

Teaching a Tree to Talk

Isaiah 60:1-5
Luke 2:8-20

December 24, 2018 9:00pm
Faith Community

We have two artificial Christmas trees at our house. One of them is similar to what many of you have, I'm sure, but the other is a bit unique. It's four feet tall, give or take. Its branches stick out all over the place. The green stuff is spread out rather chaotically, and in some places missing altogether. It's pretty much the mangiest, scrawniest thing you can imagine. It looks like it's been through a few wars, ocean journeys, and a hundred years of hard holiday observances. And that's because it has.

If beauty is in the eyes of the beholder, that beat up old tree is a work of art as far as I'm concerned. My grandfather was eleven years old when he and his family came to this country from Sweden, and that tree was one of the few things that came with them. Growing up, it was the highlight of my holiday. We'd arrive at Grandma and Grandpa's place in Tawas City, come in through the back as always, and even as we took our coats off in the back room we could smell it already. Christmas dinner, still a day away, was in its early stages of preparation, and it only got worse as we entered the house through the kitchen.

Smells, hugs, and kisses having been administered, I made my way around a corner or two, through the living room, and what to my wondering eyes should appear, the tree. The Swedish tree. It was in much better shape back then. Sitting on a table. Brightly decorated. Surrounded by the most tempting treasure trove a little kid could ever dream of.

The tree is now in our possession and, unlike some of its owners, has not aged all that gracefully. But one year when we were living in Pennsylvania, Fran and I sought to restore it to its original glory. It's old enough that instead of lights it was equipped with little sockets to hold small candles, so we cleaned up and reattached as many as we could find, and then got red candles and put them in place.

We have a Christmas card from the 1940s with a black and white photograph of the tree when my great aunt and uncle had it. In looking at that card we realized that some of the ornaments we'd used over the years were originally on that tree. So back on the Swedish tree they went, in the same place as in the photo.

Today, well the tree is what it is. It may not be much to look at, but I'm learning that there's real beauty that comes with the accumulation of years. The branches might sag and the ornaments look a bit ratty, but there's a well-worn dignity about it that more than compensates. Kind of like with people.

Oh, if only trees could talk. What might that old thing say? From its early years in the old country, how might it reflect on the generations and decades that've unfolded? How many babies were born, marriages solidified, dreams developed and hearts broken?

How have the hopes and fears of all the years been expressed around its skinny branches?

If only trees could talk. How about yours? What would it say?

But you know, here's another thought. Go back over your Christmases, look again at some of the ornaments, traditions and memories. What might they say to you if you'd listen? How might they reinforce solid values, and how might they speak differently now that you've accumulated some wisdom yourself?

Friends, take another look.

Especially take another look at the greatest of stories, the coming of almighty God in the person of Jesus Christ to live among us. That story is as well worn as any tree, we've heard it so many times.

But wait a minute:

Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you: he is the Messiah, the Lord.

Listen again. That message is for you.

Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.

Can you hear those angels? Pay attention.

The shepherds get to Bethlehem and see the wonder of it all, and Mary, Scripture tells us, ***treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.***

What do you treasure and ponder? Look again.

Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

What must it have been like to be one of those guys? But why not? Why not now? Why not you? This is where it gets really cool.

Imagine angels telling news like that to you. Imagine living like you have nothing to prove. You are accepted, welcomed and loved just the way you are. Always remember friends, the baby grew up. And made such unconditional love a reality.

You may think of yourself as a common old Swedish tree that long ago outlived its beauty. But someone else looks at you and sees a work of art.

One of the Old Testament prophecies about the coming of Christ says this about him:

- ¹ The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,***
- ³ and provide for those who grieve in Zion—
to bestow on them a crown of beauty
instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness
instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise
instead of a spirit of despair.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
a planting of the LORD
for the display of his splendor.*** (Isaiah 61)

That's you, friend. So maybe teaching a tree to talk isn't all that difficult. Perhaps what we really need is to finally pay attention.

In the 7th century a monk from Devonshire, England, went to Germany to teach the Word of God. He did many good works there, and spent much time in Thuringia, an area which was to become the cradle of the Christmas Decoration Industry.

Legend has it that he used the triangular shape of the Fir Tree to describe the Holy Trinity of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The converted people began to revere the Fir tree as God's Tree. By the 12th century it was being hung, upside-down, from ceilings at Christmastime in Central Europe, as a symbol of Christianity.

The first decorated tree was in Latvia, in 1510. In the early 16th century, Martin Luther is said to have decorated a small Christmas Tree with candles, to show his children how the stars twinkled through the dark night.¹

¹ <http://www.christmasarchives.com/trees.html>