

## The Christmas Tree

Well brothers and sisters Christmas is now only a week away, so it's at this point in our casual conversations with other people that we start to ask *"so –are you ready for Christmas yet?"*

Because there is a lot to do in getting prepared for Christmas; Christmas cards need to be sent out, you need to decide what you are going to give to the people on your gift list and then go shopping for it...

And there are Christmas parties to attend at work, at school, at church, and you have to figure out what you be doing to celebrate on Christmas Eve – will you be going away for some Christmas vacation or will you stay in town?

Will you attend a Christmas Eve service, will you invite friends over, or will you celebrate with family – whose side of the family will you celebrate with this year??? Will you have a Christmas dinner at your place or at your relatives or a friend's

house – and what will you eat; a Christmas ham or a Christmas Turkey?

And maybe it is your tradition to send around a family photo and a yearly Christmas letter with your Christmas cards – so you have to get that organized and written up as well...

And – in the midst of all this – you also need to set up your Christmas decorations...

Now when it comes to Christmas décor, it doesn't matter if you are a full-on Martha Stewart, HGTV kind of person who puts up color-coordinated and matching decorations inspired by crafty ideas from Pinterest throughout your entire house...

Or if you are the ultimate sentimentalist decorator who displays every handmade Christmas craft and ornament that your kids and grandkids have ever made...

Or if you are more of the pragmatic kind of person who thinks – If I put it up, I have to take it down – so let's keep this to the bare minimum...

It doesn't matter what kind of Christmas decorator you are – your decorations will include a Christmas tree... (show the Cat-tree comic) of some sort. It can be big or small, real or fake, decorated to the max or just have a few lights on it – but the Christmas tree is the essential Christmas décor you cannot go without.

Now last week we learned that although Jesus' birth is the reason for the season, it is the mythical Santa Claus who has come to embody the Christmas spirit and ideal of giving, and this morning I want to point out how the Christmas tree, more than anything else, has become for us the real, tangible, concrete symbol of Christmas.

Wherever it is that you are holding your Christmas celebrations, it just doesn't seem like Christmas without a Christmas tree.

But wherever there is a Christmas tree, there is the implicit statement being made that Christmas is here – not just in the chronological sense of the holiday season having arrived, but in the actual spatial-locational sense that Christmas is specifically here - in this particular place.

Even having a nativity set – which is a real, tangible, concrete representation of the birth of Christ does not have the same effect of setting aside a place and proclaiming that in this space Christmas is being celebrated and observed.

Not sure that you agree with this? Well try to imagine all of your experiences of celebrating Christmas taking place around a nativity set instead of the Christmas tree as the central symbol... doesn't quite work the same way does it...

So why has the Christmas tree become such a significant a focal point, a location marker for all that goes on in celebrating Christmas?

Well brothers and sisters, let me start by saying this... it is worth noting that right from the very beginning - we human beings have had a rather significant relationship with trees,— haven't we.

Genesis 2:9 says *"The Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil."*

And if you are familiar with the story you remember how God instructed Adam that he was *"free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die."* (2:16-17)

And then in chapter 3 we read how Eve was deceived by the serpent into disobedience, eating from that tree, and how Adam joined her in tasting the fruit. Then God banished them from the Garden of Eden lest Adam *"reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever."* (3:22)

So to prevent Adam and Eve or their descendants from finding their way back to that tree of life we read that God put *"cherubim and a flaming sword flashing back and forth to guard the way to the tree of life."* (3:24)

And if the scripture is true – and we believe that it is – then it should be no surprise that given the significance of these trees, and the role they played in starting the true story of the whole world, that we find so many examples of sacred trees in the legends of the world's cultures.

There is the ancient Assyrian Tree of Great Light, the Oak of Dodona in the Greek legend of Homer, the Bhodi Tree under which Buddha found enlightenment, the familiar Chinese Willow Tree and the not so familiar Ash Yggdrasil from Scandinavia, and the Sacred Oaks of the British Druids to name a few...

So there has always been a significant connection between humanity and trees – and while none of the sacred trees from these ancient legends are directly responsible for the

development of the Christmas tree - I would argue that these trees, and especially the Trees of Knowledge and of Life in Genesis, show that the significance in our connection with trees is what they represent to us spiritually.

And it is this spiritual representation which explains why people have used trees in festivals and celebrations for thousands of years and why the Christmas tree has so easily become such a significant symbol of celebrating Christmas.

So let's look at some of these practices which helped to set the stage for the creation of the Christmas tree, and specifically why it was fir trees that were lit up, decorated, and set inside people's homes for Christmas?

