

THE TREE OF TREES

by Steve Hammond, December 30, 2018
1 Peter 2:23-25 at NFBC, Christmas Sunday

//23 When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. 24 He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. 25 For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.//

—1 Peter 2:23-25 ESV

Christmas has a lot to do with trees. I'm told the tradition goes back to Germany, where it was called *Christbaum* or "Christ tree," and where Martin Luther is rumored to have been the first person to bring the tree indoors. By whomever and however it happened, I am glad it did. I have magical memories of when our family back in Maine would cut our own tree and bring back such wonderful hardy specimens, with great branches reaching out into the room. After it got all decorated, I would just sit in the room at night with only the tree lights on and stare at it for hours. Christmas has a lot to do with trees, today, yesterday and further back than we might imagine.

We've already noted at the beginning of Advent that a tree played an important part in the history of why humanity has a need for Christmas in the first place. We need the Christmas coming of Christ because in the days of Adam and Eve humanity made a choice to eat of the fruit of a tree from which God had commanded us not to eat. I'm sure it was a beautiful tree, too. It was located in the center of the Garden of Eden and probably needed no decorations to be appealing. But when Eve was examining the fruit she noted that it was pleasing to the eye and good for food.

You know the rest of the story; it was that tree that marked our rebellion against God and his word. It was the fall of humanity into sin. What a terrible thing for a tree to stand for after that.

Now, we can't just jump from that tree to the Christmas tree. In fact, history doesn't even do that. The first Christmas didn't even *have* a tree. It had shepherds, angels, Mary & Joseph, the star and the wise men. But there's no mention of a tree that I'm aware of. There was that feeding trough used as a cradle, which could have been made of stone, but may well have been wood. I'd like to think of it as being wood. But even if there were a tree at that first Christmas, it wouldn't be for Christmas. It

would be for the foreshadowing work it would do: from Christmas (the birth of Christ) to the cross of Christ (the death of Christ). For there we do indeed find a tree. Take a good look at verse 24 in our text. In the midst of it you will find a tree, as I read from the English Standard Version.

*He himself bore our sins in his body **on the tree**, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed.*

---1 Peter 2:24 (ESV)

Like a lot of basic words, the Greek word here (*xulon*) carries two meanings. It can mean anything made of wood, particularly as it might be long like the trunk of a tree; but it also is used to literally mean “tree.” (Another word, *stauros*, is more often used for the cross, but not always.) And here the cross of Jesus is properly spoken of, and translated to have taken place on, a “tree.”

So, this is where we find the Tree, the “Tree of Trees,” if you will. And this is what you should keep in mind when you ponder the Christmas Tree each season in our day. This is because Christmas does not stand alone. It stands only as it stands with the Cross of Christ. Even if there was a birth of Christ, there would be no celebration of it if there were not also his sacrificial death on that Tree. The Gospel of John makes but one reference to the birth of Christ. And the Gospel of Mark makes not even one. That’s half of all the Gospels pretty much leaving out the traditional Christmas story. Whereas the Cross of Christ takes up nearly half of each of the Gospels. It is the focal point of the whole Story. Jesus death on that tree is what makes the Good News good! That may sound contradictory on the surface, but it is the truth. And it is indeed good news, the very kind of good we yearn for at Christmas.

With that in mind, let’s do a little pondering, like I did as a kid staring at that Christmas tree with all its lights and glitter, intricate decorations and the smell of pine about it. What can we take in about the Tree of Trees at the heart of the Gospel of Jesus Christ?

First off, there’s no outward appeal to this Tree of Trees.

Everything is in contrast to what we would expect to find at the heart of God’s work of salvation for our souls. We’re talking about a dead Tree, not a cut tree still alive and drinking up the water you give it to keep those needles from falling all over the floor. We’re talking about a Tree of shame, embarrassment, suffering and death, not a tree of songs, sweetness and joy.

We're talking of heartbreaking shock among the loved ones of Jesus as they witness his crucifixion on that Tree, not the gleeful surprise of children, family and friends gathered around the tree on Christmas.

There is no outward appeal to this Tree of Trees. Christmas does hint in this direction, though. For if you read the story carefully you will see that it is very rough around the edges. There's a donkey ride for a woman nine months pregnant; there's no room in the inn; there's a birth in a barn; there's a baby in a feeding trough; there are dirty, low class shepherds come to visit, and there's that myrrh from the wise men mixed in with the gold and frankincense. (Myrrh as you know is for one's burial.) There's a lot there *not* to be attracted to if you see it in the raw. But, of course, we see it refined. It's really no wonder Christmas is more popular throughout the world than Christianity itself. It's more attractive; it has a far more attractive tree in the midst of it, or so it seems.

But in truth Christmas and the Cross are not competing with each other. Christmas is but the beginning. It's not wrong to be attracted to it. It's only wrong to not go on; it's only wrong to elevate it above the rest of the story – the real point of it all is the rest of the Story, climaxing at the cross and resurrection.

So let's continue to ponder that Tree of Trees.

There is an inner appeal to this Tree, greater than all other Trees.

Only God knows for sure why he has ordered his way of salvation to be exactly the way it is. But we can know for sure that his way is best. And God chose for there to be no outward beauty about this Tree of Christ. Yet at the same time that Tree held within its 'branches' the most precious, loving, glorious, wondrous, righteous, life-giving, sin-forgiving, soul-healing, Person ever to walk this earth. That Tree held nothing less than the heart of God himself upon those branches. And though what was done there was cruel suffering and death, it was not without purpose and power. For it was our salvation.

*He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, **that we might die to sin and live to righteousness.** By his wounds **you have been healed.***

---1 Peter 2:24 (ESV)

This was the end of our sin. This was the beginning of our righteousness. This was our ultimate healing such that the disease of death itself would be cured. But you don't see such beauty with your eyes here.

You can only see these truths through the inner eyes of faith. God knows this. And so that's how he arranged it for us to behold.

Haven't you ever "judged a book by its cover," only to find out you judged completely wrong? Haven't you ever found the inside of something to be so great that it actually changes how you view the outside? That may not be so common when it comes to trees. But it is especially true when it comes to people. People can be beautiful on the outside, yet ugly on the inside, or ugly on the outside and beautiful on the inside.

Biologically speaking, we have a natural, built in meter that looks at the outward appearance of people and makes judgments about what's inside. That's because outward, physical appearance can indicate a person's physical inner health. This type of judgment works really well in the animal kingdom or on TV. Consider the peacock in all its glory, or the huge antlers on a buck or a bull moose; those are signs of health. And we humans enjoy such signs in our appearance as well, for a season at least.

But then again, real life is more complicated than that. Have you ever noticed how often the hero's on TV tell a true story, but at the end of the story you see the real life people . . . and they're just so ordinary or even odd looking compared to the actors who portrayed them. Why is that? Well, for one thing, in real life what's on the inside is more important than what's on the outside.

Also in real life, we humans are not mere reflections of animals. We are made in the image of God. And though we've fallen into sin and marred that image, God knows the way to redeem us is to fix us on the inside first. The outside can come later. So, when God made no outward appeal to the Cross, he more than compensated by making the absolute greatest appeal on the inside. When he did this he was zeroing in on exactly what we need. We need our hearts touched by God's heart. The only attractive force at work at the Cross is the heart-to-heart love of God through Jesus Christ dying for our sins on that Tree of Trees.

Ponder that Tree this Christmas season and into the new year. Don't just look with your eyes either. Look with your eyes of faith. In this way you will see the love of God hanging like the most beautiful light in the darkness of this world . . . on that now most beautiful Tree of trees.