

**Christmas Tradition**  
*Tale of the Trees*  
**December 18/19, 2010**

**PRELUDE – *Jungle Bells***

**Congregational Songs – *O Come Let Us Adore / Here is Our King***

**Video – *Griswold Family Christmas Tree***

**Feature – *Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree***

Rockin' around the Christmas Tree ...

I'm curious ...

- Has anyone here not yet put up your Christmas tree? We just did ours last Thursday, which I think was probably the latest we've ever done it.
- Does anyone here have the custom of waiting until Christmas Eve to put up your tree?
- Does anyone here typically put up a tree on Thanksgiving weekend or even earlier?

Have you ever wondered why? Not "why you put up a tree at a certain time" ... but why you put up a tree at all? Why *do* we set up a tree in the middle of the house to celebrate Christmas?

It's a tradition that, as you might expect, goes way back.

Some people believe that the association of a tree with Christmas began in Germany.

**(Boniface) Legend has it that, somewhere around 725 A.D, a missionary to the Germans by the name of St. Boniface was preaching a sermon on the birth of Jesus to a tribe of Druids outside the town of Geismar.**

**(Donar Oak) Now, the Druids believed that oak trees were sacred – so much so that they would offer sacrifices to a large one called the Donar Oak.**

But Boniface wanted to show them that there was nothing extraordinary or sacred about oak trees, so he took an axe to it and, as the story goes, with a single swing, brought it down.

Apparently, the tree split in half and, as it crashed to earth, it crushed everything in its path, except for one small fir sapling which was left standing between the two halves. Boniface took this to be a miracle and declared "let this be called the tree of the Christ Child."

Soon after this in his preaching and teaching, Boniface began to use the triangular shape of the Fir tree as a way of describing the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: each distinct, yet sharing the same essence.

**And, at Christmas, he would hang a small tree from the ceiling to represent faith in Christ.**

Hundreds of years later, in the 12th century, it was common practice for fir trees to be hung upside down in homes all over Central Europe during the month of December.

**(Luther) Fast forward to the 1500s to the German Protestant Reformation leader, Martin Luther.**

The story goes that he was walking through the forest one Christmas Eve and he was awed by the beauty of millions of stars as they glimmered through the branches of the evergreen trees. Wanting to share the experience with his family ...

**(candle tree) He cut down a small tree, took it home and placed candles on all its branches.**

... and that's how, supposedly, the idea of lights on the Christmas tree caught out.

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By the 1700s, the Christmas tree was a firmly established tradition all over Western Europe and, so, it soon spread to America.

- The first documented report of Christmas trees in “The New World” dates to 1747 among German Moravian Christians who had migrated to, of all places, Bethlehem, Pa.
- The first time a Christmas tree was lit, not by candles, but by electricity was in 1882 when a colleague of Thomas Edison created a string of 80 small electric light bulbs.

**Those “strings” began to be produced en masse around 1890 (and have been confounding consumers ever since!)**

- By 1900, one in five American families had a Christmas tree, and over the next 20 years the popularity of Christmas trees spread rapidly.

**(Rockefeller trees old) In 1931, depression era workers put up the very first tree in Rockefeller Center and decorated it with tin cans and streamers. (Notice the pay desk at the base of the tree).**

**(Rockefeller trees now) Of course, things have changed quite a bit since then.**

That's beautiful, isn't it?

### **The Tree of Death**

Now, obviously the Bible has nothing to say about Christmas trees, given that the practice didn't originate until hundreds of years after the birth of Jesus.

That's not to say, however, that trees aren't significant in the Bible. In fact, there were *three* very important trees in the Bible and two of them are mentioned right at the beginning.

In the second chapter of Genesis it says that after the world was created and Adam was created ...

*The Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and there he placed the man he had created. And the Lord God planted all sorts of trees in the garden—beautiful trees that*

*produced delicious fruit.*

*At the center of the garden he placed the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Genesis 2:8-9 [NLT]*

### **A few verses later it says that ...**

*The Lord God gave [Adam] this warning: "You may freely eat any fruit in the garden except fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you eat of its fruit, you will surely die." Genesis 2:16-17 [NLT]*

Then it says that God created a woman for Adam, to be his wife. And the two of them were together in the garden, naked and unashamed.

However, it wasn't long until the enemy of God, Satan, appeared to the woman and told her that, by forbidding them to eat of the fruit of the tree of knowledge, God was selfishly holding out on her and Adam.

Verse six of chapter three says that ...