So again – we are travelling back in time this morning for a bit of a history lesson, just as we did to learn how St. Nicolas became Santa Claus and why Christmas is on December 25<sup>th</sup>.

And again we are going back to the days of the early church, where we discover that the custom of adorning one's home

with garlands of greenery was a common practice throughout the Roman Empire as a means of inviting good fortune upon your home during the New Year celebration called the Kalends of January.

While the early church had nothing against decorating a house with greenery, there are many surviving sermons that exhort the new Roman believers to stop this superstitious practice on account of the unbiblical beliefs in “fortune and luck” which it represented.

It seems however that old habits die very hard, and eventually the Church had to appropriate this custom and reform it by substituting “fortune and good luck” with God's messianic blessing referencing Isaiah 60:13 for scriptural backing, where God says *“The glory of Lebanon will come to you, [Lebanon is known for its cedar trees] the juniper, the fir and the cypress together, to adorn my sanctuary; and I will glorify the place for my feet.”*

And as the early Church continued to spread the gospel into the northern European and Scandinavian lands it was discovered that during the long, dark and cold winter months the Vikings would chop down a fir tree and place it in their homes – to be a symbol of life that survived the harsh winter.

This custom was also adapted and reformed and during the 1100's for approximately 200 years in France and Germany, people would hang evergreen trees in their homes - upside down from the ceiling, as a symbol of the Christian faith.

So it was these particular pagan practices which the church appropriated and reformed which quite literally opened the door for the later acceptance of setting up a Christmas tree - in one's home.

But why do we decorate the Christmas tree, where did that idea come from?

It started with a story from the 900's, told by Georg Jacob, an Arabian geographer, that on the night of Christ's birth, in spite

of the snow and ice - all the trees in the forest blossomed and bore fruit. It's a bit of a fantastic elaboration on the theological truth of how Christ's birth, his incarnation begins to break the curse on creation and brings about new life, even in nature – but it caught on and spread across Europe.

Thus it became a common practice in certain parts of Europe to take branches from Hawthorne and Cherry trees, take them inside and place them in warm water so that they might bloom and flower over the Christmas season.

The more enthusiastic and skilled gardeners in these communities would go all out, and bring in an entire tree, pot it and set it in the corner of a room and meticulously tend to it so that as one scholar puts it "*dull December would become as blithe as May.*" It became a point of personal pride to have the largest and most fully blooming tree in your home at Christmas time.

And over in England another tradition developed with regards to trees being decorated. Each December an evergreen tree

would be cut down and placed outside of the church, it was then decorated with ribbons and apples to play its role as The Tree of the knowledge of Good and Evil in the Paradise Plays. The church put on these Paradise Plays to teach the children about the story of Adam and Eve and the fall into sin and the need for Christ's birth and salvation.

So, it was the ways in which the theological truths of the fall into sin and Christ bringing new life into nature were expressed using trees... that set the precedent for decorating Christmas trees.

But why the fir tree, why an evergreen? Well I think we have seen in the previous historical examples that there was already recognition of how well it represented everlasting life as it stayed green throughout the harsh winter...

And it seems this representation was solidified in northern Europe by the work of St. Boniface, who after successfully preaching the gospel to the Germans had to return to Rome for a long period of time.

Upon his return to Germany in 723 he was dismayed to find that the Germans had not completely left behind their former pagan practice and he came upon them preparing to celebrate the winter solstice by sacrificing a young man under Odin's sacred oak tree.

Bishop Boniface was having none of it – he took up an axe and immediately chopped down the oak tree proving the triumph of the Christian faith over the old pagan gods.

And as the legend goes the Germans recognized the hand of God in this event and they humbly asked Boniface how they should celebrate Christmas.

St. Boniface pointed to a small fir tree that had miraculously remained upright and intact beside the fallen oak tree, and being familiar with the popular custom of taking an evergreen plant into the house in winter, he and asked everyone to take home a fir tree instead declaring that it signified peace, everlasting life; and points upward to heaven and the one true God.

So... with all of these customs and practices having been a part of early and medieval church history from the 200's onward – the stage was indeed set for none other than Martin Luther himself to “invent” the Christmas tree during the early 1500's.

The story goes that Martin Luther was walking home one dark December evening, and was contemplating how at Christmas, our Lord came down from the heavens, and he was struck by the beauty of the heavenly starlight shining down through the branches of the evergreens in the woods around his home.

On his return home he set up a fir tree and – to the horror of fire department officials across the ages – mounted lit candles upon its branches to reproduce the effect of the starlight shining down.

