

God's Evergreen Life

25 December 2023

Christmas 2023, Midnight, and Christmas Day

Reading: Luke 2:1-7

On this special night, open us to your words of love.
In Jesus name. Amen.

Chances are you will have one at home. You will find them in shops, churches, homes, and offices up and down the country and indeed around the world. I refer to Christmas trees. In this church, we have a beautiful one of our own flashing behind me. My family has been forever fated to have a fake Christmas tree because I'm allergic to pine trees, dogs, and some Aucklanders. But whether they are fake, the trees that is, not the Aucklanders, or real, the meaning behind the Christmas tree is the same - God's evergreen love.

To explain, I need to take you on a journey. The year is 734 and it's Christmas eve in a village called Geismar in modern day Germany. We go to a man named Boniface. From his travels, Boniface knew that in winter the inhabitants of the village gathered around a huge old oak tree (known as the "Thunder Oak") dedicated to the god Thor. In the dead of winter, the folk would gather around the sacred tree and sacrifice a small child in worship to Thor. Boniface, a Christian, longed to convert the village and to destroy the Thunder Oak. So, he gathered a few companions.

As they approached the village some of his companions quickly lost their nerve. They were sure they would become the next human sacrifice that night. But Boniface had other ideas. He approached the great tree in time to witness the beginning of the sacrifice. Steadying his nerve and those with him, he broke into the circle of Thor worshippers, axe in hand, and began chopping the mighty tree down. In a letter he describes how it took him several hours and no doubt many blisters to chop it down. Pointing to another tree he astonished the crowd by saying,

"This little tree, a young child of the forest, shall be your holy tree tonight. It is the wood of peace... It is the sign of an endless life, for its leaves are evergreen. See how it points upward to heaven. Let this be called the tree of the Christ-child; gather about it, not in the wild wood, but in your own homes; there it will shelter no deeds of blood but loving gifts and rites of kindness."

This was a cunning compromise on his part because the people kept their sacred trees, but Boniface had transformed their meaning. And so, it was. Fast forward about a thousand years and the tradition of a tree symbolizing God's evergreen life was brought to England by the young Albert when he married Queen Victoria ... and we have been raising Christmas trees ever since.

There is another tree that stands for God's evergreen life. On the 9th of August 1945 it stood less than a kilometer from ground zero of Oppenheim's atomic bomb. It was exposed to temperatures 30 times the surface of the sun. It was completely incinerated by the

nuclear bomb and yet it grew again. This evergreen tree is known as a survivor tree and today forms the basis of a national shrine of hope and peace in Japan.

And another tree. This one is as cruel as those of the German village. For on it, men go to die. If the star of Bethlehem cast a shadow over the manger the night of Jesus' birth, then that shadow would have been in the shape of a cross. For all his life, his teachings, his healings, his miracles, his compassion, Jesus' destiny was to die on that tree. But rather than a sign of death and human cruelty, the cross has become a sign of God's evergreen life. For the child we celebrate tonight rose from death at Easter.

Luke, our Gospel writer for tonight/today is at pains to place Jesus in an historical context. It's not a fairy story but an actual occurrence. Just as he wants us to see it in its context, he is also very realistic about Jesus' origins. There was no fanfare, no tinsel, no carols. His parents were migrants in an occupied land: friendless, penniless with no place to call home.

The Holy family's situation on the move is so like the families of Palestine today. A hostile occupying army forcing them on the move to safe zones which aren't really safe at all.

We gather tonight to celebrate Christmas. To celebrate a child born to us, to celebrate God's evergreen life and love. But God's evergreen life didn't stop at the first Christmas; it bursts into our lives still.

In the child born to us we find evergreen hope. The hope of eternal life, life that doesn't end with our death. In the child born to us we find meaning for our lives. No longer are we just what we earn or own, but our lives have meaning and purpose in serving others. In the child born to us, we start over and over again, no matter how many times we go off the rails.

But wait, there's more. We who gather this night to celebrate the birth of our Saviour, we become evergreen too. We who know the good news of Christmas - God's great love for us, become evergreen too. We become bearers of hope, and peace in our families and communities just as real as any tree. We are a sign of love in this fragile and broken world.

Let us pray:

God, on this holy night you come to us as a newborn baby,

A sign of your evergreening life.

Grant us to so open ourselves to the wonder of this night,

That our our lives are transformed to be signs of hope in our world.

This we ask in His name. Amen.

May it be so.