

Sermon for November 29, 2015 – Advent 1

Revelation 22:14, NIV84

**Theme: Celebrate a better Christmas. . .with a better Christmas Tree.**

*“Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city.”*

It’s hard to imagine Christmas without Christmas trees. They are wonderful to look at and, when freshly cut, offer an uplifting aroma. A Christmas tree can even be a window into our past; for, as we decorate it with special, old ornaments, pleasant family memories of bygone Christmases often fill our minds.

But where did the idea of a Christmas tree come from? There certainly is no mention of decorating a freshly chopped pine tree in the Bible. You may hear people claim that the Christmas tree has pagan origins – possibly from either the Roman “Saturnalia” or Scandinavian “Yule” festival – but I don’t see any evidence supporting these theories.

The truth is that we don’t exactly know where the tradition of having a Christmas tree comes from. They just sort of appeared in medieval Europe. Many historians credit Martin Luther with putting the first Christmas lights on a Christmas tree. Legend has it that he was walking through the forest one night – looking at the stars through the trees. The scene was so beautiful that he wanted to recreate it for his family – so he cut down a tree, brought it into his house and fastened candles to it.

Since I have rambled on about Christmas tree history and theory, you might wonder what all this has to do with God’s Word. Well, there is one historical tradition I have yet to mention, which ties into our sermon text for today: the tradition of the Paradise Tree.

You see, back in medieval Germany there was a tradition of celebrating “Adam and Eve” day on December 24<sup>th</sup> when Christians would remember the fall into sin and God’s promise of a Savior. They would decorate a pine tree with either apples or red and gold globes resembling fruit, to remind themselves of the Tree of Life that was in the Garden of Eden.

What is the Tree of Life? It was a tree that God planted in the middle of the Garden of Eden near the well-known Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Before they fell into sin, Adam and Eve were allowed to eat fruit from the Tree of Life; and its fruit seems to have been very special. Why do I say that? Because after Adam and Eve ate from the forbidden tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, the LORD banished them from the Garden Eden with the specific purpose of

keeping them from gaining access to the Tree of Life; because if they ate the fruit of that tree now, they would live forever in their state of sin!

The medieval Paradise Tree with its evergreen needles and red and golden glass balls was not only meant to remind people of the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden, but also of another Tree of Life mentioned in the last chapter of the last book of the Bible: the Tree of Life that is in heaven. God has not banished mankind to death forever. He has provided a way for them to be forgiven and live. The Tree of Life will grow once again, and those who “wash their robes” will be able to partake of the fruit of that tree. They will be allowed to live forever in the paradise that our LORD Jesus Christ is preparing for us.

Just think about this for a moment: In the beginning of the Bible the Tree of Life is mentioned, and then again at the end of the Bible. In the beginning of the Bible the Tree of Life is mentioned as something we lost access to because of sin; and at the end of the Bible as something we will gain access to once again. But how exactly do we gain access to the Tree of Life? Our text tells us: by washing our robes.

Now, before all of you go home and start doing laundry like crazy, let me explain what to “wash our robes” actually means. Scripture often uses the analogy of “clothing” to explain our spiritual condition. In order to gain access to God we need to be perfect and holy – with not a spot of sin soiling our nature. The problem is that we are anything but pure and holy in God’s sight. We all have inherited a selfish, sinful nature from Adam and Eve – one that constantly breaks God’s laws. Because of this sinful nature, even the good we do is tainted with sin, as Isaiah writes: *All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags. (Isaiah 64:6 NIV84)*

Because of our sins, we do not deserve the right to eat from the Tree of Life. We deserve eternal death and damnation. But God did not want us to die. He wanted to cleanse us from our sins. He wanted to save us. And this is why he sent his Son into the world – as the famous Gospel passage states: *God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16, NIV84)*. This is what we celebrate at Christmas: Jesus, true God from eternity, coming into the world to take on human flesh and blood in order to be our Savior.

I want to tell you about another Christmas tradition. Long before I was a pastor at Zebaoth in Milwaukee, that congregation had a tradition of decorating one enormous, freshly cut pine tree – far taller than any regular “Church sized” Christmas tree. After the Christmas season was over, instead of throwing the tree out, they cut off all the boughs and branches from its trunk. They would then cut the trunk in two and, at Lent, fashion the two pieces into a life-size cross that

would take a prominent place in front of the sanctuary. Every year a beautiful, ornate Christmas tree became a barren cross.

The clear point of that tradition was this: Jesus was born to suffer death for us. You see, no earthly detergent can cleanse us from sin. Only the blood of Jesus (the Lamb of God) shed on the cross can. This is why the Bible says that the people in heaven are those who *have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb.* (Revelation 7:14, NIV84)

I talked about the Tree of Life mentioned both at the beginning of the Bible and at the end. But there is another Tree of Life I want to talk about and that is Jesus himself. Now the Bible does not necessarily call Jesus the Tree of Life, but it does say that we can only have eternal life through faith in him - and this brings me back to one more tradition I want to tell you about concerning the medieval "Adam and Eve day" trees.

Some towns didn't only decorate their "paradise" trees with glass balls and fruit, they also hung bread wafers on them (which later generations replaced with cookies). Do you think you can figure out why?

It was to illustrate the truth Jesus expressed when he said: *I am the bread of life. Your forefathers ate the manna in the desert, yet they died. But here is the bread that comes down from heaven, which a man may eat and not die. I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world.*" (John 6:48-51, NIV 84).

Jesus is our Tree of Life. It is only through repentance and faith in him that we receive eternal salvation, as He himself says: *"I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. (John 14:6, NIV84) "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die"* (John 11:25-26 NIV84).

Because of this fact, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, let us celebrate a better Christmas this year with a better Christmas Tree. As you begin to decorate your tree this holiday season, don't just think about wonderful memories of Christmas' past, and "oh how beautiful" your Christmas tree is. Rather, think also about the symbolism in that tree. Remember the Garden of Eden and the fall into sin, and think about your own sinfulness and need for a Saviour. Remember Jesus, who is called the shoot from the stump of Jesse, and the Life he gives us through repentance and faith in him. Finally remember the Tree of Life that is waiting for us in the new paradise that will be created for us when Christ comes again. Think of the joy we will have eating fruit from that tree and living in perfect, sinless harmony with our God forever and ever. Amen.