

**Holy Trinity Lutheran Church
Des Moines, WA
December 12, 2010**

It's All About the Tree!:

- 1. Genesis 2:16-17; 3:2-6**
- 2. Galatians 3:13-14**
- 3. Revelation 2:7**

**Hymns: "Come To Us, Immanuel" – 11 –
754 and Closing – 22**

All Scripture quotations from the NIV

It's all about the tree, isn't it? Could you imagine Christmas without it? If there is one thing that signals Christmas for the masses, it would have to be the Christmas tree. From the giant tree that adorns Rockefeller Square in NYC to the sometimes less extravagant trees that decorate our homes to the miniature trees that people even attach to their cars, Christmas trees mark very clearly that a special time of the year is here. There is just something about the lit-up, decorated tree that is able to bring a smile to so many peoples' faces. But what does it mean? What is this staple of Christmas supposed to remind us of?

Perform a quick search on the internet, and you will quickly find out that there are many legends as to how the Christmas tree got started. There are even more to explain what the tree means. However, in good Lutheran fashion, I'm going to go with the one that involves Martin Luther. It is said that he was so struck by the beauty of a lively evergreen tree as he walked through a wintry forest, that he cut it down and brought it into his house. Shortly after that, people started decorating their evergreen trees with fruits and candies and nuts and lighting it with candles to make it shine. The purpose was to make this tree like no other tree. The always-green branches made it look like it was continually alive. The candy and fruit made it appeal to the tongue. The candles made sure that it would attract the eye even in the darkness of night. It was a tree that would always keep you wanting to come back for more.

What it is to represent is a tree that is spoken of in the Book of Revelation, at the end of the Bible. And there John describes a tree with the simple, yet glorious title: "The Tree of Life." John says in Revelation 22 that it is a tree that produces 12 different kinds of fruit throughout the entire year and it has ever-green leaves that give healing to the nations. That sounds like a truly wonderful tree, it sounds like a tree that we would be awestruck to see, it sounds like a tree that people would continually want to return to and eat from. This tree of life is what our Christmas trees are to

point us to each year as we set them up in anticipation of Christmas.

However, looking at the Christmas tree and only thinking about the tree of life is like watching only the final scene of a movie. The tree of life is really the end of the story Unless you know what got us to that point in Revelation, that tree is simply not as sweet as it could be. To truly appreciate how wonderful that tree truly is, you have to go back to the start of the journey, a journey that actually started with another tree. It is a tree that we were introduced to all the way back in the first book of the Bible, in Genesis. There we hear that, ***"The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it. And the Lord God commanded the man, "You are 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 of it you will surely die."*** (Gen 2:16-17)

Even in the beginning, it was all about the tree, wasn't it? This tree of the knowledge of good and evil that God placed in the center of the Garden of Eden was a tree with a completely different purpose than every other tree in that garden. It wasn't meant to be pruned and cared for, it wasn't even meant to be eaten from. For Adam and Eve, this tree was a magnificent way to worship their Friend and Creator, God Almighty. Martin Luther said about that tree, ***"But this tree of the knowledge of good and evil was Adam's church, altar and pulpit. Here he was to yield to God the obedience he owed, give recognition to the Word and will of God, give thanks to God, and call upon God for aid against temptation."*** (LW 1:95) In that tree, God was giving Adam and Eve a simple way to worship him. "If you love me, you will obey what I command" was God's simple message to his perfect creation. "Just leave that tree alone, and I will be glorified and will be happy to keep you in this wonderful, holy place forever."

However, that tree which started as a magnificent way to worship God quickly turned into a tree that every person throughout history should despise. It became an ugly tree when it became the way that man went against God's will and rule. It was the way that Satan got into man's heart and took control. It was the way in which sin and, ultimately, death entered the world. That tree wrecked it!

