

“SIGNS OF THE SEASON: II - CHRISTMAS TREE”
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Jeremiah 33:14-16

Luke 19:1-10

So, have you put your Christmas tree up yet? Driving around at night, and seeing all the beautiful lights through the windows, I can see that many people have. You know what? I think last weekend was the big weekend to put up Christmas trees. Why do I say that? Because Mom and I were driving up to my brother's home north of Philadelphia, and it seemed like every car we passed had a Christmas tree tied to its roof!

At any rate, I wonder - do you know why we put up Christmas trees - what's behind the tradition. Well, I wondered myself, so I went to google of course, and found out a lot about Christmas trees. First of all, there's a reason Christmas trees are traditionally green - evergreens, to be exact. It's a symbol from way, way back of eternal life, and it is clearly a symbol of God's ever-present, never-ending, always-growing love in our lives. (Parenthetically, it's the same reason we use greens for wreaths - and wreaths have an added dimension in their symbolism - the circle reminds us that God's love has no beginning or no end - it just always has been, is, and always will be there.)

But back to the Christmas tree. Christmas trees actually came into use not until the 1500's or so - the time of Martin Luther. They were, however, a reflection of trees that had been used in medieval times - called the tree of life. Those trees were decorated with two things - apples and wafers. The apples represented creation, the Garden of Eden, and the fruit of the garden (the forbidden fruit which Adam and Eve ate), and then the wafers symbolized the Eucharist, our redemption through Christ's death on the cross.

So our modern day Christmas tree had its roots in those trees of life. Of course, over time, decorations on the trees changed. Early on, the trees actually had lighted candles perched on their branches, and over the centuries all sorts of things have come and gone, until today, everyone pretty much decides what they want on their own tree. Some have lots of ornaments that children and grandchildren have made, some have precious ornaments from years gone by, some have thematic trees, some people prefer colored lights, while others want all white lights, some like the lights flashing, and others don't; and then, the big debate - is it an angel or a star for the top of your tree? I love putting up my tree, because all of my ornaments are from places I've visited from around the world. Every time I visit someplace, I buy a Christmas tree ornament, so every year I love to sit and

look at them on the tree - I think about my time in the Holy Land, or my trip to Ireland with my sister, or the Grand Canyon or Yellowstone with my parents, or Maine and Newport with the Classic Christians. My tree makes me happy, and I hate to take it down - and I wait all the way until the twelfth day of Christmas - which is January 6th - to take it down.

I hope your Christmas tree makes you happy as well. But more than that today, I want to invite all of us to look at the Christmas tree in a new way this year - actually in a few new ways - ways that will keep us focused on the fact that it's all about Jesus - the decorations, the presents, the parties, the trees - it's all about Jesus.

First, let me remind you that way back in the Hebrew scriptures, in the lesson we heard today from Jeremiah, Jesus' birth was foretold in this way: "a righteous branch will spring forth, who will execute righteousness and justice in the land." The imagery of a branch and of "thou root of Jesse's tree" which we sing about in "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" are both ways of describing the Messiah. So when you look at a Christmas tree this season, remember that it is a powerful symbol and reminder that those who came before Jesus described who He would be with the powerful imagery of strong roots and trees and branches.

Secondly, and surely most easily, when you look at your tree this year, think of the wooden stable and wooden manger in which Jesus was laid at his birth. It's ironic that while I was preparing this sermon this week, the announcement was made about a royal baby coming to Prince William and his wife Kate. That baby's head will probably never touch anything but silk, and will surely have the best of everything in life. And yet, here, now, we celebrate One who was born in the crudest of circumstances and laid in a manger built for animals.

Oh, what God said to us in that moment. When He could have sent the Messiah into the world as a conquering military hero, instead God sent Him in a way we would understand - as one of us. He came into the world much the same way all of us did, and grew up to experience life as all of us do. It was the best way God could show us just how much He loves us.

At this time of year, I'm always reminded of a story that the philosopher Soren Kierkegaard used to tell. It is the story of a prince of long ago who fell in love with a maiden in his kingdom. But he was afraid to go to her as a prince. He was afraid that if he appeared to her with all the trappings of the monarchy, she would be overwhelmed and in awe, and would feel like she had no choice but to say yes to his marriage proposal, just because he was the prince.

He didn't want that. He didn't want her awe, he wanted her love. So, he took off his princely garments and went to the marketplace where she worked, got

to know her that way, and wooed her. He went to her as one of her own kind, won her heart, and only then did he reveal to her who he really was.