*The woman was convinced. The fruit looked so fresh and delicious, and it would make her so wise! So she ate some of the fruit. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her. Then he ate it, too.*

*At that moment, their eyes were opened, and they suddenly felt shame at their nakedness. So they strung fig leaves together around their hips to cover themselves. Genesis 3:6-7 [NLT]*

Well, you know the rest of the story. God shows up and confronts them. They blame everything but themselves for their disobedience and God follows through on his previous warning.

*The Lord God said, "The people have become as we are ["we" I believe refers to the Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit], knowing everything, both good and evil. What if they eat the fruit of the tree of life? Then they will live forever!"*

*So the Lord God banished Adam and his wife from the Garden of Eden, and he sent Adam out to cultivate the ground from which he had been made. Genesis 3:22-23 [NLT]*

Now, as we've talked about on many occasions, what's going on here is that Adam and Eve wanted to take the place of God. Eating the "forbidden fruit" was their way of saying, "God, the serpent you created says you're holding out on us. He says you're not as good as you want us to think you are, and we're inclined to believe him. So we're going to eat this and acquire all the knowledge that you have and then we won't need you. We'll become your equals."

Of course, it didn't work out that way. Just as God had warned them, death followed because outside of Eden they no longer had access to the tree of life. The tree of knowledge in which they had placed all their hope actually became for them the tree of death.

But not just for them. Every one of *us* is under the same exact curse.

## As the Apostle Paul puts it:

*When Adam sinned, sin entered the entire human race.*

Then he makes a very interesting observation:

*Adam's sin brought death, so death spread to everyone, for everyone sinned.*  
*Romans 5:12 [NLT]*

It's kind of a chicken-and-egg thing.

Paul is saying Adam's sin condemns us to death but then we also sin just like Adam, which is confirmation that we actually *are* condemned.

So, it's quite amazing when you think about it. That Garden of Eden scenario gets played out again and again in the life of every human being who has ever lived.

- Something bad or stressful happens to us or someone else and we hear a whisper that says "God isn't truly good. He's not really watching out for you (or them)."
- So we doubt. We wonder "what good is it to believe God? To listen to him? To know him? Who really needs God anyway? I can handle things on my own just as well."
- And we walk away from him – we succumb to whatever temptation is in front of us.

That temptation may not be a big deal, either. It might be something relatively small that in some way says – like eating the forbidden fruit did for our original father and mother – "who needs God anyway?"

For instance, just last week, I realized that I am carrying some significant emotional burdens. As most of you know, we spent all of this fall talking about becoming aware of what's going on under the surface of our lives and then dealing with the toxic sludge as it builds up, plus living in ways that are emotionally sustainable. I think that emphasis helped me to become much more self-aware and so I made a list of all the things that are just feeling very heavy to me; things that are not necessarily bad, but emotionally stressful.

Events: Graduation/cmas/Wedding (extended family coming)

Relationships: Dog lost & found / church people hard times & struggle / friends moving away

Big decisions: Finances & staff / bldg project???

One night last week – I think it was Tuesday – I came home from a meeting late and just started eating cookies like crazy ... knew I should stop but I didn't.

"Life is too crazy, too hard, who cares – I'll have another?" Something is wrong with me that I don't turn to God with that stuff, make a list and give it to him. Instead, I run and hide from him. That's a sign that I am just like Adam; that I, too, am cursed by sin and death.

Another example: think about the last time you fudged on the truth in some way *and you knew that's what you were doing*. Ever do that? I'm sure you have. I have. We rationalized and justified it, but yet we knew in our heart of

hearts in the moment that what we were doing was wrong. But we did it anyway.

And why? Because just like Adam and just like Eve we doubted God's goodness. We believed that if we *did* do things God's way, if we told the truth, He probably wouldn't have our back.

Now, we may not have been conscious of that at the time, but that's what was going on. That's *always* what's going on whenever we symbolically "eat the tree of knowledge of good and evil" – whenever we doubt God's goodness – doubt that He is *for us* and not *against us* – and attempt to take His place.

And this process I'm describing is evidence that we truly are under the same curse as Adam and Eve; separated from God, banished from Eden, excluded from the Tree of Life ...

**... which is why the Bible describes our natural human condition in phrases like these:**

*Dead in your transgressions and sins ... Ephesians 2:1 [NIV]*

**And ...**

*... far away from the life of God because they have shut their minds and hardened their hearts against him. Ephesians 4:18 [NLT]*

And, just to be clear, "being far away from the life of God," as Paul puts it, isn't some kind of symbolic separation. The Bible says that if human beings do not somehow deal with the inborn sin condition that's passed to us from Adam which we continue to propagate, we're going to *remain* spiritually dead and separated from God in a terrible place that the Bible calls "hell."

