

12-8-19 Advent 2: A Branch to Hang Your Hopes On

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Did you get your Christmas Tree up? Did any of you go out this week in the snow to a tree farm to cut your own tree? My wife and I made a strenuous journey to find the perfect tree. We searched from place to place. We examined each limb and after much scrutiny we finally selected the perfect one. Turns out, on Black Friday Eve at Target, you don't even have to cut your own tree down, they have them all ready for you in a box.

We spend a great deal of time picking and trimming a tree during this season of preparation. We usually are focused on finding the fullest most beautiful tree we can. The ironic thing is the tree that Christmas is actually about is not a tree any of us would've picked. We probably wouldn't have even noticed it.

Our readings today talk about trees all over the place, so we're going to make our trek to find the one true and perfect Christmas tree. But appearances are deceiving, this tree doesn't have much splendor to it. **It's really more of little sprout.** Today we'd probably call it a tree sucker. My dad used to send me out with a clipper to trim these off the base of the tree. This tender shoot, this growing branch doesn't look like much, but rest assured, **this is a branch you can hang your hopes on.**

As we start our journey to find the perfect tree, we go back to the time when all the trees were perfect. At the beginning, God had made all kinds of perfect trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. Then we hear of two special trees in the middle of the garden. One tree called the *tree of life* and another called the *tree of the knowledge of good and evil*. One of these trees God had proclaimed "off limits" to Adam and Eve. **"You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die" (Genesis 2:17).** The one tree they couldn't have out of all the perfect trees, became the one tree they just needed to have. **"The woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it" (Genesis 3:6).**

So I guess picking out a tree was family event from the beginning, But this family's act of disobedience, this blatant choice against God's specific command, plunged the world into the heap of sin we live in to this day. This act of disobedience brought with it God's curse upon the ground, and all the trees, and upon mankind itself. The trees would now produce thorns and thistles; work would now be hard. Perfect creation was ruined! But the greatest curse fell upon mankind, **"Dust you are and to dust you will return" (Genesis 3:19).** They would surely die just as God had warned.

Realizing what they had done, you can probably guess what was on the top of their list to quick fix it and make it go away, "I know, let's eat from the *tree of life* and then we won't die." But the last thing God wanted was for them to eat of the *tree of life* and live forever in their sinful ruined state. So he made double sure that wouldn't happen by banishing them from the garden and posting a sword bearing angel to guard that *tree of life*. So the fateful story that brought sin into world centered around a tree.

Now on to the next tree. Isaiah pictures God's people as a tree. Under a lowly shepherd boy named David, this tree grew to be like a great and mighty oak tree, strong and powerful. This tree towered above the rest and David's kingdom became the most powerful in the whole land. This was a tree we'd be proud to put in our living room. Yet like one of those trees that drops all its needles the second you get it in the house, this tree was ruined by the curse of sin from the inside out. This tree was soon to fall.

Isaiah tells us, **"So their roots will decay...for they have rejected the law of the Lord Almighty and spurned the word of the Holy One of Israel" (Isaiah 5:24)** So the Lord stands over this

tree with an ax like a mighty lumberjack. **“Therefore, the Lord’s anger burns against his people; his hand is raised and he strikes them down” (Isaiah 5:25) “As the terebinth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy seed will be the stump in the land” (Isaiah 6:13).”**

That leaves us with a sobering thought. If God cut down this splendid and mighty *looking* tree, his chosen nation, then appearances won’t save anything. He certainly won’t hold back from hewing anyone else down. That certainly explains our next cluster of trees and the words of John the Baptist. **“The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire” (Matthew 3:10).**

John the Baptist, the Forerunner, prepared the way announcing that Christ’s coming is near. He was pointing people to see their sin and then look to the Lamb of God who takes it all away. They were confessing their sins and being baptized for the forgiveness of sins.

But there was this other group that came to John the Baptist, the Pharisees and Sadducees. They were the high and mighty religious elite. They looked like they had all the right things, the right heritage, the right knowledge of the law, the right appearances, but not the right hearts. They looked like good trees, but they didn’t produce good fruit, fruit in keeping with repentance, the fruit of hearing God’s call to recognize sin, leave it behind, and look to the Lamb. John the Baptist called them a “brood of vipers” and warned them that God was already lining up his ax to them cut down and thrown them into the fire.

Those are trees we know a lot about, trees with branches that keep up a good appearance, but don’t deal with the real problems inside the trunk? Don’t think you can squirm off the hook by thinking John’s message was only about those terrible Pharisees. The ax is at the root of the tree, and God’s ax knows who is faking and who isn’t. **“He will not judge by what he sees with his eye, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness... He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth and with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked” (Isaiah 11:4).**

So far we’ve seen a lot of trees, but none of them is the one we really need. That’s because we’re so enthralled by appearances that we walked right past the Christmas tree we needed all along. Isaiah tells us, **“A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse, from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.”** From the lowly disgraced stump of that mighty tree that had been cut down before, will spring a new sprout. We wouldn’t even give this tree a second thought, no chance to be the perfect Christmas tree. Isaiah says himself, **“He grew up like a tender shoot, like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him” (Isaiah 53:2).**

But we’ve finally come to learn that appearances don’t matter. This tree has all the right things that do matter. **“The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, counsel and power, knowledge and the fear of the Lord, and he will delight in the fear of the Lord” (Isaiah 11:2,3). “Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist” (Isaiah 11:5).**

This is the perfect tree that would return fallen creation back to its former perfection. Because of that first ruinous choice with the *tree of knowledge of good and evil*, wolves and leopards don’t lie down to sleep with sheep and goats, they tear them apart and eat them. Bear and cows don’t graze in the field, bears eat cow. We don’t put little children into the lion pen at the zoo or behind the glass in the snake exhibit. It makes me shiver just to think of it.

But this perfect tree, the righteous branch will bring righteousness and justice back into existence. Creation will be perfect once again and the hope of every beauty queen will be achieved—world peace!

The needy will have everything they need; world hunger will be eradicated. Wolves and lambs and babies and cobras can all play in the same pen together. They will not harm or destroy each other on the mountain of the Lord. And this is why!

Isaiah foretells, **“In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him” (Isaiah 11:10)** Jesus himself tells us about the day Isaiah is talking about. Jesus says, **“But I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.’ He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die” (John 12:32).**

Jesus, the Righteous Branch, knew he would soon be lifted up and hung on the tree of the cross. The Old Testament tells us, **“Cursed is everyone who is hung on tree” (Deuteronomy 21:23).** So **“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” (Galatians 3:13).** The Righteous Branch bore the curse of death by hanging on the tree instead of us, all to restore us to perfection at last, free from every sin and every curse.

This is the one Christmas tree we need—the Shoot from the Root of Jesse. This is the Savior whose lowly coming we await, the one who makes all things new, far as the curse is found! This is the **Righteous Branch to hang all our hopes on.** This is the coolest part. Remember that *tree of life* that God banished us from. Because of this Branch, we’ll see that tree again.

From the last chapter of the Bible, Revelation 22, **“Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse” (1-3).** **“Blessed are those who wash their robes, that they may have the right to the tree of life and may go through the gates into the city” (14).** **“I, Jesus, ... I am the Root and the Offspring of David... I am coming soon.”** Let every heart prepare him room. Amen.