



From the Pulpit: November 21, 2021

First Sunday of Advent

The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

Isaiah 41:17–20

Certain Semi-Sacred Symbols of the Season, I: Evergreen

This Advent and Christmas I want to preach a sermon series of Certain Semi-Sacred Symbols of the Season. For instance, this evergreen and this beautiful promise from the Prophet Isaiah:

*When the poor and needy seek water,
and there is none,
and their tongue is parched with
thirst,
I the Lord will answer them,
I the God of Israel will not
forsake them.
I will open rivers on the bare
heights,
and fountains in the midst of the
valleys;
I will make the wilderness a pool
of water,
and the dry land springs of water.
I will put in the wilderness the
cedar,
the acacia, the myrtle, and the olive;
I will set in the desert the cypress,
the plane and the pine together,
so that all may see and know,
all may consider and understand,
that the hand of the Lord has done this,
the Holy One of Israel has created it.*

“Christianity is at its
cleverest when it
moves out of its native
land into unfamiliar
geographies and
symbolic matrices.”

Someone said, “Spruce tree.” Someone else said, “Snow.” Someone said, “Candles in every window.” I said, “Friendly Village.” This is a China pattern from Johnson Brothers. It graced every Christmas table of my entire life. The set belonged to my Mom for 50 years, and now it belongs to Kathy and me; I hope

my kids will argue over it when we’re gone, but maybe tastes will change. A snow-covered American village after dark can conjure up ‘the ghost of Christmas past’.

These are some of the images that spontaneously, precognitively summon Christmas to our imaginations. They are very powerful. But notice that not one of them comes from the Biblical Nativity Narratives. A creche, a manger, a shepherd, a star, three kings from the orient—those are biblical

symbols of Christmas and therefore sacred.

These other things I mentioned entered Christian iconography much later in the history of the Church. Some of them come from aboriginal religions and foreign symbolic matrices. The Christmas tree came to Christian iconography, by a circuitous route, from ancient Anglo-Saxon nature worship which featured sacred trees and groves and streams and wells. It’s of secular origin, but it’s become so evocative to the Christian mind that I guess you could call it the Christmas tree a Semi-Sacred Symbols of the Season.

The other day I played a word association game with my staff. I said, “I’m going to say a word, and you tell me the first image that slithers into your mind. Don’t think; just speak.” “Christmas,” I said.

Christianity is at its cleverest when it moves out of its native land into unfamiliar geographies and symbolic matrices. When the story of Jesus' birth left arid rocky Palestine for the boreal forests of Europe, it simply colonized symbols that were already there and baptized them as its own. For example Easter, the celebration of Christ's resurrection is named for Eostre, the Anglo-Saxon goddess of spring. A sacred tree? OK! Heck yes! No problem! We'll slather it with candles and bangles and make it a symbol of the Christ Child.

This Advent and Christmas, I'm hoping that every time you see a Christmas tree, you'll be thinking of 'the evergreen Christ child'. Evergreens stand for the irrepressibility of life itself. Evergreens will simply not be undone.

Have you ever seen the Coastal Redwoods of California? Do you know the scientific name for coastal redwoods? It's *sequoia sempervirens*. If you took a little Latin at prep school, you know that *sempervirens* literally means 'evergreen, from *semper*—'always,' as in the Marine Corps motto *semper fi* ('always faithful') and *virens* ('green') *Sempervirens*—evergreen, always alive.

They are the tallest and most massive organisms on earth. Some of them tower to 380 feet, a 38-story building; you'd notice them on the Chicago skyline.

Some of them are 2,500 years old. That means when Jesus was born, they were already 500 years old, older than most other living organisms on this earth. **When Jesus was born!** With bark that is a foot thick in a mature tree, redwoods are almost impermeable to fire. Fire is actually beneficial to redwoods because fire clears out the more fragile competitor species. *Sequoia Sempervirens*—Evergreen, Always Alive. A cipher for the irrepressibility of life itself.

A couple of those coastal redwoods that are still growing today were seedlings when Isaiah the prophet preached his powerful promises to a hopeless people. Isaiah was active 500 years before Jesus was born. There was nothing left of Jerusalem but smoldering ruins. The Temple had been annihilated, not one stone left atop another, the Jews themselves shuffled off in chains to slavery in Babylon where they picked cotton, dug trenches, swept floors, and scrubbed latrines for their vanquishers.

“*Sequoia Sempervirens*—
Evergreen,
Always Alive.
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life itself.”

Just then the prophet Isaiah promises, “When the poor and needy seek water and there is none, I the God of Israel will open rivers in the mountains and fountains in the valleys. In the wilderness, I the Lord their God will raise up the trees evergreen—the mighty cedar, the breathtaking myrtle, the useful acacia, and the life-giving cypress—and my people will remember that I have never forgotten them and will raise them up to renewed flourishing. Towers of green in the drab, dry desert.”