When Jesus returns to this earth, Paul writes, he will come ...

*... in flaming fire, bringing judgment on those who don't know God and on those who refuse to obey the Good News of our Lord Jesus.*

*They will be punished with everlasting destruction, forever separated from the Lord and from his glorious power. 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9 [NLT]*

Not a pretty sight.

So, obviously, we've somehow got to recover from the effects of the Tree of Death and get back to that other tree, the Tree of Life. But where is it? What happened to it? And is it even possible?

### **The Tree of Life**

Well, there is an interesting passage at the very end of the Bible, in the final chapter of the book of Revelation, where that Tree of Life shows up again.

This time, however, the setting is not the Garden of Eden. This time the setting is the city of God that will come down from Heaven when God instantly renews, restores and regenerates this earth at Christ's return. Remember,

followers of Jesus aren't going to spend eternity as a spirit in Heaven. Heaven is physically coming here.

**John wrote:**

*I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Look! God's dwelling place is now among the people." Revelation 21:2-3 [NIV]*

In that city, the apostle John wrote that he saw ...

*The river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. Revelation 22:1 [NIV]*

Can you imagine that?

*On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Revelation 22:2 [NIV]*

Isn't that an awesome vision? In fact, let's just camp here for a minute and talk about what John is saying.

If you've ever been in the desert regions of Arizona or other states where it is hot and water is scarce, you can always tell where there is a river. *It's where the trees are.* It's where it is green and good. It's where you want to be.

John is telling us that in the redemption of this world in which we live, that's how it's going to be. God is going to give refreshment and comfort to all His people forever with healing waters that flow from His throne.

Notice that the water is pure; it's as clear as crystal, because there is no more sin. There is no sadness, no sorrow, and no curse. Here there is only joy and peace and blessing.

And on both sides of the river we find the tree of life. Back in the book of Genesis there was only *one* such tree. But in the world to come, it's in abundance; the tree of life is all over the place! God puts them all along both sides of the street and the river.

And what once was sealed off from humanity by an angel with a flaming sword is now as common as pine trees in East Texas and everybody can have as much of the fruit as they want.

Now, John also writes that the leaves of these trees are for the healing of the nations. The word translated "healing" here is the Greek word "therapeia," from which we get therapy: that which keeps you healthy, that which keeps you in good shape. It's not that anyone is sick and needs healing, but that they are kept well and healthy by the fruit of this tree. It brings blessing instead of curse. It brings life instead of death.<sup>i</sup>

So, the question is ... how does one get the privilege of being able to eat from *that* tree and overcome the curse of the tree of death?

A few verses later the Apostle John gives us the answer.

## He writes ...

*Blessed are those who wash their robes so they can enter through the gates of the city and eat the fruit from the tree of life. Revelation 22:14 [NLT]*

John tells us exactly what we have to do in order for that possibility to become reality. He says “those who wash their robes” can enter the city and eat.

What does it mean to “wash your robe”? It means to be purified and cleansed from the stain of sin ... and brings us to the third significant tree in the Bible – the tree of judgment.

## The Tree of Judgment

This tree is the tree that God used to pass judgment on the sin of the world: your sin and mine. It’s the tree on which Jesus of Nazareth was crucified. (And, by the way, just so you’ll know, when the Romans crucified people, most of the time, they didn’t use a dual-beam cross as we think of it. Most of the time, they took a horizontal beam and nailed it to a real tree).

Now, the reason there is a tree of judgment is that sin cannot be ignored. God can’t pretend that Adam and Eve you and I and everyone else haven’t committed big sins or even little ones. Judgment must take place for *all of them* or God is not a god of his word; God is not righteous and just.

You see, God has to play by the rules, too, and the rules demand that a price be paid and consequences be suffered. Judgment must take place.

## And the Bible says that judgment *did* take place in the death of Jesus.

*When he was hung on the cross, he took upon himself the curse for our wrongdoing. For it is written in the Scriptures, "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree." Galatians 3:13 [NLT]*

And the scripture to which Paul is referring is Deuteronomy 21:23 which says, “anyone who is hanged on a tree is a curse of God.”

