

Old Testament lesson – Isaiah 11:1-10

New Testament lesson – Matthew 3:1-12

Christmas Traditions

When I was a boy, we had a plastic Christmas tree. At some point, I took it upon myself to be the one who assembled it every year, putting it together on the basis of its number and letter system. I learned the system watching someone else do it for several years. By the time I was in high school, my brother and sister were both gone from home, and my parents were probably relieved to have someone else put it up. I enjoyed the tradition, but I sometimes envied my friends who had real trees. I liked the pine smell; it reminded me of being in a pine forest.

During my last two years of college I lived in a house off-campus. We put up a real tree. Same thing in seminary: after my first year I lived in a house with about 10 other guys. We always put up a real tree. It was nice to have that when we held our Christmas party, to which we invited the entire seminary community. That was a very popular tradition that it took only one year to establish. That house was known as the Pits – that’s a story unto itself.

From the very first Pits Christmas party, it was known as the Pits Annual Christmas Party. We residents would gather in the dining hall at lunch, walk to the raised platform, and sing our invitation. Every conversation in the dining hall stopped when we started, and did not resume until we finished, usually to applause. Most of the songs were parodies of other songs, such as “At the Hop” and “Let It Snow.” One invitation was an adaptation of a fraternity song, sung in four-part harmony, after several rehearsals.

It was a great tradition. It became famous enough to live on after the Pits was no longer used as a residence. I visited the campus ten years after graduation and went to see my former home. I walked in to the offices in the old place and someone inquired why I was there. When I explained I used to live there, it gathered a small crowd. They wanted to know whether the stories about the parties were true.

But I was talking about the tradition of live Christmas trees. Well, to be technically correct,

formerly live trees. I began my post-seminary life with a continuation of the real Christmas tree tradition. When I met Annette we eventually discovered that we both liked real trees at Christmas. This continued into our early married years, in Kentucky, then Chicago, and then Colorado.

In Colorado I found the best deal on real trees. For \$6 the U. S. Forest Service sold a permit to cut down a tree in the Roosevelt National Forest and take it home. There were limits on the trunk size, and it had to be cut close to the ground. No problem.

One year I took a sled for hauling out the tree across the snow. It was a good idea on paper or in 3-4” of snow. But there were about 8” of snow on the ground. The sled kept getting stuck, and the tree kept rolling off. I had to keep re-tying the tree to the sled, which required taking off my gloves. But that was okay; it was sunny, and not really that cold. Or so I thought.

I finally wrestled the tree back to the car, tied it on and headed home. Then I noticed I could not feel my right forefinger. I touched my face; the finger was very cold. I stuck it under my leg to warm it up. Too late. To this day, that frost-bitten finger gets cold before anything else, even in a glove.

But I arrived home with the tree, cut the trunk to fit the tree into the living room, and it was finally time for another Christmas tradition we had established: the annual cursing of the Christmas tree.

It is difficult to balance a real tree in one of those stands. The little screw-things will cut into the trunk and let it lean in one direction. The tree looks upright from here, but not from there. Add to that the lopsided shape of a tree that grew in the wild, crowded by randomly spaced neighbors, and it becomes a nearly impossible task, especially if you are being helped by a couple young children.

We continued to have real trees for some years. But at some point soon after my dad died, my mother quit putting up her tree. So she gave it to us. Sadly, it was not the tree from my youth. But it was still easier to put up than a real tree. Sometimes traditions go by the wayside, and it's not really such a bad thing.

John the Baptist had a bit of a collision with the traditionalists of the Jewish community. The Pharisees and the Sadducees were very big fans of tradition, tradition they had created. They had put layer upon layer of tradition on top of the Law and the worship life of Judaism. John was having none of that.

Matthew tells us those men showed up for baptism; why would John refuse them? Well, because he had seen what they had done to the Law and the prophets, how they treated the people, and when it came right down to it, how they treated God.

"No!" he told them. "Bear fruit that befits repentance." In other words, start keeping the Law instead of making up details about parts that are not the most important. He probably would have voiced the same criticisms that Jesus later did. They paid attention to such things as tithing spices and herbs, but they paid no attention to mercy and justice. They showed no concern for ordinary people, and they boasted in their own righteousness. What feeling could such men have for genuine repentance? They probably did not really consider themselves to be sinners; what would they confess?

No, John told them. This is just another ritual for you. You would empty it of its meaning and power, just as you have done to the LORD's worship and Law and our religion in general.

In perhaps a terrible insult that we usually don't really grasp, he told them God could make these stones into sons that would be of the same quality as you.

You are no better in God's eyes than a rock in the wilderness. Wow. Now that's an insult.

It seems a bit odd to preach about the fiery preacher John the Baptist on the Advent Sunday of peace. But that was what he preached. That was what he presented to the people, the ordinary people who probably felt the weight of the world pressing down on them. Romans occupied their homeland. The Pharisees and Sadducees built barriers between the people and God.

Into that situation comes John, offering a new relationship with God. He offered them a path for the coming Messiah to travel to reach them. Turn away from your sins, because someone else is coming after me. He is greater than I. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit – and fire. But the fire was a refining fire, not a punishing fire. It's a different fire than the one that will burn the chaff and the unfruitful trees. I think it's important to realize that in our lesson John spoke of two very different uses of God's fire.

