

“HANGING OF THE GREENS” SERVICE, St. Paul United Church of Christ, Taylor, prepared by the Reverend Dr. Geoffrey Drutchas, December 5, 2021

The Meaning of the Greens

As we gather on this second Advent Sunday, we make ourselves ready for the birthday of Jesus Christ. Over the last week our church has been dressed, much as we might dress up for a banquet with a king! The season’s apparel is visible all around. The first two Advent candles are lit, representing the hope and peace that Jesus Christ makes possible. Angel trees flank the altar. For the first time, their lights shine for our entire service. Lighted greenery hangs throughout the chancel and makes its festive appearance in other locations. Finally, the manger is in place with the baby Jesus surrounded by those who adore him. All this reminds us that though Christmas is not here, the “mass” of Christ will be joyously upon us soon—very soon. This morning we give humble thought and appreciation to all these splendid decorations and what they symbolize and mean for us as a worshipping people of faith in these weeks ahead.

Our Evergreens, Holly, and Mistletoe

The Advent and Christmas greenery now sported throughout our chancel and sanctuary have origins in pagan, nature-centered cultures, celebrating other gods than our own. But as Christianity spread northward across Europe, it saw an opportunity to Christianize pagan customs in a way that made the gospel message more friendly in its outreach. Conifers or evergreens, which were so plentiful in northern climes, were not the home of spirits as the pagans had long believed. They were certainly not to be worshiped as before. Nevertheless, they could—as the church now taught--serve as a symbol of the eternal life made possible through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Holly and mistletoe also underwent conversion in the new Christian teachings. Traditionally, for instance, pagans adorned their houses with holly to ward off evil spirits. They also harvested mistletoe at winter solstice time as a poison-fighter and a fertility aid. Very differently, the Christian churches embraced the prickly leaves and red berries of holly as a wonderful reminder of Jesus’ Crown of Thorns and his bleeding head as he endured arrest and made the ultimate sacrifice for humankind on Calvary’s hill. Meanwhile, mistletoe was also put to use in church life. In the medieval cathedral at York, England, mistletoe was hung to create a place where wrong-doers could come, express regret, offer penance, and receive a pardon. Similarly, battling warriors could meet to avow peace between them, ending any poisonous hatred and conflict.

May all the greenery displayed before us remind us of Christ’s love and sacrifice for us and the wonderful healing and renewal in body and spirit that he makes possible.

Our Advent and Christmas Wreaths

Wreaths figure large in our Advent and Christmas celebration. Here at St. Paul Church we display them indoors and out. In pre-Christian times wreaths made from various plants and their leaves were often worn as headdresses to symbolize victory, honor, and the continuing cycle of life. The “Victor’s Laurels” presented to conquering heroes or athletic champions were essentially a head wreath made of laurel leaves. Although meant to mock him, Jesus’ own Crown of Thorns was a barren, prickly wreath.

As a circle, the wreath—like a wedding ring--has no beginning or end. This makes it the perfect symbol of the eternity of God, the immortality of the soul, and the unending love of Jesus Christ as our savior. The Christian Churches have long made the wreath the central symbol of Advent, the four weeks which spiritually prepare us for the celebration of Christ’s birth. Around the circling wreath, candles are progressively lit, week by week, recalling the hope, peace, love, and joy which Jesus Christ makes possible for our lives. At the center of every Advent wreath is the Christ Candle, underscoring that Jesus Christ and God the Father should be center of our lives, binding us together as a community of the faithful.

Our Christmas Poinsettias

In all its vivid color, the Poinsettia has become the most popular of all Christmas flowers. Its tropical blood-red leaves are often mistaken for its blossoms. However, the poinsettia’s actual flowers are the small, yellow clusters which appear in the midst of its red leaves. Although widely grown in greenhouses today, poinsettias are only native to the Pacific coast of Mexico south to Guatemala.

Dr. Joel R. Poinsett, the English ambassador to Mexico, has been credited with the “discovery” of this Christmas flower in 1828. But it’s more accurate to say that he simply made the plant known across Europe and North America where no one had ever seen anything like it before. It is because of Poinsett’s role in introducing the plant beyond its native clime that the Christmas flower bears his name.

A fanciful Mexican legend claims that whenever a drop of blood falls to earth from the broken heart of a young woman a poinsettia will spring up. For Christians the poinsettia’s blood-red leaves brought to mind the blood of Christ sacrificed for sinners. The poinsettia’s star-shaped leaf formation has also been compared to the star which shone at Bethlehem, announcing Christ’s birth. Given its beauty and almost bush-like size as a decoration, the poinsettia has become even more recognizable and popular than the slimmer, more fragile “Christmas rose,” traditionally celebrated by both prophetic scripture and church hymn.

