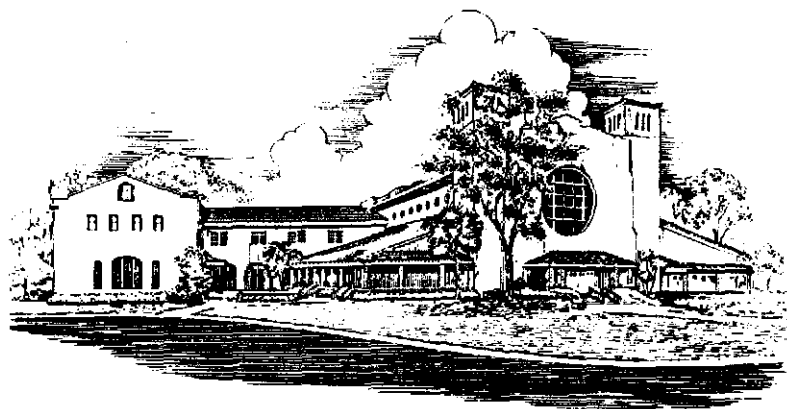


# First Church Pulpit

## **"HOW SHALL WE DECORATE THE TREE THIS YEAR?"**

**Text:** "And all the trees of the field shall clap their  
hands." — *(Isaiah 55:12)*



## **FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

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"How Shall We Decorate the Tree This Year?" It is so much fun to decorate a Christmas tree. Each family has its own style and customs and memories. Where I grew up in Western Pennsylvania, we used to plod up to Indiana, Pa., out to the famous Mueller Tree Farms, and cut down our tree. It only cost a dollar those days. When you pay fifty-seven dollars for a tree in South Florida, you appreciate that.

Now, it did not make much difference that it probably cost Five Dollars for lunch, and Three Dollars (then) for gasoline; and sometimes, Twenty Dollars to the doctor, after we caught a deathly cold from being out in the woods all day...but it was fun to go out there, and select the perfect tree from all the forest. One year my brother and I went (I don't know what possessed us to do it), but we cut the top off a big tree, you know, measured from top to the size we wanted. We lopped it off and left, that flat evergreen sitting there for the next fellow. Oh, I felt terrible about it years later, when I thought about it, spoiling a tree as large as these enormous ones in our Sanctuary. And sadly, when we got it home, my mother would not let us in the house with it. You might not know it, but when you cut off the top of a tall tree, the branches are proportionately farther apart, and it looks a little silly.

Before that, we had an Uncle Howard, my dad's twin brother, who used to go and buy three cheap trees in a bundle. He would take them to his house first, of course, and of course, my Aunt Marie chose the best one; and since my Aunt Mary lived a couple of doors away, she got the second one. By the time the remnant got to our house, it was a straggly bumpkin. Talk about in-law rivalries; it happened every year until we set off on our own.

At our house the tree was decorated by Santa Claus (Do you believe in Santa Claus?). We went to bed on Christmas Eve with nothing in the house unusual. Then, when we woke up at five, and tiptoed down the stairs to see, there was a tree! It came from nowhere! And every year, the cookies and the milk we left for Santa Claus were gone. It still happens in our house today; and no one knows who eats the cookies!

I have to confess to you that this sermon is a trifle unusual. In fact, a dear friend of mine after the first service said it is not a sermon at all. Well, that might please some of you more than others, so just stay tuned, and don't go away. For one thing, I had no idea, when I presented the topic several weeks ago to the office staff, where this sermon would lead me. Now, if you ever write or compose, or are an artist...you know that sometimes you just cannot control

the composition. It goes wherever it wants to go (As it were). This sermon did that. And, if you are wise, or maybe just getting on in years, you better follow where the sermon, or the painting, or the music leads.

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Far less did I know how it would turn out eleven years ago, when I wrote on the program from the Carnegie Museum's 1976 Christmas Festival of Trees: "How shall we decorate the tree this year?" It was subsequently deposited in my file called "Sermons to Preach Some Day". How little could I have known that it would crop up here today.... (I mean, some of my little sermons-to-be have been there for twenty-five years. I imagine they cry out every week, saying: "Come on, Reverend, pick me!" And when I pass them by for a little circuitous fellow like this one...they must be peeved.)

Each year at the Carnegie Museum, they featured marvelous displays of trees. Enormous things.... And every year in the spring (Perhaps it happened in your town too), they chose a different theme for the Festival. And as the social climate moved along, a different theme was chosen for what was in vogue that year. One year it was civil rights, one year environmental concerns. Another year the theme was women.... Behold a Madame Curie tree, the whole of its branches

devoted to all kinds of paraphernalia pertaining to her works: Bunsen burners, test tubes, and all the rest. The Harriet Tubman (The great black reformer) tree had signs "Wanted" all over it. The Rachel Carson tree was decorated with things celebrating the sea. Rachel's great desire was that we take care of the environment, or else the waters of the earth will give up on us someday.... And Pocahontas was there. Her tree had a full-size canoe underneath it. One of my then small children asked me where the water was. Pocahontas was sitting there, little Poca herself.... etc., etc.

