

“In the Bleak Midwinter”
Rev. Bill Gause
Overbrook Presbyterian Church
Second Sunday of Advent
December 6, 2020

First Scripture Reading: Isaiah 11:1-9

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. ²The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. ³His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; ⁴but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. ⁵Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. ⁶The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. ⁷The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. ⁸The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den. ⁹They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

Second Scripture Reading: John 10:10b

[Jesus said to them] “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”



Sermon: “In the Bleak Midwinter”

I don’t think I’ll ever forget my first winter in Ohio. Having spent my entire life south of the Mason-Dixon line, my experiences of winter had been decidedly mild compared with what I found here. That first year, it snowed the week before Halloween. Not much, but enough to make the point. I began to mark the severity of the snowfalls by whether or not it was enough to shovel. By the time New Year’s Day had arrived, I’d already reached five and quit counting. In winter the days are short, the temperatures are low, the weather can be absolutely horrid. I now understand why Ohio State’s colors are scarlet and gray. Scarlet for the state bird, and gray for the color of the sky in winter.

It was also after moving here that the Greek mythology I had learned in college began to make more sense. After a few winters of shoveling snow and enduring bleak, sub-freezing days, I started to understand why so many ancient peoples felt like winter was some kind of punishment from the gods, or at the very least, a sign of divine displeasure.

In Greek mythology, winter was a time of sadness, because Demeter, the goddess of the harvest and agriculture, mourns her daughter Persephone who must spend several months of each year in the underworld as the wife of Hades. As she mourns her daughter, Demeter neglects growing things, and they die. Crops no longer grow. The weather turns bleak. This is the onset of winter. Several months later, when her daughter is finally returned to her, in joyful celebration she allows new life to blossom on the earth. That is the arrival of Spring.¹ Again, this is all ancient mythology, but the stories give some insight into the minds of people who, suffering through brutal European winters, understood their situation must be the result of some kind of divine misery.

Which I get. I’m not a huge fan of winter. I don’t like the cold. And while snow is pretty when it’s falling, and I love how quiet everything is when it snows, by day two or three I’m ready for it to be gone. And I like bright sunny days, so the sun going down at 4:30 in the afternoon is a drag.

But even in the bleak midwinter, there are signs of life all around us giving hope that Spring will come. Just as the dove sent out by Noah into the barren post-flood landscape returning with an olive branch was sign of life in the midst of desolation, so the holly and mistletoe and fir, spruce and pine trees we put up at Christmas are green signs of life among the snowy whites and cloudy grays of winter. Which is remarkably appropriate considering the life-giving Christ-child whose birth we are celebrating.

Of course, we know that evergreens are not a uniquely Christian symbol. Historically, many other cultures used evergreens in winter as a symbol of life. The Romans decorated their homes with evergreen branches during the celebration of Saturnalia. And when pagan peoples were converted to Christianity, they often brought their traditions with them, including trees and greenery as symbols of life in winter.²

But the modern Christmas tree actually originates with early German Christians. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica:

“The main prop of a popular medieval play about Adam and Eve was a “paradise tree,” a fir tree hung with apples, that represented the Garden of Eden. The Germans set up a paradise tree in their homes on December 24, the religious feast day of Adam and Eve. They hung wafers on it (symbolizing the eucharistic host, the Christian sign of redemption); in a later tradition the wafers were replaced by cookies of various shapes. Candles, symbolic of Christ as the light of the world, were often added. In the same room was the “Christmas pyramid,” a triangular construction of wood that had shelves to hold Christmas figurines and was decorated with evergreens, candles, and a star. By the 16th century the Christmas pyramid and the paradise tree had merged, becoming the Christmas tree.”³

The custom grew in Germany through the 18th and 19th centuries and when Queen Victoria married German-born Prince Albert, it took hold in Great Britain, too, with Victorian trees being decorated with toys and small gifts. From there, the tradition spread to the far corners of the globe, largely because of Christian missionaries who brought the custom with them on their evangelistic journeys.⁴

And Christmas Trees have become a big thing in this country, too. According to the National Christmas Tree Association ... and lets just pause for a moment to marvel at the fact that Christmas trees are such a big deal in this country, that we *have* a National Christmas Tree Association... According to them, last year Americans bought over 26.2 million live Christmas trees, spending over 2 billion dollars in the process.⁵ That doesn’t even include the synthetic trees. In one recent survey, PBS Newshour found that 76% of all Americans said they will decorate their homes with a Christmas tree this year.⁶

