



Rev Chris Taylor - 12/16/18

O Christmas Tree

Over in the manse, we put our Christmas tree up a couple of weeks ago. After church I brought the pieces up from the basement and put it together. Then I waited for Bonnie to get home so we could decorate it together.

We used to always use real trees. When we were living in Cleveland one of our favorite rituals each year was driving out into Amish country to a wonderful tree farm there. The owners brought in farmers from all over the area with their teams of horses, hay wagons and harnesses filled with bells. The kids loved it. We'd pick up a saw, climb up onto one of the wagons and then travel out to the fields where we would go in search of the perfect tree.

After cutting it, and waiting for a wagon to take us back, we'd all go inside a brightly decorated barn with rows of tables. There we would drink hot chocolate, sing Christmas carols and enjoy the roaring fire. It was always a great day for the family, and a great way to enter into the season.

One year, however, the perfect tree happened to have a lot of pollen. Within hours of getting it home I started developing a reaction. We ended up giving it to my secretary and going out to a nearby tree stand to get a different one. That was our first clue that these real trees might be a problem.

The turning point came several years later, after we moved to Colorado. We got through Christmas okay, but when I tried to take the tree outside I ended up in the bathroom coughing and choking so badly that Bonnie wanted to take me to the emergency room. That was the end. A couple of weeks later we picked up our new artificial tree at a local store that was running a sale. We've been using it ever since.

The tree has got to be twenty to twenty five years old now. A pretty good run, but it is definitely showing its age. Every year I find more pieces in the bottom of the box. Every year it is a struggle to get the lights working. There are whole sections now that are simply dark. The result is a pretty pathetic looking tree when we first set it up. So no surprise, for the last five or six years Bonnie and I have said the same thing: "It's time to get a new tree."

This year we actually went as far as looking on the internet for a replacement. One night I came home from a meeting and found Bonnie sitting up in bed with her computer. When she told me how much the trees cost I had a kind of conversion – "you know, with all the decorations our old tree still looks pretty good!" And that's where we've left it for now.

But it got me wondering where this whole Christmas tree thing got started. I'm pretty sure those first century Christians didn't go out and cut down trees to celebrate Jesus' birth...the connection is not readily apparent: "Jesus is born – let's go cut down a tree!"? So how, exactly, did this tradition get started, and what it does it mean for us, as followers of Jesus, to put up brightly decorated trees in our homes?

In search of an answer I went to everyone's favorite reference, Wikipedia. Happily, I found the article quoting my old standard, the Encyclopedia Britannica. "The use of evergreen trees, wreaths, and garlands to symbolize eternal life was a custom of the ancient Egyptians, Chinese, and Hebrews. Tree worship was common among the pagan Europeans and survived their conversion to Christianity in the Scandinavian customs of decorating the house and barn with evergreens at the New Year to scare away the devil and of setting up a tree for the birds during Christmas time."

Why the evergreen tree? Because it alone remains green year round, it alone suggests the presence of life and vitality year after year no matter what the season.

It was in Germany that the Christmas tree evolved into the form we know today. The first evidence of decorated trees emerged in guildhalls in the fifteenth century, where the trees were decorated with sweets that the apprentices and children could enjoy. Tradition has it that a century later, the great reformer Martin Luther was the first to add candles to the branches. Within a couple of hundred years the practice had spread throughout the Protestant church in Germany, and by the second half of the 19th century decorated trees had found their way into the Baltic countries and down into France and Britain.

Hessian soldiers were the first to bring them to the United States. They were followed, of course, by German immigrants and today there are several towns that lay claim to being the first to use Christmas trees: Windsor Locks in Connecticut, and both Easton and Lancaster here in Pennsylvania. Far more influential, perhaps, was a drawing that appeared in the 1850 edition of *Godey's Lady's Book*. It was a picture of an American couple admiring their tree. Seeing it, people everywhere had the same thought, "Hey, we could do that!" Ironically, the whole scene was an exact copy of an earlier drawing of Prince Albert and Queen Elizabeth with their own tree, only to make them American the artist had deleted Albert's mustache and the Queen's tiara.

So what is the significance of the tree for us as followers of Jesus? Why do we have trees in our sanctuary, and go to so much trouble and expense to put them up in our homes? Martin Luther's willingness to embrace the tradition points to a deeper meaning behind them. It is that meaning I want to lift before you this morning.

First, consider the tree's shape. It is in the form of a triangle, a sacred symbol for the Christian community. Its three points speak to us of the Trinity: God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, uniquely manifest in the birth of that tiny child so long ago.

Then there are the lights. They remind us of that light that broke into our world with Jesus' birth. In the words of the Evangelist: "What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (John 1:4,5).

Along with the lights we have all the decorations that actually transform the tree into something strikingly beautiful; reflecting the lights and bringing a rich variety of color and texture. Watch anyone approach a tree for a closer look and you will almost always see them smile. This is the beauty, the joy, the wonder of a world transformed by Emmanuel, God with us.

At the very top people often place a star or an angel: a star to remind us of that star which led the magi to the stable; an angel to recall that first angel and the heavenly choir that proclaimed our Savior's birth to the shepherds out in the fields.

And then there is the tree itself: an evergreen. Early cultures worshipped the evergreen because they saw in it a sign of eternity, a sign of life itself. It is that same life, that same eternity, that the tree continues to represent today. It is a symbol of the rich, abundant life that we find in Jesus; a reminder of that gift he offers of all eternity to those who turn to him.

The tree speaks, as well, of an ageless God, eternal: seen or unseen, a God who is always present; always at work; moving in our lives and in this world according to his own good and loving purposes.

This is the God that Isaiah proclaims in our first lesson: the God of our salvation; the God in whom we can place our trust and not be afraid. The God who has been so utterly faithful in the past and will continue to be faithful today and tomorrow and in all the days to come.

This is the God that the Apostle speaks of in his epistle to the Philippians: the source of a peace that passes all understanding as we learn to place our trust in him. It is this Lord, the eternal, who is near to us even now; this God into whose caring hands we can place our every hope and dream knowing that God's love is sure and that God's faithfulness endures forever.

These are the things that make our trees so full of meaning. These are what make them so much more than just a decoration. This Christmas, then, I invite you to pause amid all the activity, and consider the tree and the message it proclaims and the hope to which it points: Jesus, our Savior, is born this day!