

December 18, 2016

“They are Like Trees”

Psalm 1; Luke 2

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My hunch is that realtors hear a lot of strange requests from people for what they want or don't want in purchasing a home. My requirement for a happy home is that there will be trees nearby, and preferably not the new and scraggly trees of a recently developed neighborhood. I like old trees, tall trees, the kind that will litter my yard with leaves in the fall, and drop acorns on our back deck. I must say the acorn yield for this year has been plentiful; the squirrels in my neighborhood are fat and happy for the winter. And the winter trees have a special kind of beauty about them. They can look like life has left them with their bare branches and yet, the promise of spring lies just underneath their sturdy surface.

So as I consider this psalm as a prayer for recognizing a good and fruitful life, it does not surprise me that trees feature prominently as a metaphor. Trees give us oxygen, shade us, calm us, and provide food and shelter for the animals that rely on them, sometimes including us. It is also no surprise that trees have become a prominent symbol of the Christmas season. When the days get darker and the nights get longer, my family gets a fir tree from a local lot and brings it into our home to fill with lights and decorations gathered through many years of Christmases together.

Now, you probably already know that the Northern European tradition of bringing in evergreen boughs in the winter was a thing before it got associated with our tradition of Christmas trees. Robert Hunt, an interfaith blogger asks the cliché question, “Is Jesus the Reason for the Season?” and then answers it with a resounding “No.” The winter solstice had

celebrations associated with this particular time of year BEFORE the association with Christmas came along. And yet, he quickly points out that those early Christian settlers were wise to notice that winter solstice celebrations and Christmas celebrations have some natural affinity for one another. Both remind us that when we reach our darkest days, we have reason to hope. This season of giving gifts and celebrating the coming of light is not something that we Christians created, he says, but he also suggests that we don't need to justify "Jesus" as the reason for this season, because we can also recognize that, "God was there before a missionary church inserted the story of the birth of Christ into the midwinter season. God was there in all those pagan celebrations, and lights in evergreen trees, and yule logs, and feasts, and gift exchanges. God was there in all those human feelings roused by the desire that light once again conquer darkness. God was there in all the ways that human hearts leap with joy for the hope that is present in the birth of a child. These were all God's work."

I really appreciate Dr. Hunt's observation that our human rituals and celebrations reflect God's work in the world, whether they come directly from our faith narratives or from borrowed traditions. Come to think of it, the trees of Bethlehem aren't exactly evergreens. Today the choir sang about the whispering palms at Jesus' birth. I like that image as well. Perhaps it's because my favorite Christmas album is Jimmy Buffett's compilation called "Christmas Island" that includes songs about celebrating Christmas where "it's green and bright...in the land where palm trees sway."

Right here in this sanctuary, we hang the greens and put up a tree as signs of hope for our dark world as we round the corner of the longest night of the year. It isn't exactly biblical. But there's nothing wrong with that. The connections are there to remind us of God's work in the world. Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, who don't take the path that

sinner's tread, who don't sit in the seat of scoffers. Happy are those who take their delight in the law of the Lord. Happy are those, I would say who take delight in the creation of the Lord as well, noticing the patterns of the changes of the seasons, and who celebrate that the longest night is followed by the returning of longer days and the emergence of Spring blossoms. Those who are happily staying in the light in the midst of dark days will be like trees planted by the river, whose fruits, and acorns, and leaves are plentiful and beautiful.

Since I am such a tree person, at Christmas, I want to smell the tree in my living room. I want to touch its branches, and know that it's real. Our tree will get donated back to the center in our neighborhood that turns it into mulch for the next trees, and so the giving continues. The cycles and seasons are blessed reminders that God's plan is not quite as fickle or difficult to understand as we might have thought. There are patterns, and meanings, and reasons to keep hoping for God to show up in both the likely and unlikely places. I believe that in our celebrations of Christmas – whatever they may be – God becomes known. So pay attention, whether you are listening to the story of Jesus' birth on Christmas Eve or gathered around our tree with family close by. God is there. God is there. Amen.

Psalm 1

Happy are those

who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
or take the path that sinners tread,
or sit in the seat of scoffers;

²but their delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law they meditate day and night.

³They are like trees
planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season,
and their leaves do not wither.

In all that they do, they prosper.

⁴The wicked are not so,
but are like chaff that the wind drives away.

⁵Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;

⁶for the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish.

Luke 2

The Birth of Jesus

2 In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

The Shepherds and the Angels

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, ^[a]the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, ^[b]praising God and saying,

¹⁴“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”^[c]

¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.