

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David, and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will dwell securely. And this is the name by which it will be called: ‘The Lord is our righteousness.’ (Jeremiah 33:14-16 - ESV)

From Harlequin movies to Home Alone; from Whoville to Rockefeller Square, ‘tis the season when people are all but obsessed with Christmas trees. Many people are planning to put up their Christmas tree in the coming days if they haven’t already done so. As I’m sure you’ve noticed this morning, our tree is up here at the church, decorated by the members and their families who joined us for our Advent activity yesterday. If you are really into Christmas trees, you may want to consider trying to match the efforts of Dortmund, Germany. Every year they create a 150 ft tall tower of branches out of hundreds of spruce trees. It usually weights up to 40 tonnes and decorated with nearly 40,000 electric lights. Or maybe you would want to have the tree that lights the medieval town Gubbio in Italy. It is a 2,000 foot light display decorated on pine trees on the side of Mount Ingino. The top of the tree, which reaches up to the peak of Basilica of the Patron Sant’ Ubaldo, is crowned with a bright white shooting star. Although it is not really a tree, but a string of lights on many trees, it has been classed as the world’s tallest Christmas Tree by Guinness World Records.

There are many impressive and inspiring trees around the world. But the greatest Christmas tree of all is the one that Jeremiah speaks of in our text today. From a stump that was as good as dead, God promised: ***I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David, and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will dwell securely. And this is the name by which it will be called: ‘The Lord is our righteousness.*** In these Advent days, we look forward to the coming of the Saviour, our Lord Jesus Christ. He is that righteous branch; the One who comes as the fulfilment of all God’s promises to His people. He comes to be more than a decoration for our homes. He is the one who comes to bring life and salvation. He is the tree of life for all who believe. Now *that’s* a Christmas tree!

Most people can’t imagine Christmas without a tree. As we read through Scripture, it is impossible to miss the focus on trees. We begin with the very creation itself and the mention of two special trees in the garden of Eden: the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It would be interesting to spend time talking of how the tree of the knowledge of good and evil may have been where God met with Adam and Eve. Luther describes that tree as the place where they came to worship. Sadly, Adam and Eve disobeyed God, who had said: ***“You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.”*** (Genesis 2:16–17, ESV) Tempted by Satan, Eve ate of the tree, as did Adam, and that sin was passed on to all their descendants, including you and me.

We can think of Abraham, who we are told settled for a time by the oaks at Mamre. Here, under the shade of those great trees, God meets with Abraham to promise him, ***“I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son.”*** (Genesis 18:10, ESV) Or we look to the burning bush, from which God spoke to Moses, calling him to be the Lord’s messenger of deliverance for captive Israel. There are many such examples, from the great cedars of Lebanon to the small fig tree or even the sycamore tree into which Zacchaeus climbed so that he could see Jesus passing by one day. Yet no matter how great the tree; no matter how wonderfully decorated they may be, they all pale in comparison to the greatest tree of Christmas—the Righteous Branch of David.

What makes this tree so wonderful? Jeremiah was sent by God to bring a message of judgement to Judah. The people have forsaken the Lord. He will judge and discipline His people. The temple would be destroyed. The people would be carried into captivity. Jeremiah himself is in prison at this time, considered an enemy of the state for proclaiming such bad news. These were not good days. But in the midst of the darkness, there is a message of hope from God. A few verses before our text, God says: ***“Behold, I will bring to it health and healing, and I will heal them and reveal to them abundance of prosperity and security.”*** (Jeremiah 33:6, ESV) God also says: ***“I will cleanse them from all the guilt of their sin against me, and I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me. And this city shall be to me a name of joy, a praise and a glory before all the nations of the earth who shall hear of all the good that I do for them. They shall fear and tremble because of all the good and all the prosperity I provide for it.”*** (Jeremiah 33:8–9, ESV)