Our Christmas Tree

In the Old Testament Book of Isaiah, Israel's great prophet declares in God's name: "The glory of Lebanon shall come to you, the fir, the pine, and box tree together, to beautiful the place of my sanctuary and I will make the place of my feet glorious." (*Isaiah 60:13*) Indeed, the wood from all these different trees were ultimately used in the construction of Israel's Great Temple in Jerusalem. But Isaiah's prophecy also comes to fulfillment in a fresh way when fir and pine had brought into God's house to celebrate Christmas.

Of course, trees did not originally figure into any Christmas celebrations. An old legend attributes the very first use of trees as a Christian symbol to Saint Winifred, an eighth-century Christian missionary in Wales. In that era of Saint Winifred's missionizing, pagan Druid priests were reputedly conducting rituals of human sacrifice beneath a great oak tree deep in the forest. Shocked by pagan brutality and its reckless disregard for human life in the name of their gods, a very strong and able St. Winifred took an axe amid an array of Druid priests and felled their sacred oak so that it could never again be the site of human killing. Supposedly, where the great oak fell, a fir tree grew up in its place. St. Winifred proclaimed this fir tree as holy, calling it a symbol of endless life in Christ because its branches remain forever green.

Fast forward to the sixteenth-century when and where Protestant Reformer Martin Luther is credited with being among the first to erect a Christmas tree in his own home, decorating it with candles to suggest the many stars of God's gracious heavens. However, the Christmas tree custom only made it to American shores in 1832. In that year, the German-born Congregational minister Charles Follen decorated a Christmas tree for display in his own Boston-area home and invited his church members and friends to share the beauty of it. The idea of Christmas trees quickly caught on. Twenty years later, in 1851, the Reverend Harry Schwan, another German-born minister at Cleveland's Zion Church, took the even bolder step of introducing this once pagan symbol into his sanctuary for Christmas Eve services. It was not long before the presence of Christmas trees in church became widespread, if not universal.

For many the lights of every Christmas tree evoke thoughts of the starry skies that likely greeted Jesus's Bethlehem birth. The lights on our congregation's paired Angel Trees flanking the altar are white, further symbolizing the purity of heart and mind that we should all seek through Jesus Christ as our sinless savior.

Our Ringing Bells

Bells come in all sizes and tones. Although they have a single clapper to make their sound, they can be incredibly expressive. Depending on their size and construction, bells can variously ring bright and joyous; mellow and dignified; or mournful and sad.

Traditionally used to summon Christian worshipers to prayer in homes and fields, as well as for sanctuary worship, church bells have over long centuries festively rung on

Christmas Eve to announce the start and finish of services celebrating Jesus's birth. In the nineteenth century British Isles, Christmas carolers also began carrying small bells to announce themselves as they moved between households sharing merry songs of the season. In more recent days, handbells also emerged as popular instruments for church worship. For me there's nothing quite so delightful as chimes and handbells playing Christmas tunes.

Not surprising then, some of our most cherished holiday and Christmas carols celebrate bells. What would Advent and Christmas be like without hearing, for instance, *Jingle Bells* *I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day*, *Ding-Dong Merrily on High*, or even that more recently composed song *The Carol of the Bells*? Bells have become another beautiful symbol of Advent and Christmas which, amid these seasons' rich greenery, help us rejoice in the promise of Christ's birth.

Our Lighted Star

One of the oldest symbols of the Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany seasons is a five-pointed star. In Matthew's Gospel, Magi or Wise Men, who were most likely Persian astronomers, set out to investigate an unusual star observed in the sky which they suspect is a heavenly sign of some great earthly event. In their quest for the star's source they may have traveled as much as 800 or 900 miles. Arriving in Jerusalem, ancient Israel's capital, the wise men, who have apparently learned much along the way pointedly ask, "*Where is baby born to be King of the Jews? We saw his star when it came up in the east and we have come to worship him.*" (Matthew 2:2) These Wise Men, who may have been three or more in number, are soon to be the first gentiles or non-Jews to pay Jesus Christ the reverence due him.

Not surprisingly, the Wise Men's question about a baby born to the King of the Jews raises the hackles on the neck of evil King Herod, who wants no future competitors for his royal throne. Slyly, for his own selfish purposes, King Herod summons the Wise Men to his palace to solicit as much intelligence as it can about his potential rival. In fact, he has every intention of murderously snuffing out the life of whoever that rival may be.

Yet the Wise Men are wise guys indeed. As much as they may have their heads up in the stars, so-to-speak, they know an evil man when they see him. Consequently, as quickly as possible they slip away from King Herod's court and never return. Continuing to follow the star first noticed in the East, they find themselves in Bethlehem, which is also the birthplace of Israel's fabled King David. In this now sleepy town, the star has come to rest, bathing a stable in light, where a baby coos, comforted by his mother. In this light, Wisdom, represented by the magi or Wise Men, bow in respect and reverence for Truth, embodied by the Christ Child. We light our star this morning as a symbol of Christ's beckoning appeal to all who seek in live in true faith and wisdom.