

EVERGREEN—AN EVERLASTING COVENANT**Hosea 14, John 15:1-11****(Read John 15:1-11)**

Intro: I was away over the past weekend and when I returned, this forest of Christmas trees greeted me. I love it! I so appreciate the creativity our Worship Design Team and their decorating specialist, Sally Ashbaugh, exhibit all year round, but I especially love our Christmas decorations and the variety we have from year to year. I just like Christmas decorations. The lights, the colors, all of it (with the possible exception of a massive blow-up Santa) illuminate a season that can be glum and dark. The nights are long and the clouds are plentiful and the snow threatens this time of year and Christmas finery just helps a lot. And the fact that it's all to celebrate the arrival of Jesus into the human race is the topper on the tree.

Speaking of trees, this Advent we are talking about redeeming the symbols of the season. Last week Jeffrey talked to us about one of the symbols of the season which is feasting. This is the time of the year for company Christmas dinners and Tyson Christmas party and Christmas hams. And it's also a time when some don't have the prospect of feasting and they wonder what they will have to celebrate. Baby Jesus was born into a needy family and his first bedroom was a stable and I'm sure Joseph worried how he would provide for his little family.

This week the symbol we're seeking to redeem is evergreen. Yes – especially when it comes to Christmas trees – thus my joy in having a phalanx of Christmas trees surrounding me as I speak. Was there a Christmas tree in the stable in Bethlehem or at least in the lobby of the inn which had no room for Joseph and Mary? Certainly not. In fact it seems that Christmas greens didn't show up in the western church until the 16th Century in Germany. Martin Luther may have had a Christmas tree and Queen Victoria's husband, Prince Albert of Saxe and Gotha was allegedly the person who introduced the Christmas tree to England.

Did they have spiritual application? Not really. But spiritual significance has been added over the centuries and rather than throw the baby out with the bathwater, as some are tempted to do with accoutrements that don't show up in the New Testament, we can use Christmas greens and Christmas trees to paint wonderful word pictures of what Christmas means.

Many churches in the more liturgical tradition celebrated the hanging of the greens last weekend as they prepared for the first Sunday of Advent. This celebration is specifically and unapologetically . . .

A celebration of eternal life

- The evergreen tree is a symbol of life in a season when hardwood trees have surrendered their leaves to the descending cold of a long winter.
- Is there anything at all about evergreen in the Bible? Not really. In the Hosea Scripture that we had at the lighting of the Advent candle we heard God speaking words of hope to his chosen people with, *I am like an evergreen cypress; from me comes your fruit.* Hosea 14:8a and that's the only time the word is used. But the chapter is still very significant. After 13 chapters of hard prophecies, dire warnings, and calls to return from unfaithfulness – the closing chapter of Hosea is filled with hope. Instead of giving up on his beloved people God is wooing them back with words of instruction and promise. Every other avenue has come up empty and all other suitors for the affections of God's people have been revealed for what they are – worthless and faithless. But what God offers is healing and abiding love.
- The people of God had been so ungrateful and unfaithful and they deserved nothing good – but God still offers redemption. In fact – the redemption would come in the form of Immanuel, the name that means. . .

God with us

- Yes – Jesus was Immanuel. People who had no hope received more than hope – they received everlasting life.
- I can't remember my family ever buying a Christmas tree as I grew up. As a matter of fact, I'm pretty certain my parents never did, ever. Instead, we would head out in the open area below the high tension electric lines that our property was adjacent to and we would find a suitable cedar tree and bring it home. The trees were the only thing that could grow in the worthless shale under the towers and there were plenty to pick from. They were not a pretty tree – as you can see. They didn't have the conical shape of a classic Christmas tree and they were evergreen but not very green. Worst of all you needed to wear gloves to

handle the tree as you retrieved it and you set it up and decorated it – it was extremely and very uncomfortably picky. But like the poor little lonely Christmas tree in A CHARLIE BROWN CHRISTMAS, we were able to transform that formerly ugly and prickly cedar into a beautiful Christmas tree. And, oh, did it smell wonderful! To this day the memory of the aroma of our cedar Christmas tree brings me joy.

- Jesus came into humanity in all its ugliness and prickliness and brought transformation. In Luke 4, as Jesus came out of his Wilderness temptations, he went to his home synagogue and read from Isaiah 61

*The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor;
he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
to grant to those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit;
that they may be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified.* Isaiah 61:1-3

He was reading about himself. This is what he came to do. He came to change ashes into beauty.

- He came to bring life eternal – like an evergreen . . .

He's a vine in the Father's vineyard

- And we are the branches on that vine. Yes, we're back to the text I read as I opened this talk. As Jesus is teaching his disciples about this, he is in final days before he goes to the Cross.
- As he does this he tells them *I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.* John 15:5-8. What does he mean by that? What does abide mean? Listen to the Message, *"I am the Vine, you are the branches. When you're joined with me and I with you, the relation intimate and organic, the harvest is sure to be abundant. Separated, you can't produce a thing. Anyone who separates from me is deadwood, gathered up and thrown on the bonfire. But if you make yourselves at home with me and my words are at home in you, you can be sure that whatever you ask will be listened to and acted upon. This is how my Father shows who he is—when you produce grapes, when you mature as my disciples.* John 15:5-8 (The Message).
- Abiding in Jesus means living in him. It means bearing fruit for him. It means eternal life. It means life everlasting, just like an evergreen.

Conclusion: At Christmas we sing, *Joy to the World, the Lord is come.* Yes – Jesus came to bring joy. The kind of joy that comes from living in the vine. He said, *These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.* John 15:11. What things? That Jesus is loved by the Father, Jesus loves us, and as we live in him, we will have joy eternal. It's like the evergreen – an eternal covenant. Amen.