

“FINDING CHRIST IN THE CHRISTMAS TREE”

(ISAIAH 11:1-10)

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INTRODUCTION: On November 25, 2011, the day after Thanksgiving, a horse-drawn carriage brought a 19-foot balsam fir Christmas tree, grown in Wisconsin, and delivered it to the White House, met by First Lady Michelle Obama and her girls. The tradition of bringing a Christmas tree to the White House goes back to 1866.

All over America and the world, people are putting up Christmas trees for the holiday. But what does this have to do with the birth of Jesus? Is it just a pagan practice, or can we find Christ in the Christmas tree?

I. The tree symbolized Israel (Isaiah 5; Ezekiel 17; Daniel 4:10-12)

In ancient Israel, a tree symbolized God’s people Israel. Isaiah 5 gives a parable of a vineyard that was planted but failed to produce good fruit, and so it is torn down. Isaiah says, “For the vineyard of the Lord of Hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah, the plant He delighted in.” (Isaiah 5:7, HCSB).

Ezekiel 17 gives another parable comparing Israel to a tree, saying God will plant a sprig on a mountain. “I will plant it on Israel’s high mountain so that it may bear branches, produce fruit, and become a majestic cedar... Then all the trees of the field will know that I am Yahweh.”

Thus Psalm 1:3 speaks of the righteous man as like a tree planted by water, and in Matthew 3:10, John the Baptists says every tree that doesn’t produce is cut down.

Daniel 4 tells how God used a vision of a tree to warn King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon to beware of his pride. He told about a tree that reached to the sky, but it was cut down, and Daniel said, “That tree is you, the king.” (Daniel 4:22).

So a tree often symbolized Israel, although it could also symbolize the life of others.

II. The Christmas tree symbolized life (Luke 23:31)

But what about the tradition of the Christmas tree? Where did it come from?

There are many different stories, since ancient peoples have made use of trees and even worshipped them. One of my favorite stories is of St. Boniface, the missionary to the Germans in the 8th century. Boniface told them about Jesus Christ, but they worshipped a great oak tree. So Boniface boldly went to the oak with an axe and began to chop it down. They were ready to kill him, when a great

wind came and blew the tree down. After that, the Germans converted to Christianity in large numbers.

Some legends tell that St. Boniface later decorated a fir tree to represent Jesus instead of their pagan gods. It is uncertain whether this is true.

The best historical records indicate that Christmas trees as we know them began in the 15th or 16th century in Latvia, Estonia and northern Germany, with a tradition of bringing an evergreen tree to the town square on Christmas tree, dancing around it, and letting it burn. Eventually, people in Germany began to light a tree on Christmas Eve with candles. The German word, *Tannenbaum* in the Christmas carol “O Tannenbaum,” is translated loosely in English as “Christmas tree,” but literally it means “fir tree,” referring to an evergreen tree used at Christmas.

And here we begin to see a connection to Christ. Notice what Jesus said in Luke 23:31 when He was being taken to the cross: “For if they do these things when the wood is green, what will happen when it is dry?” The reference to the “wood is green” means when it is alive. An evergreen tree is still alive in the winter, which is why it is called “evergreen.” So the evergreen Christmas tree represents life, and eternal life.

III. Christ is symbolized by a tree of life (Isaiah 11:1-10) and a tree of death (1 Peter 2:24)

So if we stay with the symbolism of life in a tree, notice what we read in the prophecy of Isaiah 11: “Then a shoot will grow from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots will bear fruit... On that day the root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples. The nations will seek Him, and His resting place will be glorious.” (Isaiah 11:1, 10, HCSB).

Jesse was the name of the father of King David, so this passage is referring to the Messiah who would be a descendant of David. Notice the description of the Messiah in verses 2 and following:

“The Spirit of the Lord will rest on Him—
A Spirit of wisdom and understanding,
A Spirit of counsel and strength,
A Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord...”

From the beginning to the end of the Bible, we read of a tree of life. In the Garden of Eden, Genesis 2:9 speaks of a tree of life, and in Revelation 22:2 we read that in heaven, “The tree of life was on both sides of the river, bearing 12 kinds of fruit, producing its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations...”

Jesus is symbolized by this tree of life, for Christ gives us life. And how? Because he is also represented by a tree of death by his death on the cross!

Crucifixion was so horrible it was illegal to crucify a Roman citizen, and Jews saw it as a curse. Deuteronomy 21:23 says that anybody executed on a tree is cursed, and Galatians 3:13 repeats this. So when Jesus was nailed to the cross, which of course was made from a tree, the Jews thought He was cursed.

Yet look what we read in 1 Peter 2:24: “He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, so that, having died to sins, we might live for righteousness, for you have been healed by His wounds.”

Thus the tree of life became the tree of death so that by faith in Christ, we could enjoy life.

The best Christmas gift was not under a tree, but hung upon a tree, the tree of Calvary.

CONCLUSION: So you see, we can see Christ in the Christmas tree!

First United Methodist Church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania created a “Carols in the Park” display with 21 trees, each representing a different Christmas carol, from “Hark the Herald Angels” to the “King of Kings.”

Why don't we have our own traditions to see Christ in the Christmas tree? Up front is a box of nails. During the invitation, why don't you come take one, and place a ribbon around it, and hang it on your Christmas tree, as a reminder that the greatest gift hang upon a tree for you and me?

First Baptist Church of Rincon, Georgia November 27, 2011 P.M.