Of that verse, one of the famous rabbis of the early second century AD wrote that it means “why was he hanged? Because he cursed the name of God, and furthermore, he leaves the name of God profaned.”<sup>ii</sup>

Now, here’s what’s amazing: on the cross – on the tree of judgment – Jesus, the Son of God, took our place and, in the sight of God, became the one who cursed God and profaned the name of God ... instead of us. Incredibly, on the cross, God became, at the same time, both the righteous Judge *and* the one who pays the price.

In this way, God plays by the rules – he punishes sin as justice demands *and* is also able to offer atonement and forgiveness for every sin we’ve ever committed.

## Or, as Paul puts it ...

*He has done this through his death on the cross in his own human body. As a result, he has brought you into the very presence of God, and you are holy and blameless as you stand before him - without a single fault.*

The curse of the tree of death is removed.

*But you must continue to believe this truth and stand in it firmly. Don't drift away from the assurance you received when you heard the Good News. Colossians 1:22-23 [NLT]*

Those are very important words because this is how all that God has done on the third tree – the tree of judgment – becomes real in our lives. Paul says we must personally believe in it and continue to “stand in it firmly.” Just believe and continue to believe.

Now, that sounds easy enough, but it's not quite as simple as you might think for two reasons.

1. To come to the initial point of belief is not easy because *the cross is offensive*. It's offensive to think that you and I are such despicable sinners in the sight of God that it would take someone dying in our place – and not just anyone – God in the flesh. We're not *that* bad are we?

The Bible says that yes, we are. But we don't like picturing ourselves as needy, empty-handed and unable to justify ourselves even a little.

### **As John Wesley wrote a long time ago ...**

*“Nothing is more repugnant to capable, reasonable people than grace.”*

Being told that you have no redeemable qualities – that you are far worse than you can ever imagine – being told these things *but* “it's ok” because of the tree of judgment is hard to buy into. It requires an ability to look deep into our soul and our heart and our motives and see the truth behind even the most trivial of sins – like gorging ourselves on chocolate chip cookies.

Most people just don't want to do that. Most people want to compare themselves to the worst people around them instead of comparing themselves to God's standard of perfection – his Son, Jesus.

So, number 1: it's hard to believe because the cross and what it says about even our best attempts at self-justification is offensive.

2. And to “stand firm in believing” (after you have come to the initial point of believing in Christ) also isn't easy because we tend, as Paul put it, to “drift away from the assurance we received when we heard the Good News.”

What does that mean? I think it means something like this ... you become a believer in Jesus and you are assured that all of your sins past, present and future are totally forgiven.

But then at some later point – maybe weeks, months or even years later, you will do something “bad” that surprises



and shocks you; reveals that you really are – as a spiritual descendant of Adam – far worse than you ever believed.

And what happens then is that you despair. You shame yourself. You tell yourself that you're beyond hope. That God is mad at you. That's what it means to "drift away from the assurance we received when we first heard the Good News."

So, to stand firm in believing means that as time reveals that you really are far worse than you ever believed, you choose to not beat yourself up and instead choose to rejoice in the fact that you are more loved and accepted in Christ – with all of your failings and weaknesses – than you can ever imagine. You come to the cross again and you rejoice that what was true at the beginning of your faith is *still* true.

So, this third tree of the Bible – the tree of judgment – represents something very difficult and challenging.

**... which is why Paul once wrote ...**

*The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing.*

To those who don't believe in it, the cross is ridiculous. It's the last tree you'd want to have anything to do with.

*But to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 1 Corinthians 1:18 [NIV]*

It's what changes us. It's what keeps us from going into the tank. It allows us to become more like God and less like ourselves.

To those who understand just how desperate they are before God, the ugly cross takes on a new beauty.

And, to me, that's the value of the Christmas tree. It can remind us of the cross (in that the cross was *also* a tree), but even more important it can remind us of what happens when we come to the cross. It can remind us that what is ugly can become beautiful, that what is sinful can become pure and that what is dead can be made alive.

## **Response**

And that's how we want to bring this message to a close – to come to the cross either for the first time or once again. I'm going to ask the band to get in place because they are going to do a song to help us.

Listen, I know some of you have been in church for a long time, or maybe this is the first time you've been in church in a long time and you're trying to figure out what this Jesus thing is all about. Here's the deal, Jesus paid for your sins when he died on the cross. And what you need to do is just turn to him and say "I don't quite get it and I don't understand how it all works, but when I look below the surface of my life, I see Adam, I see Eve, I see that this garden thing is what's going on with me. And you tell me that this is an issue, and that if I don't deal with this, there is an end coming that is not very pleasant." So you just turn to Christ and say, "Jesus, this is true of me. I'm a sinner and I need a savior. I believe you died on the cross for me." And you ask him to come in and forgive your sins – forever - and he will. And that is what I think some of you need to do today.

