

“BARREN THINGS TO FLOWER”

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Tradition, Legend, and Lore – “A teaching series about discovering the importance of Spiritual Experience through Tradition, Legend, and Lore.”

- The purpose of this series has been to help us to “discover the importance of why we celebrate what we do the way we do.”

This week we are going to focus on “Tradition” Specifically.

- **Def:** Tradition – The transmission of customs or beliefs from generation to generation, or the fact of being passed on in this way.

There may not be a more widely participated in tradition than that of setting up a Christmas Tree during the Christmas season...

Quick Vote: Are we a real or fake tree church?

- Nobody is really sure when Fir trees were first used as Christmas trees. It probably began about 1000 years ago in Northern Europe.
- The evergreen tree was already an ancient symbol of life in the midst of winter and has traditionally been used to celebrate winter festivals (pagan and Christian) for thousands of years.
- The Romans decorated their houses with evergreen branches during the New Year.
- Christians used it as a sign of everlasting life with God.

And so... There have been many legends around the origin of Christmas Trees...

The Forester and Orphan:

- “Once on a cold Christmas Eve night, a forester and his family were in their cottage gathered round the fire to keep warm. Suddenly there was a knock on the door. When the forester opened the door, he found a poor little boy standing on the doorstep, lost and alone. The forester welcomed him into his house and the family fed and washed him and put him to bed in the youngest son’s own bed (he had to share with his brother that night!). The next morning, Christmas Morning, the family were woken up by a choir of angels, and the poor little boy had turned into Jesus, the Christ Child. The Christ Child went into the front garden of the cottage and broke a branch off a Fir tree and gave it to the family as a present to say thank you for looking after him. So ever since them, people have remembered that night by bringing a Christmas Tree into their homes!?”

The Legend of the Christmas Spider:

- All the versions of the story involve a poor family who can't afford to decorate a Tree for Christmas (in some versions the tree grew from a pinecone in their house, in others the family have bought a tree into the house). When the children go to sleep on Christmas Eve a spider covers the tree in cobwebs. Then on Christmas morning the cobwebs are magically turned into silver and gold strands which decorate the tree and so this is where get the Tinsel tradition from.
- In parts of Germany, Poland, and Ukraine, it's meant to be good luck to find a spider or a spider's web on your Christmas Tree. Spider's web Christmas Tree decorations are also popular in Ukraine.

Regardless of their origins, the significances of our traditions are powerful...

- They give us a sense of belonging, a sense of prediction, a sense of order like no other.
- Think about it... Was there a time in your family when a tradition changed? Remember the reaction?
- Or maybe you can recall a time you went to another family's holiday gathering whose traditions were different?
- You may have stared in polite disbelief and thought to yourself... "You do what? When? How? Why?"
- While we can rarely answer the why, we know its importance...

"Traditions are the framework, the structure that creates our memories... the stories of our lives."

Christians however haven't always seen it this way...

- Many early Christians were hostile to such practices.
- Many second-century theologians condemned those Christians who first celebrated the winter festivals, or decorated their houses with laurel boughs...
- ... But by the early Middle Ages, the legend had grown that when Christ was born in the dead of winter, every tree throughout the world miraculously shook off its ice and snow and produced new shoots of green.
- Around that same time, Christian missionaries who were preaching to the Germanic and Slavic people were taking a more lenient approach to cultural practices—such as evergreen trees...

These missionaries believed that, "The Incarnation proclaimed Christ's lordship over those natural symbols that had previously been used for the worship of pagan gods. Not only individual human beings, but cultures, symbols, and traditions could be converted."

Let's look at a Biblical outworking of this... Acts Ch. 17

- The Apostle Paul arrives in Athens, the citadel of the many Greek gods. In that city was the Areopagus, or Mars Hill, which is a small hill covered in stone seats where a council of civic leaders met.
- This council had charge of religious and educational matters in Athens.

(Vs) Acts 17:16-21 – “Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols...”

- These two groups... The Epicurean and Stoic philosophers represent two very different belief systems...
- The Epicureans were followers of Epicurus. (341—270 BC) He taught that happiness was the ultimate goal in life.
- The Stoic thinkers regarded Zeno (340—265 BC) as their founder. He was noted for promoting the rational over the emotional.
- Both Epicurus and Zeno believed in many gods... Like most in their culture.

Paul Addresses the Areopagus...

(Vs) Acts 17: 22-33 – “So Paul, standing in the midst of the Areopagus, said: “Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious...”

What Paul does here is from the Holy Spirit...

“The Holy Spirit often takes something known and relevant and drives the heart of God up through it.”

- Jesus himself does this time and time again... He uses paying taxes to teach about the Kingdom of this world and the next.
- He uses the cultural tradition of a wedding feast to show how he goes about inviting people to sit in relationship with him.
- He even uses the story of a prophet and a harlot to show how his love, even though denied time and again, still remains.
- Do you recognize that God uses all for His Glory and so should you!

And yet... “As a general rule, I would say that human beings never behave more badly toward one another than when they believe they are protecting God.”

Barbara Brown Taylor

- Still today, the Holy Spirit can, and often does, use our man-made traditions to bring focus and glory upon himself...

In this way... “Traditions serve as a portal between generations, allowing contemporary kin to connect to ancestors that passed long before their existence, and families of the same lifetime to celebrate one another. It's an unrivaled excuse to engage with your culture and remind yourself of moral priorities to preserve provisional experiences that otherwise would be skewed by memory.”

- And so... As many of us make trees and gifts the center of our own Christmas practice, we would do well to remember that they are ultimately symbols of the One who gave himself to unite heaven and earth, and who brings all barren things to flower.

Next week's Topic is by far one of the world's most well-known Legends – Santa Claus. Santa Warning: We will keep our Santa representative in the auditorium only, and we will be discussing the Ministry of this believing family.