

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Jesus said: ***“I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die”*** (John 11:25-26a).

Advent is a season of preparation for Christmas and for the coming of the Lord. During this Advent season, we will reflect upon common decorations that we see all around us this time of year. Did you know that many decorations can help us prepare for the coming of Christ? For this first midweek in Advent, we will focus on how evergreen decorations help us prepare for the coming of Christ.

Look around this time of year, and you will see greenery everywhere – garland, wreaths, trees, and sprays. We decorate with different kinds of conifer trees – pine, spruce, fir – as well as broadleaf evergreens like holly and ivy. We love to celebrate these evergreen decorations by singing, “O Tannenbaum” (“O Christmas Tree”) and “The Holly and the Ivy.”

The Christmas tree has become the universal symbol of the Christmas season – and oddly enough, the Advent season – as these evergreen trees are displayed everywhere throughout the world: in our homes, offices, department stores, and public spaces. Even here at Prince of Peace, we have our chancel decorated with an evergreen tree. This indicates that these decorations have a churchly significance as they point us to spiritual truths.

But at one time, a Christmas tree in a church caused scandal. Can you believe that? Well, back on the Christmas Eve in 1851 at Zion Lutheran Church in Cleveland, Ohio, Pastor Heinrich Schwan placed an evergreen tree in the chancel, attached candles to it, and placed a silver star on top. This doesn’t sound too scandalous. But it was!

You see, this candlelit tree in a church was so revolutionary that it was reported in the city’s newspapers. One local paper reported this action as nonsensical, asinine and moronic. Some in Cleveland accused Pastor Schwan as engaging in heathenish and idolatrous practices by erecting an evergreen tree in the chancel. People were saying that the tree was a pagan symbol. This was quite a scandal.

But Pastor Schawn did his homework before he placed the evergreen tree in the Zion Lutheran chancel. He knew of the evergreen tree's significance in Germany and was convinced that they were a godly custom that celebrated the Savior's birth. So, he wrote letters to the newspapers making his case for the Christmas tree.

By that next Christmas in 1852, Pastor Schwan again erected a Christmas tree in his church's chancel. And that year, many of his parishioners also decorated trees in their homes. Within a decade, Christmas trees appeared in churches and homes across America.

Just leave it to the Lutherans, and a LCMS Lutheran at that. Pastor Schwan later served the LCMS as our third president of synod.

So, what did Pastor Schwan do to make his case for the Christmas tree?

To help us answer this question, let's go back to the very origins of the use of evergreen decorations during Advent and Christmas.

The use of Christmas trees first appeared in northern Europe around AD 1000. Usually, a small fir tree was cut from the forest and brought into the house. By AD 1400, Christmas trees were commonly found in German homes. They were decorated with apples, nuts, pretzels, wafers, and gingerbread.

Around this time, garland made of green holly and ivy appeared in England during Advent and Christmas. Christians would decorate their churches, houses and streets with evergreen branches.

So, why evergreens? Well, green is a symbol of life because living plants are green. In cold climates, many plants lose their green in the winter and appear to be lifeless. But evergreen plants retain their leaves in the winter. Evergreens have become a symbol of life when other plants appear dead.

Moreover, evergreens are a symbol of *eternal* life. This is because they are ever green. They prevail over death, even in the dead of winter.

In the Bible, the tree of life offered eternal life to all who ate its fruit. Accordingly, Christians since the Middle Ages have decorated their homes and churches during Advent and Christmas to remind them of the gift of eternal life that Jesus' advent offers.

Evergreens point us to Christ's first advent. During Christ's first advent, Jesus restored eternal life that had been lost when our first parents fell into sin. In Paradise, Adam and Eve had access to the very tree of life, but they forfeited that eternal life as they fell into sin. Thorns infested the ground as a symbol of the curse and of death (Genesis 3:17-19).

Jesus, the second Adam, came to restore life that was lost in man's fall. In His first advent, the very Second Person of the Trinity took upon Himself our human flesh to give His life so that we sinners might receive eternal life. Jesus says to us: ***"I came that they may have life and have it abundantly"*** (John 10:10). Jesus brought life to us through a thorny crown and a sacrificial death on the cross, exchanging His life for the death that we deserved because of our sins of thought, word and deed against God and our neighbor.

Also, the evergreen holly branch is associated with Christ's death because its thorny leaves remind us of the crown of thorns He wore on the cross. Its red berries remind us of the drops of blood that fell from His head as He hung on the cross.

Jesus' death destroyed death, and His resurrection restored life. Jesus proclaims to us: ***"I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die"*** (John 11:25-26).

Through Christ's first advent, we have been given the gift of eternal life. And did you realize that God compares Himself to an evergreen tree? In Hosea 14:8, He does just that: ***"I am like an evergreen cypress; from Me comes your fruit."*** The triune God is certainly our never-failing source of life and fruitfulness.

But we are in the Advent season. Is this just all it points to? Does the evergreen just point us back to Christ's first advent? No. The evergreen also points us to Christ's final advent on the Last Day. You see, Jesus' return will inaugurate a new creation in which sin and death no longer exist. Evergreens are associated with the new creation, which brings the reversal of sin's curse and the blessings of eternal life.

In Revelation 22, evergreens are again associated with the tree of life. It is described this way: ***"On either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed"*** (Revelation 22:2-3). The tree of life is evergreen as it bestows the fruit of everlasting life. And this life is ours because of Christ.

Evergreens certainly convey a powerful message: eternal life. That is what Advent and Christmas is all about: the eternal life that Jesus won for us at His first advent, which we will experience fully at His last advent. So, every time you see evergreen decorations – *at church, at home, at the office, or while shopping* – remember their message: Jesus has come and will come again to give you everlasting life!

Amen. Come Lord Jesus!

*The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding,
keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.*

+ SOLI DEO GLORIA +