I think some of us say "Oh, I did that years ago, years ago" and you are now in that situation that I talked about.

You're looking at your life and thinking "I'm a mess. I'm supposed to be a Christian and I'm thinking these things and I'm doing these things and acting this way." And you're feeling beat down. You're discouraged and ashamed, and you feel guilty. But what God wants you to feel is sorrow. Sorrow, that you've disappointed Him. But that is different from condemnation. And in sorrow, you come to the cross and say, "Jesus, this is *still* true of me, as it was forty years ago when I accepted you. I have Adam in me." And you come to him and you just rejoice. And you thank him for forgiving you, from beginning to end. You rejoice in what he has done on the cross for you.

That's what I want us to do in this moment as our band does this song. However this applies to you, that's what I'd like for us to do. Let's pray.

### **Feature – *Beautiful, Scandalous Night***

### **CLOSING COMMENTS**

I'm going to put on my pastor hat for a few minutes before we leave, kind of like I did at last week's service. I'm sure some of you are going, "oh gosh, he's going to do this every week." No, I'm not. I just need to tie up a few loose ends from last week.

Last week we talked about generosity. We talked about the story of Saint Nicholas and what that was really about before it got turned into Santa Claus. Then we talked a bit about how that might apply to our church and specifically our Giving Trees. We probably have a lot more room in our congregation to be way more generous than we've been. And many people responded positively to that message last week. I was so thrilled. I was told that...

### **Last week after the service, the Giving Tree amount went from \$5K to over \$11K !!!**

I just want to say "Yea" God, and "yea" to those of you who did that! So, we have about \$4K left, and some of you who were not here last week will still have an opportunity to not spend every stinkin' penny on yourself and your family this Christmas.

Also, as part of the message last week I was explaining about our financial situation at the church that after the first of the year, if things do not improve financially around here, we're going to have a furlough of our staff. Every pay period (every 2 weeks) people will take a day off without pay. I kind of called you guys out. And actually, a guy sent me an email saying, "thank you for calling us out last week." And as a result of that, many people gave after the service.

**(City slide) Many people gave via "The City"**

**If you miss the basket during the time of the offering, you can give your check to an usher or use the offering box. (pic of box)**

One question that came up after last week's message is how much to give ... 10% is the biblical standard. It's called the tithe. It literally means ten or tenth. For a lot of people it's hard to start there. But, the point is, in the scripture you give proportionately and you give regularly. So, if the best you can do at this point is 2% of your income, you figure out what 2% is and you figure out how to do that on a regular basis – use The City, write checks, or however you want to do it. But that's how we do it – regularly and proportionately.

I have one other thing to share with you. And it may not be as important to those of you who are sitting here, but you need to know because you're part of our church family. We have had three service times for the last couple of years- the 9:30 and 11:00am on Sunday, and the 5:37pm service on Saturday. And if you've attended the Saturday service in the last month or so, you know that we've been doing surveys to find out who is actually showing up to the service. And we've discovered some things and we've two observations. The first observation is, the people who are showing up to the Saturday evening service are not the people we had hoped to reach. We originally hoped we would have people who worked on Sunday, who could not therefore attend church on Sunday, come on Saturday night. Or, the people who volunteered on Sunday morning (like in Adventureland) would come to church on Saturday night. And when we've done the surveys of the 100 people or so here in the auditorium, very few people are doing that.

The second observation we've made is that actually running the service on Saturday night is becoming destructive hard on some of our staff and key volunteers, like the people on sound and lights, but especially people in the children's program. We haven't been able to get people to volunteer consistently. One of the subs on the Saturday night list told me that she has been called every week. So basically she has become a regular and she can't do that. So, we're just not able to sustain the thing. And you know we've talked a lot around here about living a sustainable life, and that applies to us as a church and to our ministries, as well. So, we've had to make the decision that last night was our last Saturday night service. So, for most of you it's probably not a big deal. But for some of you, who occasionally show up for the 5:37pm service, I want to give you a heads up that if you do, you'll be here by yourself. So don't do that. It was a great run, and there's nothing that says we won't bring it back sometime in the future, but we need to be able to sustain it and not burn people out who are serving.

See you Christmas Eve!!!!

#### Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> See <http://www.bcchapel.org/resource/archives/20061224.html>

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.theologynetwork.org/biblical-studies/going-on/the-messiah-who-was-cursed-on-the-tree.htm>