

“Pointing to Jesus” – Pr Jim Sprengle – Advent Midweek 1 December 3, 2025

- I. **The Word of God that engages us today** comes from our readings in Hosea, Revelation, and the Gospel of John.
- II. **Advent is about preparing for Christmas** and for the coming of the Lord.
 - a. This first week of Advent, I hope to give you some insight into how evergreen decorations help us prepare for the coming of Christ.
 - b. When we look around this time of year, there’s greenery everywhere... garland, wreaths, sprays, and of course, trees...
 - i. Especially in Oregon we take pride in all the conifer trees that grow here... pines, spruce, juniper, cedar, and fir trees are a big part of the natural landscape...
 - ii. Then, each year around this time, greenery starts making its way indoors... from holly and ivy to all the varieties of conifers...
 - iii. Many of us also like the music associated with this time of year, and some of the songs that highlight this greenery we see all around us are “O Tannenbaum” and “The Holly and the Ivy.”
 - c. Of course, the main player in all this greenery is the Christmas tree... which some people have attributed to paganism working its way into the Church.
 - i. Yet, you might not know that an LCMS pastor was behind the introduction of the Christmas tree in America... and even in the sanctuaries of churches.
 - ii. It was quite a scandal, but in 1851, Pastor Heinrich Schwan (the 3rd Vice President of the LCMS) set up a Christmas tree in Zion Lutheran Church in Cleveland, Ohio.
 - iii. With candles and a silver star topper that he brought from Germany, the tree was revolutionary... and became the talk of the town... including a group who called it idolatrous and a pagan symbol... along with a newspaper article calling it nonsensical and asinine.
 - iv. The members loved it because many were German immigrants who remembered Christmas trees from the old country... but Pastor Schwan needed to do some research and inform the public about why Christmas trees are a godly tradition – even pointing to Christ.
 - v. So, he wrote letters to the newspapers and to the people who objected, making the case for the Christmas tree.
 - vi. The next Christmas Eve, in 1852, Pastor Schwan put up another Christmas tree in his church... and many of his members did the same at home... and the practice grew until, within a decade, Christmas trees were in churches and homes all over America.
 - vii. If you go to Cleveland, a historical marker commemorates the event and start of putting up a Christmas tree in churches and homes... and

what was big scandal... turned into a symbol that points to the arrival of Jesus and the everlasting life He brings.

- d. So, we don't just put up Christmas decorations because culture dictates what we do... we see spiritual truths behind their meaning... and that would include what we do in this sanctuary today.

III. **The Advent practice of decorating with evergreens started in Europe.**

- a. Research has shown it started out in northern Europe, with Christmas trees showing up around AD 1000 with small firs cut down and brought inside.
 - i. By around Martin Luther's time, Christmas trees were common in German homes, and they were decorated with apples, nuts, pretzels, and gingerbread.
- b. It's interesting, but Christmas Eve, December 24 was observed as the feast day of Adam... and they performed a "Paradise Play" that showed the creation story in Genesis... and the fir tree represented the tree of life... as Christians saw the evergreen tree as a symbol of life.
- c. During this same timeframe, garland that was made with holly and ivy showed up in England through the seasons of Advent and Christmas... and they also started wrapping everything in their homes and churches in it to represent life in the dead of winter.

IV. **Evergreen decorations are a symbol of eternal life.**

- a. Green is a symbol of life because living plants are green... which we are blessed with in Oregon even through winter... but in much of the country, plants lose their green and look like they're dead... But not our evergreen plants like fir, pine, cedar, ivy, and the occasional holly tree that keep their green leaves throughout the winter.
 - i. These plants have become a symbol of life when the other plants around them look dead.
- b. Evergreens are not just a symbol of life, but a symbol of eternal life.
 - i. This is because they are ever... or always green.
 - ii. They overcome death, even in the dead of winter.
 - iii. So, the Christmas tree was a symbol for the tree of life all the way back to medieval times... and the tree of life offers eternal life to all who eat from it...
 - iv. With all this in mind, we continue the tradition of decorating our homes and churches with evergreens to remind us of Christ's arrival and the eternal life He offers.

V. **Evergreens are not only a symbol of eternal life**, but they also point us to Christ's first advent or arrival.

- a. Jesus was born 2000 years ago to bring back the eternal life that was lost when Adam and Eve sinned against God in the beginning.
- b. Before the Fall, they had access to everything... including the tree of life... but they gave all that up when temptation overtook the blessings they had.

- i. As a symbol of the brokenness and a sinful world, Genesis 3 says that thorns and thistles will remind us of the curse of death. (Genesis 3:17-19)
 - c. So, Jesus, the Second Adam, came to restore the life that was lost through Adam and Eve.
 - i. God the Son came as a human being to give His life so that we sinners might receive eternal life.
 - ii. As Jesus said, "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly." (John 10:10)
 - iii. It is rich symbolism that He brought life to us while wearing a crown of thorns... and though perfect in every way, willingly died the death we deserved.
 - iv. Holly is symbolic of Christ's death because its thorny leaves remind us of the crown of thorns He wore on the cross, while the red berries remind us of the drops of blood that fell from His head as He hung on the cross.
 - v. His death destroyed death, and His resurrection restored life... as Jesus proclaims, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in Me shall never die." (John 11:25-26)
 - d. The birth of Jesus means you and I have the gift of eternal life.
 - i. The power of God indwells us by the Holy Spirit... and God is like the evergreen tree as He says in Hosea 14:8: "I am like an evergreen cypress; from Me comes your fruit."
 - ii. God alone is our source of life and fruitfulness.
- VI. **Finally, evergreens not only point to eternal life** and the birth of Jesus, but also to His return... the second advent of Christ.
- a. Jesus' return will be the start of a new creation where sin and death no longer exist.
 - i. In the Bible, evergreens are associated with the new creation, which reverses the curse of sin and blesses us with eternal life.
 - b. So, evergreens are associated with the tree of life, which we will have access to when Jesus comes again.
 - i. The final chapter of the Bible describes that scene: "On either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed." (Rev. 22:2-3)
 - ii. The tree of life is everbearing, evergreen, bestowing the fruit of everlasting life....
 - iii. This life is ours because of Christ's first and second advents.
- VII. **Evergreen decorations are everywhere this time of year...**
- a. These are great symbols, and should remind us of everlasting life.

- b. They point to the heart of Advent and Christmas: Jesus came to give us eternal life, and He will return to bring it to completion.
- c. So, whenever you see evergreens, remember that He has come and will come again to give you life that never ends. Amen.¹

¹ Based on © 2025 Concordia Publishing House, *Every Heart Prepare*, Advent-Christmas series