That doesn’t necessarily mean that all those people putting up Christmas trees are drawing that same connection back to the life-giving birth of the Christ-child as we do. Christmas has become a secular holiday enjoyed by people of many faiths and cultures. But for us, trees and greenery, are living reminders that in Christ we have new life. Which is why we use greenery and trees to decorate our worship spaces during Advent and Christmas. This is not just acquiescence to cultural norms; it is a proclamation of the hope and life we find in Jesus Christ. Most of the church year our worship spaces are decorated with green paraments because green, the color of ordinary time, is the color of life and in Christ Jesus, we are given new life.⁷

That is a regular theme which we emphasize during Advent. In our worship spaces, we have Advent wreaths. And while we focus more each week on the candles we light, it is not by accident that those candles are nestled within a wreath of greenery. And in both the sanctuary and the parlor, we put up trees: one a Chrismon tree, and the other a Jesse tree. The Chrismon tree is decorated with symbols that reflect what we believe about Jesus Christ, and our trinitarian God.⁸ While the Jesse tree in our contemporary worship space is decorated with symbols that tell the story of Jesus’ family tree.⁹ Those evergreen trees are in themselves symbols of life. But they also stand as beacons of truth, proclaiming our faith story for all the world to see; the story of Jesus Christ, in whom we have life.

When we say that, of course we mean eternal life. But more than that, it means that because we have been set free by God who is more powerful than the things we fear most, even death, we can live at peace in *this* life. And that is not just peace in the sense of non-violence, but peace in the sense of the Hebrew word “Shalom” which is wholeness, completeness of life for everyone. Frederick Buechner describes it beautifully when he writes that [Peace,] “Shalom, means fullness, [it] means having everything you need to be wholly and happily yourself.”¹⁰ To know shalom is to know joy and harmony in life. When we have peace, we have physical and spiritual resources sufficient for our needs. Peace means right relationship with God and one another, right relationship that is characterized by justice. In a world that sometimes feels cold and gray, where that kind of peace is sometimes hard to come by, this season provides a splash of color, reminding us that there is life, that in Christ, whose birth we prepare to celebrate, there is eternity, there is life abundant, there is shalom.

Like I said before, I’m no big fan of winter. I miss the long days, the warm sunshine, being outside and feeling the sun on my face. I miss the splash of colors, flowers and trees, and green things growing. Remember, the creation stories all say that the first humans were gifted by God with a garden, not a winter wonderland. The verdant landscape of spring and summer reassures me of God’s love and reminds me of God’s provision.

But we live in the world we have, not in the one we’d like to have. It is easy to see in the cold and dark of winter, a parallel with the cold and dark of which the human heart is capable. The world is fraught with sinful human beings. We need look

no further than the ugliness of our recent election and the divisiveness that persists afterwards to see examples of that. But it is just as easy to see in the evergreens of Christmas, a reminder of the grace, mercy, and steadfast love of God, born into the world in the child, Jesus, that brings eternal life and peace to a world so desperate for it.

So, as you put up your tree, and hang your wreaths, as you look upon the trees and greenery of your neighbors and the spruce and pine and fir trees that stand sentinel in neighborhoods and fields, let them be reminders of the life we find in Christ, that grows, even in the bleak mid-winter, and be at peace.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion, in this world and in the world that is to come. Amen.

End Notes

¹ GreekMythology.com. "Persephone - Greek Mythology." GreekMythology.com, 31 Oct. 2018, www.greekmythology.com/Other_Gods/Persephone/persephone.html.

² Contributors to Wikimedia projects. "Christmas tree - Wikipedia." 29 Nov. 2020, en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Christmas_tree&oldid=991388467.

³ "Christmas tree | Tradition, History, & Facts." Encyclopedia Britannica, 2 Dec. 2020, www.britannica.com/plant/Christmas-tree.

⁴ "Christmas tree | Tradition, History, & Facts." Encyclopedia Britannica...

⁵ Holman, Jordyn, et al. "Christmas trees are getting more expensive as Americans remain homebound." Fortune, 2 Dec. 2020, fortune.com/2020/12/02/christmas-tree-prices-expensive-covid-lockdowns.

⁶ "Why are more and more Americans buying fake Christmas trees?" PBS NewsHour, 24 Dec. 2018, www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/why-are-more-and-more-americans-buying-fake-christmas-trees.

⁷ "Richmond First Presbyterian Church - Richmond, KY - The Extra-Ordinariness of Ordinary Time." 3 Dec. 2020, richmondipc.com/pages/worship/days-and-seasons/the-extra-ordinariness-of-ordinary-time.php.

⁸ "Chrismon Explanation." Grace Lutheran Church Denison TX, 3 Dec. 2020, www.glcdenison.org/chrismon-explanation.

⁹ Rüter, Grace. "The Jesse Tree: A Guide to the Advent Tradition | Faithward.org." Faithward, 13 Nov. 2020, www.faithward.org/jesse-tree.

¹⁰ Buechner, Frederick. *Wishful Thinking: a Theological ABC*. Harper & Row, 1973.