Anyway, I noted on the little sheet the good possibility that "this will preach" someday....

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So, can you imagine (Turn the page) how excited I was, when I read recently that our Museum of Art, here in Fort Lauderdale, was going to sponsor the First Annual Festival of Trees. I hope you were able to see it. If not, you have exactly five hours to get there. It closes today at 5 P.M.

I trust it will be a great tradition in our city. I wish I could share with each of you what I felt and thought as I walked around the Museum the other day. I enjoyed it all. I liked the idea of the tree entitled "The Twelve Feasts of Christmas".

Some people were clever, who did these things. On this one, Santa Claus was a baker with a big loaf of bread on the top of the tree. Tiny little squirrels had miniature buckets of nuts. All kinds of goodies were all over the tree.

The Alamo tree in the center had wonderful German decorations. It celebrated the Nutcracker Suite, so familiar this time of the year. Then there was a dignified tree called the "Grape Days of Christmas", with little crystal clusters of white grapes and grape-colored candles on it. There was a "Beardines" tree with (I counted them) sixty-three white bears decorating it underneath and all around. There was a Sea Shell Fantasy tree; an Old-Fashioned Christmas tree with strings of home-made popcorn (Remember?) all around it. And "Yule Love This Tree"...Y-u-l-e love this tree! And to remind us of the Jewish heritage in South Florida (Some of us need to be reminded), there were five Chanukah Menorahs of exquisite taste and skill. And I walked away, proud of our city.

Then as I left, I dreamed of this day eighty years from now. (That is about how old the Cargenie Museum was when I was last there; we'll manage eighty years of devotion of the people of this city to our museum.) I tried to imagine what it will look like to my great-grandchildren; and how proud they might be to know that I cared enough about it to do something to help the museum along.

Goodness, too, I was proud, for all around were names of First Church people... on the committees, and the Chairman of the Board; those who donated trees and wreaths; those who volunteered as docents. I met four members of this congregation that very day.

Now, I am proud of Fort Lauderdale. Some of the people I run into (And I don't want to quarrel with you from the pulpit), lament that "it is not what it used to be". Well, neither am I, folks, and I hope my wife still loves me anyway. I mean, this city is growing up, right? That is what we are going through. Any kind of growth (Think of your own city, if you are a visitor here), when you are going through it, brings with it the pain of growing. You have got to give up something to get something else. I remember the little old lady who told me: "I'm in favor of progress. It's all these changes I can't stand."

Whether it is in your own life, or the life of your family as your children grow older; or whether it is in the city, or nation, or even the world...God did not make it so that we could live in the past. He is God of the Future. It is only in the last several years here in Fort Lauderdale that we have turned full force to culture and artistic things. I mean, it was always here, but now we have our museum, and are moving towards a Performing Arts

Center; we have a wonderful library, and all the other things I could talk about all morning. But, we must move along.

One man accused me the other night of being interested only in the church. Well, you know I am interested in this church. But I am interested in our whole city. We will all go up together, or we fall together. And if one church succeeds, and nothing else does, what good is that?

In this instance, I commend the committee and the people who planned the Festival of Trees. I look forward to another one next year, and the year after that, and after that, and after that....

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You know, outside of the Bible, from ancient times, trees have been sacred to people. Trees have brought so much to mankind, that in pre-Christian winter festivals all around the world (And especially in Rome), when a green tree, or branches were brought inside, it was thought that they would convey a special charm: the wonder and the mystery of the deep woods would bless the house, just being there.

The Christmas tree, as we know it, is a recent development in the Christian festivals, about two hundred years old. It came from Germany, as you no doubt know.

There is a wonderful little legendary story that Martin Luther was out walking one night in the woods. He looked up in an open field, and saw the stars on Christmas Eve. Then he went back home and put little lighted candles on the tree he carried inside, so that his children could remember the stars outside.... Up at the top he put the Star of Bethlehem, shining down to beckon them on.... It is a lovely story. Unfortunately, there is no historical evidence to support it.

Two hundred years after the first German Christmas trees, the custom spread to this country; first to Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, then to Philadelphia, to New York, to Washington, and now all around the world, including imported trees to South Florida.

There is another lovely little story, that George Washington on Christmas Eve had a tree with candles on it out in the open air, and his men sang carols. I am afraid it has about as much historical authenticity as "chopping down the cherry tree."

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The Bible knows all about trees. I want to tell you about three of them. The first tree is on the first page of the Bible, the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. It was decorated by a very special fruit, of which Adam and Eve were commended

not to eat. But they ate of it anyway, disobeying God, and He banished them from the Garden to the East, from which they will never return...and neither will you, nor I, until our days on earth are through. In Adam's sin, we all were driven out of Eden.