However, putting the blame on the tree would be excusing the real culprits, Adam and Eve. Unlike every person after them who is born in sin, Adam and Eve did not have that curse upon them. They had the ability not to sin, not to yield to temptation. When Satan came with the allure of that forbidden fruit, they had the ability to say, "NO!" But they did not, and they wrecked that earthly paradise for every single person who came after them, all of us included. Adam and Eve wrecked it!

However, just as silly as it would be to blame the tree, it would be just as naïve to blame Adam and Eve alone for all the trouble in this world that has resulted from sin. It would be excusing their cohorts in crime...you and me! Because the same offense that Adam and Eve committed in the garden, namely, putting themselves above their Creator, is something that each of us do on a daily basis. Every plan that needs to have my input, every goal that has to be for my

good, every thought that has to be about my future, every solution that needs to feature my ideas are each ways that we put our own will before God's. Every time we put "me" into our brains, we are really doing exactly what Adam and Eve did back in the garden. We are doubting that God's way is the right way. We are doubting that we could be happiest and most successful when everything is done according to his will and for his glory. The sin we share with Adam and Eve is where this journey of the Christmas tree really begins and that sin began at the foot of that tree in the garden.

Fittingly, it is a stripped down tree which moves us along in this Christmas tree journey. And at first glance, the tree that we focus on now is the ugliest of trees. This cross of tree trunks is a glaring reminder that the failure of sin has incredibly real results. Our failure, along with Adam and Eve, to avoid the forbidden fruit of the tree leads to a severe curse. That curse is death and separation from God. And that is exactly what we see in this tree. In fact, Paul quotes in Galatians 3, "***Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree.***" It is certainly an ugly part of this journey, to picture Jesus hanging on that tree in agonizing pain, but it is a necessary part of this journey. It was necessary because God did not want Adam and Eve and all of their children down through the ages to lose out on eternal paradise. But in order for that not to happen, God had to take the curse that came on us when sin entered the world and put it on someone else. And that is exactly what happened. Paul tells us, "***Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.***" (Gal. 3:13) And that simple message makes this ugly cross of trees into something that looks truly beautiful to us. It makes it beautiful because through that cross, through Christ's death, the curse that was given to all mankind through Adam and Eve has been taken care of. Paul explains as he continues, "***He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit.***" (Gal. 3:14) Christ redeemed us. He paid the price for our sins. He died the death that was the curse of sin. He made it possible for our relationship with God to be restored.

You know, before Adam and Eve ate from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, the tree of life stood next to it in the Garden of Eden. It was a tree that they could regularly eat from as the crown of God's perfect creation. After they sinned, that wonderful tree of life would have not have held the same beauty. God said in Genesis, "***He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever.***" (Gen 3:22) Those are not words of punishment, they are words of love. Adam and Eve would no longer want to live forever in this painful life they were about to experience. We, also, would certainly not want to live forever in this world that shows the decay and hurt of sin all too often.

However, Christ's work on that beautiful tree allowed all of us to once again look forward to the day when man will taste the fruit of the Tree of Life. God makes the promise of when that will happen in Revelation, "***To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.***" (Revelation 2:7) Each of us have overcome through the work of Christ, each of us will

experience the joys of heaven. Each of us can be confident that one day soon, we will WANT to eat from the fruit of the tree of life because we WANT life to continue forever. That can only happen in the paradise that God created for all of his children.

That wonderful assurance is why each year, right before we celebrate the birth of a baby in Bethlehem, we put up this reminder of the tree of life. We put it up at Christ's birth because his entry into this world as the promised Savior sealed the deal that God had kept his promise of life that he gave to those who ate, and who would eat, the forbidden fruit of that cursed tree in the Garden. Christ's birth, like every birth, is a celebration of life. But on Christmas morning each year, we aren't simply celebrating the beginning of the Savior's life on this earth. No, we are celebrating a birth that means life for all people. We are celebrating a birth that means life for each one of us. God bless you in the coming weeks as you prepare for Christmas and may your decorations help to focus your eyes on the precious truths of Christmas. Amen.