It caught on quickly – and due to Luther's influence, it spread like wildfire across Germany – where to this day it is said that you have not really seen a Christmas tree until you have seen a Christmas tree in Germany.

However it remained a mostly German tradition and it would not have become a part of our North American Christmas experience... if it were not for the marriage of Queen Victoria to Germany's Prince Albert in 1841 which introduced the tradition of a Christmas tree to the Christmas celebrations at the Windsor Palace.

As the cultural influence of the Victorian Era spread across world, so did the appeal of bringing a Christmas tree into the home to enhance and heighten the sense of warmth and wonder during the Christmas season.

A picture of this new royal Christmas tree was featured in some American newspapers in the early 1850's and suddenly a new Christmas tradition available to both rich and poor alike, was born.

But the tradition of the Christmas tree was not fully Americanized just yet – it still had to be baptized into the American entrepreneurial spirit, which it was in 1851 when a fellow by the name of Mark Carr realized that it was difficult

to impossible for many people who lived in the cities to procure a Christmas tree.

So... Mark Carr took a large sled up into the Catskill Mountains of New York – chopped down a whole bunch of evergreens, loaded them up on the sled and brought them back to New York City and sold them out of a vacant lot.

Pretty soon every major city in North America had a Christmas-tree lot, and the idea made its way back to Europe as well – where it was reported that in 1890 between 30 to 35 thousand Christmas trees were sold in the city of Paris alone.

And this is how the Christmas tree came to occupy its place at the center of our family Christmas celebrations – as a marker, an indicator which says *“Christmas is being observed and celebrated here, in this place...”*

And what I have come to understand about the Christmas tree as I have researched its origins and development is that it is theology in practice. When we put up and decorate a

Christmas tree we are engaging in theology – whether we realize it or not, and now after this message hopefully you will realize it and help others to recognize it as well.

You see the Christmas tree has absolutely nothing to do with the actual facts and details of the Nativity Story and Jesus birth - there is no mention of a tree whatsoever... the facts and details of his birth are represented in our pageant plays and our nativity scenes...

And the Christmas tree has nothing to do with the spirit of Christmas either, there’s nothing inherent about the tree which symbolizes the obvious generosity of God sending us His son or the actions of the Wise men in worshiping Christ through offering their gifts...

Instead the Christmas tree represents how the Church has developed Christian thinking – based on what the generous gift of salvation that God gave to us in Christ’s birth really means.



The Christmas tree shows us that Christ's birth has real life implications- by taking the most mundane and common of objects – an evergreen tree, and infusing its natural characteristics with theological meaning.

The fact that an evergreen tree survives that long cold and dark winter becomes a theological statement about the kind of life we receive from Jesus Christ, it is everlasting life – it can survive the most trying and testing times that we encounter in our life – including death.

It doesn't change the winter conditions from being long and cold and dark – but it survives them... and with the added lights on the tree that life stands out as a beacon which offers hope that one day the season will change.

The lights on a Christmas tree are beacons of Hope – not the hope of wishing for something better, or wishing that things would change, but a solid hope, hope as a noun – hope because Jesus was incarnate as an actual Human, and thus

humanity – in spite of everything you experience that says others... humanity can be redeemed.

And there is Hope because Jesus returned to the Father and poured out His Holy Spirit and it is the Holy Spirit of Jesus active in our world today that regenerates us – produces new and everlasting life in us and causes our faith in Jesus Christ to bloom and produce fruit.

You can hardly deny the scriptural connections here where Jesus says to us in *"I am the vine – you are the branches, remain in me and bear much fruit"* (John 15:5)

So an evergreen tree, all lit up and decorated to represent the blooms and fruit that come from an everlasting life that not only survives – but now thrives – in spite of the cold dark harsh conditions, set-up as the central point of our Christmas celebrations in our homes and in our churches - well what could better symbolize the theological reality brought about by the Christ's birth?!

In fact you can say - that for all intents and purposes - a Christmas tree means that in Jesus Christ, God has instructed the Cherubim, the Angel with the flaming sword, which once blocked the way back to the tree of life to announce instead that there is now peace between God and man, and the flames of the sword now dance on the leaves of the tree – inviting all who would receive to come and find the life that was denied to us in Adam – freely given to us in Christ.

Brothers and sisters, in truth - the Christmas tree... is the Tree of Life! And it is the birth of Christ which opens the way to it for us, once again – and that reality is here, now in this place and it is what we are celebrating and experiencing.

O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree – how lovely are your branches.

Amen.