

December 24, 2019 – Titus 2:11-14 & Luke 2:1-20

On December 24, 1851, Pastor Heinrich Schwan had an idea. Pastor Schwan had been recently installed at Zion Lutheran Church in Cleveland, OH. And like pretty much all the Lutheran churches in the midwest, it's membership was almost entirely recent German immigrants. And Pastor Schwan wanted to give them a little taste of home.

And so Christmas Eve morning, he went out into the forest, found a perfectly sized evergreen, chopped it down, and set it up right in the front of the church. Together, he and his wife decorated it with cookies, ribbons, nuts, and candles, and topped it with the silver star he had brought with him from his own boyhood home in Germany.

When the congregation arrived that evening, they were delighted to see a Tannenbaum – a Christmas tree – for maybe the first time since they arrived in America. You see the practice of putting up Christmas trees was common in Germany. But as far as historians can tell, this is the first recorded example of a Christmas tree being put up in a public place in the United States.

His congregation loved it. His community did not. Within days, the city of Cleveland was buzzing about the Lutherans who were a bunch of idolaters, worshipping a tree instead of Jesus. Pastor Schwan was heartbroken over the reaction. And embarrassed that so many of his members were forced to apologize for his actions.

But by the next Christmas he had decided that, no, he had done nothing wrong by putting up the tree. The only thing he had done wrong was fail to teach his members about the symbolism of Christmas trees. And so he set about to do just that.

He taught them about the symbolism of the candles, lights shining in the darkness, like Jesus, the light of the world. He taught them about the star that topped the tree, like the star that led the wise men to worship the Son of God made flesh. He taught them about the tree of the cross, upon which Jesus died. The greatest symbol of our faith. And he taught them about the bright green evergreen, alive in the midst of winter, like the living God who gives us eternal life.

When Christmas finally arrived, he boldly put another Christmas tree up. And was pleased to find that most of his members had put Christmas trees in their own homes too. And he soon learned that there were even a few non-Lutherans who were starting to put up Christmas trees in their houses.

In fact, within a few years, that number grew and grew and grew. Until the entire city of Cleveland was putting up Christmas trees. And then more cities. And more cities. Until it had become a custom that was sweeping the entire nation. All because a Lutheran pastor – who would later become a leader in the Missouri Synod, I might add – was willing to share this little piece of home with his congregation.

We all have traditions that are important to us. For many, it's Christmas trees just like Pastor Schwan's. For others, it may be something else. Family dinner at grandma's house. Christmas caroling around the piano. Reading from Luke chapter 2. In fact, I would venture to say that there are a great many of you here this evening who consider the Christmas Eve candlelight service part of your family's traditions. And I'm glad you have.

Whatever your traditions are, they're important to you. The days after Christmas are always spent talking to your friends about whatever it is you did for Christmas this year. Sharing all the traditions that have become important to you. Inviting others to emulate your own family's customs and activities. That's natural.

What I find interesting, however, is how incredibly comfortable we are telling others about our family traditions. And how uncomfortable we are telling others about the reason for those traditions. Telling others about the faith that lays the foundation for everything we do on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.

It's a stark contrast to that first Christmas Eve that we read about in Luke's Gospel. Here we have a group of shepherds out in the fields. Watching over their sheep. Suddenly, angels appear, announcing the birth of a Savior. Christ the Lord.

But they're not just told to take the angel's word for it. They're given instructions. Go into Bethlehem. Find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying a manger. See this miracle of God's love first hand.

So they go. "The Lord has made known to us something incredible. We should go see it for ourselves." They found Mary and Joseph. And they found the baby, lying in a manger. Just like they had been told.

And then they did something that came so easily to them and with so much difficult for us. *"They made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child."* In words, they went all over Bethlehem, telling people about the angels. About what the angels had said. About who this child really was.

And yeah, plenty of people didn't know what to make of it. They wondered at what the shepherds had told them. A fair number probably scoffed. But it didn't matter. The shepherds knew it was true. The shepherds knew they had to tell everyone. And only after they told everyone did they finally return to their fields. Glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen.

The first Christmas was not much of a silent night. All was not calm and bright. No, the first Christmas was a night to go tell it on the mountain. To go over the hills and everywhere. It was night to go tell it on the mountain that Jesus Christ is born.

And it should be for us too. Christmas trees and family dinners shouldn't be the only thing that we tell people about when we head back to work and school over next days and weeks. If they are, if that's all that we take away from this night, then we really have become exactly what those residents of Cleveland thought of the Lutherans in their community.

We really are just bowing down to a Christmas tree. Idolizing the traditions, rather than the savior they celebrate. Worshiping the symbols, rather than the event they symbolize.

I'm sorry to be a buzzkill, but Christmas is not and cannot simply be warm fuzzy feelings and good memories. God did not become flesh and dwell among us so that you can have an excuse to see your extended family members. Or to sit at home drinking hot cocoa and watching Christmas movies.

No, he came to seek and to save that which was lost. He came to forgive a people who so easily idolize the things of this world and forget about the God who made it all. In Jesus Christ, the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all people.

And he has given himself to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works. Zealous like those shepherds were zealous to tell all of Bethlehem about what they had seen and heard.

Zealous like Pastor Schwan was. Not just for a Christmas tree. But to teach his congregation about the wonderful Gospel message that it symbolized. The light of Christ in our hearts. The star that gathered all nations into God's kingdom. The sacrifice Christ made and the new life that he gives us.

Unto us a child is born for our salvation. And it is the zeal of the Lord of hosts that does this. It was God's zeal to save you that resulted in Jesus' birth. He has granted to us that same zeal. Christmas is about being zealous for your faith. Zealous for your God. Zealous for your savior, Jesus Christ.

So go home and celebrate Christmas with your family. Go home and embrace your wonderful traditions. Go home and enjoy that Tannenbaum – that Christmas tree – like the good German Lutherans many of you are.

But after it's all over, after the presents are opened and the dinner is eaten and the tree is taken down, and your friends ask you, "How was your Christmas?" Consider telling them that it was a good Christmas not because of what you did. But because of what was done for you. It was a good Christmas because 2000 years ago a Savior was born for you. And He is Christ the Lord. Amen.