But think about it. First, it brings a potent message, which says: there are some things in God's world which you cannot, must not, should not do... when we do them, we are punished, driven out of the Garden to wander, and feeling the punishment within.

It applies to countless areas. I know some people here and elsewhere, who deal so trivially with their marriage vows, you would think they did not matter. But, it was not for naught God said: "Thou shall not commit adultery." Other people get into alcohol, drugs, or anything.... You do not fool God! And, what is worse, in the loneliness of the night, you cannot even fool yourself. The first tree is a reminder that some things are right, and some things are wrong, and it will stand forever in the middle of the Garden.

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Secondly, there is a hopeful tree.... I jump all the way to Isaiah 11 in one of the Advent Passages read each year. It says: "There shall come forth a shoot out of the stump of Jesse; and a branch shall grow out of his roots." That is to say when

it all caves in and crumbles to pieces, when things go wrong, when you have been a fool and you know it, and you do not know what to do next, it is not over!

In Christ, you do not have to live forever in the mistake, or the sin, or the debacle. If you allow yourself to go back into the Living Water, a little shoot will grow out of the stump, and your life can begin to grow again. Right? I mean, we do not have to live in the past. Christ never consigned you to "then". You pay a price when you disobey, or worse when someone else does, but with God, you can always begin again.

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The third tree I mention is on the last page of the Scripture. It is called the Tree of Life. When that Eternal Kingdom comes, it says, the Tree of Life will grow along each side of the river, on the beautiful banks of the River of Eternal Life. Then it says: "If anyone takes away from the Word of God, and does not do what the Word of God requires, God will take away the Tree of Life!" He who tries to follow, will bask in the shade of those eternal trees.

In Isaiah 55, the words I chose for our text, it says a lovely thing: "When the day of the Kingdom of Christ finally gets here, when the Messiah eventually returns, all the trees

of the field will clap their hands." The invitation he issues is: "Come, you who hunger and thirst, you without money, the poor, the lonely" and all the rest of us...there are no exclusions to the invitation which he gives. Then he says: "When it finally comes, you shall go out with joy, and be led forth in peace. The mountains and hills shall break forth before you into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands."

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That is enough of trees; it is past time to go. But, you might know I would bring it home to you. I cannot leave it in the Old Testament, or the New, or back in Germany, or at the Carnegie, or at our downtown museum (Are you listening?).

Suppose there is a tree outside your house or apartment, and someone asks you how you are going to decorate that tree this year. What could you put on it, so that everyone who passes by will know it belongs to you? What will you put on your tree? That is the question before we go.

First, I am talking about me (I want you to talk about you), I would put a sign of Peace on it. I know that can be controversial, e.g. some Americans think that President Reagan is going to be taken in by Mr. Gorbachev. "What's all this talk of peace?" the old Elder asked me.

I know there were times when the peace sign caused friction in our nation. But I tell you as your pastor and your friend: If we do not have peace, we will not have anything! If we were to allow war to break out again...I mean, it will be all over for everyone! So, I would put a sign on my tree saying you and I must believe in peace for the world. And what is more, peace for you and me on the inside, too.

Secondly, I would put pictures of my wife and children there, and my family. I do not know what you do if you do not have a family. Some of you need to tell me that. It must be very lonely. But if I cannot believe in my family, I have nothing left to believe in. As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord. And I would have pictures there, so that anybody walking by would know that this family believes in family.

But, we need also to find some way to say that we believe in the Family of Man. That for all of those people who are invited in Isaiah 55, by God Himself, in South Florida especially, He is breaking down the barriers. And you and I are often fighting it. He is blending in this unique melting pot of this particular part of the country, blending the tired and the poor and the huddled masses yearning to breathe free...and we are fighting it. He is trying to create something new, and we are trying to keep it strong white Anglo-Saxon Protestant.

I am not against strong Anglo-Saxon Protestants, but God is creating something new in the Family of Man, and we have to quit fighting it.

Next to last, I would put some angels on my tree. Remember the Angel Candle? That somehow God, in His mysterious ways, has someone looking out after you to take care of you, even if you cannot see him or her.

Then, at the top of the tree, like Martin Luther's story, I would place a star. Because that is where we are heading this Christmas, isn't it? I mean, when I was in Bethlehem two years ago, there I saw a sign which says: "Go slow, Bethlehem lies ahead." Because if you get too busy, and wrapped up, and turned upside down, and worn out in every other way...you might drive by Bethlehem! And, you will be on into the New Year, and will not even know it: what the star was beckoning you on to see you might miss forever.

So, slow down on your spiritual journey. Focus on the Baby. And in his new life, God can bring to you the same. Right? Right! For now and evermore. Amen.