Five centuries later, a child is born at Bethlehem. The Christ Evergreen. He should never have survived long enough to matriculate at kindergarten. His mother was on the road when the labor pains started. He must have taken her by surprise, right? He must have been a premie, or at least a few weeks early, or Mother Mary would never have risked that hundred-mile, six-day hike from Nazareth to Bethlehem. She would never have risked it.

“No Vacancy” signs everywhere, no place more fitting to lay him down than a feeding trough. Not very sanitary, oxen all around; it's a wonder one of them didn't step on his head. Then wicked, malevolent King Herod goes on a killing spree and the wee lad barely escapes to Egypt where he lives as an undocumented immigrant for the first two years of his life.

He came down to a manger and went up to a cross and spent every day between with the almost lifeless—the least, the last, the lost, the lame, the leper, and the loser. At Golgotha, they tried to throttle his eccentric, threatening message, but that irrepressible message of hope will not be stifled, and he comes back to show the world that death can never have the last word in God’s good world. Think of all that every time you see a Christmas tree this season of the year. Jesus *Sempervirens*, The Christ Evergreen.

Who here has taken at least one obligatory pilgrimage to see the Christmas Tree in Rockefeller Center? The Head Gardener at Rock Center spends all year scouting the Northeast and even Canada looking for the perfect specimen. The Rockefeller Center Christmas Tree come from all over.

This year the Rockefeller Center Christmas Tree is an 80-foot Norway Spruce from Elkton, Maryland. Twelve years ago, in 2009, when I was living in Old Greenwich, Connecticut, the Rock Center Christmas tree was another 80-foot Norway Spruce from Easton, Connecticut. Easton, Connecticut, is where I cut down my own Christmas tree for the 17 Christmases I lived there. Taylor was five years old when we launched this annual Christmas ritual.

The day after Thanksgiving every year, I guess it took us about an hour to drive from Old Greenwich to Easton, in empty, rural, upstate Connecticut where the landscape is covered with forests, farm fields, hay bales, orchards, ancient barns, and white clapboard churches. To get there, it’s literally “over the river and through the woods, to Grandmother’s house we go.” In the car on the way there and back, we always listened to the Christmas songs of John Denver and the Muppets.

“He came down to a manger and went up to a cross and spent every day between with the almost lifeless”

Every year giant cranes install the Rockefeller Center Christmas Tree in mid-November, then the tree gladdens the hearts of New Yorkers and visitors for about 60 days till they take it down in January, but did you ever wonder what happens to the Rockefeller Center Christmas Tree after they take it down and undress it of its thousands of lights and ornaments?

Every year, they mill that tree for lumber on the spot. In the Plaza. When that happens, flakes of sawdust mingle with flakes of snow at Rock Center, if it happens to be snowing. The air is redolent with the fragrance of Spruce shavings, exactly the same scent you’d have smelled long ago if you’d walked into a little woodworking shop in the village of Nazareth, where Carpenter Joseph and his foster son Jesus would have been planing surfaces and sizing 2x4’s; the same fragrance—the sawdust of the Cedars of Lebanon.

Do you know what they do with the milled lumber from the Rockefeller Center Christmas Tree? Every year they donate the lumber to Habitat for Humanity.

In 2009 when I was living in Old Greenwich, Habitat for Humanity used the timber from that Connecticut Norway Spruce to build an eight-unit condominium in Stamford, Connecticut, less than a mile from my house in Old Greenwich, for the kind of folk Jesus spent all his nights and days hanging out with. How would you like to live **inside** the Rockefeller Center Christmas Tree?

An Evergreen means that life goes on. An Evergreen stands for life’s irrepressibility. Every time you see a Christmas tree this beautiful season of the year, think of that, will you? Think of Jesus *Sempervirens*. The Christ Evergreen. The Christ Always Alive.

—Prayers of the People—
By The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster

As autumn leaves anticipate snow, as harvest festivals shift toward the need for winter-warming, as Thanksgiving Day's gratitude turns to Advent's spirit of longing, we turn to you, O God.

We seek the blessing of the snow after long autumn rain. We seek the blessing of the cardinal after all others have migrated elsewhere. We seek the blessing of the wild goose whispering her way across a frozen sky.

The long nights settled in sooner than we expected, and now we find ourselves baptized in the blue of night by mid-day, the sky ago, "pine tree tops bend snow-blue" (Gary Snyder) toward the earth.

Give us a language with which to bless this season. Dark-green and berry red reminding us of your sweeping presence. Give us a language in which to pray for this unending season of global disruption: be in the places where decisions must be made (Can she join us? Should he quarantine? Can we fly there? Can they travel here?) and be with the global community as we face yet another variant.

We need your hope to buoy us, gird us, carry us. Receive us, arms wide open, searching. Receive us, bodies postured in prayer, longing for a way through. Receive us, searching the night sky beyond the Milky Way for you who has been nearer than our next breath all along.

Enlarge our imaginations, so that we might conjure a creative love. Expand our vision, so that we might establish paths of justice and connection for the lost, lonely, grieving, suffering and hesitant (which is each of us, at one point or another). Break forth like the dawn into the hardest places in our lives, so that we might be made new. Come, Emmanuel. Come.