This would all be possible because God would raise up the Righteous Branch who ***shall execute justice and righteousness in***

the land. What a wonderful change comes when the Righteous Branch springs forth! As our text says: ***In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will dwell securely. And this is the name by which it will be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness.'***

This promise of God was not just for the residents of Judah in those days. It is the promise that God makes to all those who are His through faith in Christ, the branch from the stump of David. We also find ourselves living in some dark, uncertain times. As we prepare to meet the coming Saviour in these Advent days, we know that most people are preparing to celebrate something far different. We see that so many have forsaken the Lord. Let's be honest, there are times when we also live as if God were an afterthought, more of a decoration for our lives than the Lord of our lives. We may pray, as Jesus taught: ***"Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."*** (Matthew 6:10, ESV) Yet our hearts want to say, "don't come too soon and hopefully Your will, Lord, will be what we really want."

Our sinful hearts condemn us and lead us away from God. Thankfully, that is not what God wants. That is why He caused that Righteous Branch to spring forth. And that, dear people, loved by God, truly is a great tree for our Advent and Christmas celebration. I am drawn to the Revelation of John, who speaks of the tree of life again: ***"Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, 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."*** (Revelation 22:1-2 - ESV) God brings healing through the Tree of Life—and Jesus is that tree! During the season of Lent, the Proper Preface in our liturgy of Holy Communion reminds us that: ***"It is truly good, right, and salutary that we should at all times and in all places give thanks to You, holy Lord, almighty Father, everlasting God, who on the tree of the cross did give salvation unto mankind that, whence death arose, thence life might rise again; and that he who by a tree once overcame might likewise by a tree be overcome; through Jesus Christ, our Lord, through whom with angels and archangels and with all the company of heaven we laud and magnify Your glorious name, evermore praising You"***. (LSB, DS 1) In the garden of Eden, the devil overcame God's people, tempting them to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. But on another tree, the tree of the cross, the One who is the Tree of Life defeats the devil. He pays the price for our sin. He executes justice and righteousness for us. Through His death we are forgiven. But death is not the end. Again, this Righteous Branch springs forth. He brings us life and healing through His resurrection from the dead.

Now *that* is a great and glorious Tree! How blessed we are that Jesus is still branching out into human history. He graphs us into Himself through Baptism. He grows in us, and we in him, through God's Word and Sacraments. He comes to calm our fears, to love us and befriend us, to help us and forgive us. We even are blessed to be given the name that belongs to the Lord Himself. When God says that Judah will be saved, He is speaking of us as the people of God. He says we shall be called, ***'The Lord is our righteousness.'*** His name becomes our name. All that is His is shared with us, the people He has given life through His death and resurrection.

It may be hard to remember on a cold winter's morning, but think about sitting under the shade of a leafy, green tree on a hot summer day. Trees offer that shade. They may be places of shelter. In a barren land, trees become a sign of life. That is what Jesus is for us. He is our shade and comfort. He is a place of shelter. He is our life. Earlier in his prophecy, Jeremiah said: ***"Blessed is the man who trusts in the LORD, whose trust is the LORD. He is like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit."*** (Jeremiah 17:7-8, ESV) United with Christ, the wonderful, life-giving Branch, the very Tree of Life, we know the joy of a life that will one day burst forth in the glory of eternal life forever.

Most people are familiar with the Christmas song, "O Tannenbaum". There are various English versions of that song. One of them does state: *O Tannenbaum, O Tannenbaum, You bear a joyful message: That faith and hope shall ever bloom To bring us light in winter's gloom. O Tannenbaum, O Tannenbaum, You bear a joyful message.* One of my favourite versions is sung by famed tenor Mario Lanza and says: *"O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree, How sturdy God hath made thee! Thou bidd'st us all place faithfully Our trust in God, unchangingly! O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree, How sturdy God hath made thee!"* God has made a glorious Tree for us this Advent season. It is the tree we see in the Righteous Branch from David's line. Jesus Christ is the Tree of Life—and that, my friends, is truly a glorious Christmas Tree for us! Amen.