(Tony Campolo, *Let Me Tell You a Story*, p. 15)

In many ways, that's what God did for us in Christ Jesus. Had God sent His Son into the world in princely garb, with the trappings of royalty, we might have been overwhelmed or in awe or afraid, and followed Him because we had to. Instead, God sent Him as one of us. He came to us, lived among us, loved us, and won our hearts.

May your Christmas tree, this year, remind you of the manger that cradled that Son of God - born as one of us, yet ever so much more - our Savior.

Which brings me to the third way I'd invite you to see your tree this year - as a reminder of who Jesus was and is - One who comes to us and helps us - as He helped Zaccheus who was up in a tree in this morning's Gospel lesson. I guess, the shorthand of that would be, that our trees would remind us that it is Jesus who comes to us and helps us when we're "up a tree" which we are, regularly.

The baby born in the manger in Bethlehem grew up to be the Messiah walking the paths of Galilee - teaching, healing, reaching out, caring, reconciling, and forgiving. He was the One who touched those that others would have shunned. He was the One who forgave sinners, and set them back on their feet to start over again. He was the One who unbound people from their past, who told them they were precious in God's sight.

Look what He did for Zaccheus that day. Zaccheus was a hated man, and truth be told, he didn't like himself all that much. He was a tax collector, who not only collected taxes, but lined his pockets as well - and everybody knew it, and hated him. He was on the outside looking in, and one day, when Jesus was passing by, he decided to get a look at him. Oh, he'd heard all about Him, and wanted to catch a glimpse of him, but he didn't want to get close, and he sure didn't want to deal with the crowd. So he ended up in that tree - he was up a tree, both literally and figuratively.

And Jesus brought him down. Jesus saved him. He loved him even in his imperfection, even though he was a cheat, even though the crowd turned on him. Jesus loved him, and went to his house with him, and told him he was okay. And it changed Zaccheus' life forever.

That's who Jesus is, friends. The One who reaches out to us and loves us no matter what, who saves us from ourselves and our sins, and sets us back on our feet to start over again, who loves us unconditionally even when we don't love ourselves.

May your Christmas tree, this year, remind you of how much Christ loves you, and remind you, that even when you find yourself “up a tree” of your own making or not, He is your salvation. He will rescue you, and allow you to begin again.

The writer Debra Dean Murphy put it this way: “The Jesus who comes into the world naked, homeless, and vulnerable is the Christ who comes to us in our own places of godforsakenness. And we know this not because of the cradle, but of the cross.” (On-line, debradeanmurphy.com)

Which brings me to my final invitation - to let your Christmas tree this year remind you of the cross at Calvary - the cross on which Jesus died to set us free. Because the Christmas story is not the Christmas story without knowing how it ends. This is not just a nice baby story, about an ordinary baby being born in extraordinary circumstances.

This is the story of the Son of God, who came into the world, yes, in human form, but whose sole purpose was to show us the love that God had for us - so deep, so profound that He would sacrifice His Son for us. That baby in the manger became the man Christ who died on a cruel wooden cross for us and for our salvation.

Poet Ann Weems, in her poem, “The Cross in the Manger” reflects on that. It goes like this:

“If there is no cross in the manger, there is no Christmas.
If the Babe doesn’t become the Adult, there is no Bethlehem star.
If there is no commitment in us, there are no Wise Men searching.
If we offer no cup of cold water, there is no gold, no frankincense, no myrrh.
If there is no praising God’s name, there are no angels singing.
If there is no spirit of alleluia, there are no shepherds watching.
If there is no standing up, no speaking out, no risk,
 there is no Herod, no flight into Egypt.
If there is no room in our inn, then ‘Merry Christmas’ mocks the Christ Child,
 and the Holy Family is just a holiday card,
 and God will loathe our feasts and festivals.

For if there is no reconciliation, we cannot call Christ ‘Prince of Peace.’
If there is no goodwill toward others, it can all be packed away in
 boxes for another year.
If there is no forgiveness in us, there is no cause for celebration.
If we cannot go now even unto Golgotha, there is no Christmas in us.
If Christmas is not *now*, if Christ is not born into the everyday present,

then what is all the *noise* about?"

(Ann Weems, *Kneeling in Bethlehem*, p. 77)

Thought provoking, isn't it? "If there is no cross in the manger, there is no Christmas." The babe born in the manger is the Christ of Calvary. That's why He came - for us.

So this year, enjoy your Christmas tree as always, but look at it more closely. Remember through it the manger that cradled the baby Jesus; remember the times you have been "up a tree" and Jesus has helped you down; and remember the cross where He gave His life for you.

The Christmas tree - a sign of the season - a powerful sign of God's love for you and for me. Thanks be to God!

Amen.