I suspect that John realized he was preparing the way for the shoot from stump of Jesse, as depicted by Isaiah in our OT lesson. I mentioned this passage a couple weeks ago, when the OT lesson was from Isaiah 65. This lesson is famously depicted in a series of paintings about the so-called "Peaceable Kingdom." Predators and prey are feeding together, poisonous snakes are no longer dangerous, and no one will hurt or destroy in all of God's holy mountain. All the nations – all the Gentiles, all those who did not previously know the LORD – all of them will seek this root of Jesse, this descendant of King David, who was a son of Jesse.

But notice what occurs before this peaceable kingdom is made manifest: God will judge the poor with righteousness and decide in a fair way for the entire world. And then, he will "smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall slay the wicked." Apparently, there is a price that will be paid for God's peace, paid by those who want no part of it.

Every year we have similar passages from Scripture for the second Sunday of Advent. They have become a tradition within many parts of the

Christian Church. Churches that don't use the lectionary probably have developed their own favorite passages as they lead up to Christmas. There is an instinct within every believer that recognizes the fact that the birth of Jesus is significant beyond our wildest imaginations.

And so we instinctively build up important rituals and observations to look forward to every year, practices that remind us this is an important part of life. It is so pervasive in our society that even non-believers do this; they just do it in an entirely non-religious way.

Those of us who believe in Jesus have also added non-religious components to our traditions. I know I have. Think about the things you look forward to at this time of year.

Lots of people have favorite Christmas movies. I know Christmas is approaching the first time Annette watches "White Christmas." Notice I said, "*the first time*." I think my favorite might be "Miracle on 34th Street." Other people might prefer the Grinch, Muppet Christmas Carol, the original Christmas Carol, Elf, or Die Hard. Yes, Die Hard. There is a meme on the internet that says, "It isn't Christmas until I see Hans Gruber fall from Nakatomi Plaza." If you don't understand that meme, watch the movie. There are also some lesser-known movies that might not be favorites, such as "Santa Claus Conquers the Martians," from 1965. That's on my "need to watch list."

There are also animated Christmas specials, Charlie Brown topping the list, followed by others like Frosty the Snowman, Rudolph, the animated Grinch, and numerous others. Charlie Brown is the only one that actually refers to the real reason for Christmas: the birth of Christ. The others ignore this event, leading a thinking person to wonder why and how this holiday came to be.

Then there are the other traditions we have accumulated: shopping for gifts, travel, family dinners, office parties, elf on the shelf, caroling, decorations, and Christmas trees.

And what do they have to do with the birth of Jesus Christ? Little or nothing, including the date on which we celebrate. As there were shepherds out in the field with their sheep, the chances are that Jesus was born in the spring of the year, according to people who know about such practices. So why is December 25 the traditional date for Christmas? There are a couple of possibilities, and neither one is certain.

In one, the death of Jesus has been calculated to the date of March 25, based on dates of Passover. Then, in alignment with some ancient beliefs, his conception is connected to the date of his death. That would set December 25 as his birth date, nine months later.

A second idea is more popular. This idea says that Christmas is celebrated at the same time that pagan winter festivals used to be celebrated, because the Church decided it would be easier to incorporate some pagan practices into Christian traditions, and thus make it more comfortable for pagans to convert. This idea, however, seems contradicted by mentions of Jesus being born on December 25 that were written before much contact with pagans in northern and western Europe. On the other hand, the Romans observed the festivals of Saturnalia and *Sol Invictus* on or around December 25. So as far as I can tell, the scholarly jury is still out on this one.

We *can* say with certainty that the date is not mentioned in the Bible. So we can probably conclude that the date is not really important.

I also think it is pretty clear that a fair number of our Christmas traditions do come from pagan origins. Take the Christmas tree, for example. Along with holly, ivy, mistletoe, and other greenery, these are signs of life in the midst of winter's death in a northern climate. Pagans brought such things inside during the darkest days of winter as signs of life. They burned yule logs and lit other lights to drive away the dark of winter.

It was probably the missionary Boniface who found such practices among the northern tribes and said these were ways God had prepared them

to hear the gospel of Jesus, who is the light that shines in the darkness, the life of the world who rose from the dead. In this way, he took pagan traditions and gave them a Christian meaning.

We find Christmas traditions all around us, of course. Families have Christmas traditions, churches have them, towns and neighborhoods and ethnic groups have them. Even individuals have traditions at Christmas, and so do entire countries. The question we have to ask ourselves about our traditions is this: do they detract from the meaning of the birth of Christ? Do they distract us from God instead of attracting us to him?

Traditions often promote family, loving others, sometimes romance, helping other people, and giving gifts. All of these things can be good, for they are all gifts from God. But if we observe them at Christmas and they distract

us from the birth of Jesus and why God did this, then they are just that – distractions. They are not the real deal.

Now, I am not foolish enough to suggest that people simply stop practicing their traditions. I will watch “Miracle on 34th Street” at least once this season, even though it has absolutely *nothing* to do with the birth of Jesus.

But those little buttons some people wear are 100% correct: “Jesus is the reason for the season.” He should also be the reason for our Christmas traditions. If he isn’t, then we should at least make sure we spend plenty of time thinking about his birth, why God sent him at all, what did it mean for God to take on the human form of a helpless infant, and that sort of thing. Thinking long and deeply about the birth of Jesus, worshiping God daily – these should be our Christmas traditions, too. Amen.