woodcutters climbed the mountain.

One of the woodcutters looked at the second tree and said, “Oh, this tree is beautiful. It is perfect for me, and with a swoop of his axe, the tree fell. “Now I shall be made into a beautiful chest, I shall hold wonderful treasure,” the tree thought to herself.

Then another woodcutter went over to the third tree and said, “Oh, this tree is strong. It is perfect for me.” And with his axe, he made some cuts, and the tree fell.

Then the third woodcutter went over and glanced at the fourth tree, and didn’t really even look up at it, just said to himself, “well, any kind of tree will do for me,” and in an instant, he had taken it down. The heart of that tree sank a little when she heard those words.

Finally, the fourth woodcutter went over and said, “Oh, this is a fine, fine tree – why, it looks absolutely perfect. This is the one for me.” And he cut it down.

All of the woodcutters hauled their trees away.

The second tree was so excited when the woodcutter took her to a carpenter’s shop. “Oh good, he’s going to cover me in gold and filled me with precious stones.” But no, instead, he fashioned her into a feed box for animals – no gold, no gems, just sawdust and hay for hungry animals.

The third tree smiled when her woodcutter took her to a shipyard. “Yay, I’m getting my wish. I’m going to be a great ship to travel the seas.” But she, too, was disappointed, when she was carved into a small fishing boat, and put on a little lake.

The fourth tree didn’t know what to expect from her woodcutter. After all, the woodcutter hadn’t thought much of her, so she wasn’t really surprised when he just cut her up into beams and set her aside. “What happened?” she wondered. “All I ever wanted was to stay on the mountain and point to God.” She was sad.

Then there was the fifth tree that had been cut down – that beautiful, perfect tree. Well, you know what? The woodcutter didn’t do anything with her – just left her alone.

Then, many, many days passed – so many that the trees nearly forgot their dreams.

Until one night. One night, golden starlight poured over the second tree as a young woman placed her newborn baby in that feedbox made for animals. That tree heard a man say, “I wish I could make a cradle for him,” and heard the woman reply, “This manger is beautiful. It’s just right. It’s perfect. It’s just as it should be.” And suddenly that tree knew she was holding the greatest treasure in the world.

One evening, some time later, oh, some thirty years later, a tired traveler and his friends crowded into a fishing boat on the banks of a little lake. They got inside and floated out onto the water and the tired traveler fell asleep in that little boat. Suddenly, a violent storm arose. The little tree shuddered. She knew she did not have the strength to carry so many passengers safely through the wind and the rain. The tired man awakened. He stood up, stretched out his hand, and said, “Peace.” The storm stopped as quickly as it had begun. And suddenly the third tree knew she was carrying the king of heaven and earth.

Not long after that, one Friday afternoon, the fourth tree was startled when her beams were yanked from the forgotten woodpile. She flinched as she was carried through an angry jeering crowd. She shuddered when soldiers nailed a man’s hands to her. She felt ugly and harsh and cruel. But on Sunday morning,

when the sun rose and the earth trembled with joy beneath her, the fourth tree knew that God's love had changed everything. And every time people thought of this tree, they would think of God – and oh, that was so much better than being the tallest tree in the world.

The fifth tree's story isn't finished yet. Her story will end on that day when Christ comes again in glory – when the kingdom that was shattered in the Garden of Eden is restored – and all will be perfect again. On that day, as we heard in our Gospel lesson this morning, “every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill made low, the crooked made straight and the rough places plain.” We wait for that day, we long for that day, we live trusting that day will come on a day and time that only God knows.

A tale of five trees, weaving a golden thread through the story of God's love for humankind – from the trees in the perfect Garden of Eden; to the tree turned into a manger bed for “God with us” – Emmanuel; to a tree carved into a boat in which Jesus showed his power and his love, in which we are invited over and over again to experience the peace that only he can give; to a tree that was intended for evil but ended up being a symbol for good – the tree that became the cross of Calvary; and finally, that tree that will stand in the last days when “justice shall

roll down like waters and righteousness like an everflowing stream,” when all things will be just as God intends – perfect.

I hope this little tale will cause you to look at your Christmas tree – actually at all Christmas trees in a new, faith-filled way. That you’ll see in their green color, God’s never-ending, eternal love. That you’ll see in their lights – the light of Christ breaking through the darkness, and the countless souls he came to save. That you’ll see in the ornaments, all of the gifts God has put into your life, all the people, all the memories. That you’ll see in the very shape of the trees, a call to lift your eyes to heaven.

Oh friends, who knew that such a thing as a Christmas tree could have so much to tell us about the love of God made known so perfectly in Christ Jesus? May none of us ever look at a Christmas tree the same way again. May we see them always through the eyes of faith and love. May it be so.

Amen.