

"The Gift of the Tree: Promise "

Luke 1:39-45; Luke 1:46-55

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

December 24, 2015 – Christmas Eve – Rev. Ronald Botts

At a wedding of friends of mine the couple broke with tradition. Instead of simply receiving gifts, as is usual and customary, Gary and Winifred also gave gifts—a present to each person who attended and shared that day with them. Each guest got a small pine tree seedling. For them this was a way of saying "thank you" to everyone who came; yet, it was also something more. The trees were a way of affirming new life symbolized by their marriage and of expressing hope for the future.

When you plant a tree, you not only do it for yourself but for those who come after you. These two people sincerely believe that, as we take from life's generosity, we must also strive to give back. We cannot properly receive without adding something of our own in exchange.

I got to thinking later that if all people could live by such an attitude of sharing, of returning back to life, the world would certainly be a far different place. Instead of tearing down and destroying, as too often goes on in life, all that energy could be put into building up the world, to making it a better place to live and prosper.

Even as we meet others' needs, we often find our own basics being met at the same time. Can you imagine how such a shift of attitude could alter the quality of life in every community on earth, where each child could look forward to growing up in a safe, healthy environment with promise for the future? What a dramatic change this would bring to the pain and desperation felt by so many today!

A small pine tree given to friends by two people in love is especially appropriate for a wedding taking place at Christmas time. The evergreen is certainly one of our most visible symbols in this holy season.

It's commonly believed that our custom of using this perennial tree came from Germany centuries ago, perhaps even tracing it back to Martin Luther. Whatever its true origin, the practice of decorating evergreens with candles and ornaments and gifts probably started in Europe and then spread to the Americas. Early on we embraced the Christmas tree and have continued to do so ever since.

A large body of folklore has also grown up around the tree. Here's how one old story attempts to explain the central place of the evergreen in our homes. It goes this way: "On a stormy Christmas Eve a woodsman and his family bolted the front door against the raging weather and gathered around a cheerful fire. After a while knocking was heard outside and the father went to open the door. It was a little child—cold, hungry, and all but exhausted.

"The little one, though unknown, was kindly welcomed by the family and warmed and fed. One of the children even insisted in giving up his bed to the little stranger. In the morning the family was awakened early by strange and beautiful singing, which came from a whole choir of angels. Even more amazing, the family discovered that the tired and cold boy they had

graciously invited in was now transformed into the Christ Child. And this Holy One went outside and there he broke off a branch from a fir tree and pushed it into the earth.

"See,' said the Christ Child,' I have gladly received your gifts, and now this is my gift to you. Henceforth this tree shall bear its fruit at Christmas and you shall always have abundance.'" Maybe you've heard that story before, or one like it. There are dozens of other stories, too, which also try to explain the custom of the tree. None of them probably have any historical significance, but they are such beautiful tales that we still repeat and enjoy them. There sentiment is characteristic of Christmas, even if they don't go back to actual fact.

All these old stories tell us something similar and very basic: Christmas is like no other day. Even now, or maybe especially now, it's important we not lose its true significance amid everything surrounding it. Yes, Christmas is a shopping season and an excuse for parades. It's a time for parties and a holiday from work. It's tinsel and commercials and TV specials. But it's nothing if it isn't Christ's birth.

In the Old Testament we find prophecies of one who is to come, of one who "shall be great to the ends of the earth." And we find those words fulfilled in our scripture lesson tonight from Luke in what is known as the Magnificat, or the song of Mary. Here Mary rejoices in the knowledge that she has been chosen to bear a most special child. She says:

"My heart praises the Lord; my soul is glad because of God my Savior, for he has remembered me, his lowly servant! From now on all people will call me blessed, because of the great things God Almighty has done for me.

It's a great joy for anyone to be the mother of a child of promise. We recall many outstanding people down through the ages, but rarely do we think about or even know the women who gave life to them. In a sense these individuals are not important. In another sense those persons are absolutely focal. Without Mary Jesus could not, would not have been. Her song is a psalm of gratitude, both for God's confidence in her, and for God's watchfulness over the people of Israel.

Like Mary we, too, should give thanks to God that the one who was promised has come. He was nurtured by Mary until he was of such an age that the time of his fulfillment arrived. He gave of himself fully so that God's purpose could be revealed. He did for humanity what we could never do for ourselves. And it all began with a young Hebrew woman who became a mother. We hear her words of joy even yet tonight.

Like Mary who opened herself to God's purpose, we are also called to be receptive to God's planting of a holy seed within us. While we will not be expected to bring forth the likeness of Christ physically, we are given the opportunity to bear his likeness spiritually. We can embody love in our words and actions to show that Christ is alive and working through us even now.

A small pine tree is not going to reforest the earth on its own, but planting it is both a symbolic and practical act. It can make a difference. Saying "yes" in some in some tangible way in this holy season to Jesus' claim upon you may not be a total response, but it's another step in discipleship. You see, the real importance of Christmas is not so much in acknowledging the

fact of Christ's birth, but affirming that he still comes into the world through those who have faith, and that's you and me.

A small pine holds the possibility of the magnificent tree that is to come. The Christ child in the manger is the promise that God's will and intention continues to unfold in the world. So tonight and tomorrow consider the true meaning of Christmas already planted within your heart, and then let God direct you throughout the year ahead in joyful response. Christ has come; he has come, indeed!