

Sermon: **Dead Christmas Trees**

Text: John 1:1-18

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In recent weeks we've been enjoying the beloved stories of Christmas... the baby Jesus in the manger, the angel's announcement to the shepherds, and the visit of the magi. We know these stories well and each year they evoke warm feelings. There's something wonderful about our yearly round of Christmas tradition and celebration.

But what's it all about *now*? *After all*? What's the lasting significance of all this? John tells us, in a profound proclamation at the beginning of his gospel. Listen to this.

TEXT: John 1:1-18

The Christmas tree has become the cultural icon of the season. You will find one in most every home and in many public venues, civic and commercial. There are tree lighting ceremonies on the mall in Washington DC, Rockefeller Center, New York City and, not to be outdone, Centennial Hall in Harpswell Center.

Most every year since our children were very young my family has tromped off into the woods or to one of those cut-your-own-tree places and, with a great deal of care and not a little discussion, selected some one very special tree, cut it down and brought it home and stood it up in our living room.

When my son grew into his teen years, I would offer him my yearly wisdom. "Son; two bits of advice that will put you in good stead for the rest of your life. One, find yourself a good wife. And two, find yourself a good Christmas tree stand. Don't get a cheap one. Get a good heavy sturdy one". (I'm talking about the stand, not the wife!)

Well, he got himself a good wife. She's wonderful. And then he got himself... a... a... an artificial tree! I still can't believe it. My own son! Bone of my bones!

We always put lights in the windows the first of Advent, and sometime later the tree goes up. We leave the tree up through the twelve days of Christmas to Epiphany. We try to keep it well watered but toward the end of the season it begins to lose its freshness and fragrance. It inevitably begins to brown as it dries.

Now what do we do with it? What do you do with a dead Christmas tree?

We took it down on Friday, leaving a trail of needles from where it stood, through the living room and entranceway, across the porch and through the snow to the burn pile.

What do you do with dead Christmas trees? Whatever; however, they are ultimately disposed of. You may burn it, chip it into mulch, or put it out by the curb to be hauled away.

Dead Christmas trees mark the end of the Christmas celebration.

Could it be that dead Christmas trees symbolize all too well the ultimate significance of our actual Christmas experience?

Poet, W. H Auden makes the point in his lengthy work entitled *The Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio*.

*Well, so that is that.
Now we must dismantle the tree,
Putting the decorations back into their cardboard boxes -
Some have got broken – and carrying them up to the attic.
The holly and the mistletoe must be taken down and burnt,
And the children got ready for school. There are enough
Left-overs to do, warmed-up, for the rest of the week -
Not that we have much appetite, having drunk such a lot,
Stayed up so late, attempted – quite unsuccessfully -*

*To love all of our relatives, and in general
Grossly overestimated our powers. Once again
As in previous years we have seen the actual Vision and failed
To do more than entertain it as an agreeable
Possibility, once again we have sent Him away...
... But, for the time being, here we all are.
... In the meantime
There are bills to be paid, machines to keep in repair,
Irregular verbs to learn, the Time Being to redeem
From insignificance. The happy morning is over.*

Can it be that dead Christmas trees really do symbolize the conclusion of our actual experience? Is Christmas merely a yearly peripheral exercise? It was nice... again... and we'll do it again next year. But the whole thing is rather obscure in terms of any lasting meaning beyond the traditions and good memories. What's it all about... after all... until next year... for "the time being", as Auden puts it? John tells us.

*The Word became flesh
and lived among us,
and we have seen his glory...
full of grace and truth...
and from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace.*

John speaks of Christ as the Word, (Logos) not as a grammatical part of speech such as a noun or adjective, but as the personification of the very action and power of God; as the truth and life of God given expression. The idea of the Word here is that of God expressing himself. God by his Word expresses light and life into being. God's thought and will is brought forth into actual existence.

The bible begins... "In the beginning God created." God spoke his will into being, and it was. God said, "Let there be", and there was. And then God pronounce it good.

God speaks first. He always does.

We think we're the self existent ones, asking the questions, charting the conversation, and demanding answers from God. No! God speaks first. He asks the questions. We respond to his initial word.

God said to Adam, "You may partake of the good of all of my creation. You may not eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil." But Adam did. God called to Adam, "Adam, where are you?" Adam responds, "I was afraid. I was naked. So I hid."

God said to Abram, "Leave your country and go to where I will show you." And Adam went.

God spoke to Moses from the burning bush. And Moses took off his shoes before a holy God. God said, "Moses, Moses." And Moses replies, "Here I am."

God shows himself holy to Isaiah in the temple. Isaiah can only respond, "Woe is me." God asks the question, "Whom shall I send and who will go for me?" Isaiah responds, "Here am I, send me."

The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah, "I knew you before you were born." The word of the Lord came to Ezekiel, to Hosea, to Joel, to Jonah. On and on from the beginning and on through the Hebrew Scriptures we read of God speaking to his spokesmen.

And then the writer to the Hebrews begins his New Testament writing:

*Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various
ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us
by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he
also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and
the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by
his powerful word.*

And John says:

In the beginning was the Word. And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory... full of grace and truth. And from his fullness we have received grace upon grace. No one has seen God; it is God the only Son who has made him known.

Seeing Jesus is the closest we can come to actually seeing God. All that is otherwise abstract concept... the light of God, the life of God, the truth of God... is embodied and made visible in Jesus Christ. Jesus brings it all to earth; to us.

Barbara Brown Taylor, great preacher and teacher of preachers, says, "God puts skin on all the divine realities". All the divine ideas of goodness, compassion, justice, patience, may only be idealized concepts. How do you know them? We know them only when they are embodied and enacted.

John tells us that God put skin on all that God is. *The Word became flesh, and lived among us, and we have seen his glory... full of grace and truth.*

He brings light into our darkness. He brings life to our death. He speaks truth into our ears. He expresses God's love and grace into our human predicaments. We see the true meaning of God's light, life, glory, truth and grace, in the life death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

This is the proclamation of John. This is the message of Christmas.

Now this is completely relevant and absolutely essential to our knowledge of God and our understanding of ourselves.

First, this is God making God's self known to us. We gain a new knowledge of God in Jesus Christ. This is not a set of principles or a list of rules. This is reality in the flesh. John tells us that in receiving him we experience the reality of God's life and life; his truth and grace. That is what it is to know God.

In the Greco-Roman world of John, Platonic teaching determined that in order to know God, one must ascend higher; out from the mortal and finite; beyond our fleshly material lives, to rise into the spiritual and the immaterial. That was thought to be true enlightenment and knowledge. But the good news, John tells us, is the other way around. Jesus Christ is life and the life is the light of all people. God has reached down to us and showed himself, giving us a knowledge of himself we could never acquire on our own. *The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, full of grace and truth.*

Not only does this give us a knowledge of God, it also helps us to make sense of what it is to be human. Our understanding of what it means to be human emerges out of being a child of God. As we receive him and believe on his name we are empowered as children of God. We are human in the truest sense as children of God "born not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God".

We are the recipient of his light and life. And we become participants in his truth and glory. We are the reflection of his light into the world, living to the glory of God and as testimonies of his grace. The one who said, "I am the light of the world" says to us, "You are the light of the world. Let your light shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven."

*The Word became flesh
and lived among us,
and we have seen his glory...
full of grace and truth.
and from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace.*

That's what Christmas is all about. That's what it's all about, after all. After all the trees have died and have been burned, or chipped into mulch, or set out on the curb to be hauled away.

That's what it's all about after all... after all and forever.
Thanks be to God. Amen.