



Where did the tradition of the Christmas tree get started ?

That's a great question, because traditions - like the Christmas tree - are such a HUGE part of the Christmas season. Unless we know the origin of the tradition it loses its meaning and becomes something we keep doing "because we've always done it that way." (You've all heard the story of the Christmas Ham with the end chopped off. If you haven't heard it, ask me. It's a great illustration of traditions that are kept without knowing why.)

Anyway, the origins of the Christmas tree are disputed, and it's hard to separate legend from fact. That is to say, no one really knows for sure how/when we started using them. Even so, it is pretty well agreed that using an evergreen tree as part of a Christmas celebration began somewhere in Germany, sometime between the 8th and 16th centuries (how's that for pin-point accuracy?!). Martin Luther is sometimes credited with putting candles on a tree and bringing it in the house as part of a celebration. But we also know that Luther gets credited (and blamed) for lots of things he didn't do, so whether he is the "father of Christmas tree lights" is open to question.

However, it is safe to say that using an evergreen tree as part of a mid-winter celebration was not a new thing when Christians first started celebrating the birth of Christ. (And Christ's birth was not a holiday celebrated by Christians until the fourth century. The Resurrection of Jesus was - and is - the most important holiday for Christians.)

Pagan (nature-worship) mid-winter celebrations before the time of Christ used evergreen trees and wreaths as symbols of the certain hope that the days would become longer, winter would end and spring would bring all the other plants to life again. For example the Norse pagans and Celtic Druids revered evergreens as manifestations of deity because they did not "die" from year to year but stayed green and alive when other plants appeared dead and bare.

Christians eventually settled on celebrating the birth of Christ in December to provide an alternative to the Pagan mid-winter celebrations. They gave Christian meanings to some of the pagan traditions - like the use of evergreens. Instead of worshiping the tree, Christians began to use it as a way to help them remember to worship the God who gave us that tree.

Some of the aspects of the Christmas tree that remind us of Jesus:

The Evergreen:

Reminds us of the Everlasting life that belongs to everyone who repents of sin and trusts in Jesus.

The tree points

Reminding us not (as the pagans do) to worship the created to heaven thing but rather the Creator

The lights on the tree:

Remind us that Jesus came to be the "light shining in the darkness" - shining our way to God. (John 1)

The star at top:

Reminds us of the star the wise men followed that led them to the baby Jesus in Bethlehem. (Matthew 2)

Angel ornaments:

Remind us of the angels who told of Jesus' birth (Luke 2)

Shiny ornaments:

Reflect the lights of the tree, reminding us that we are to reflect the light of Jesus (Matthew 5)

I'd be interested to hear other Christmas tree traditions and decorations that help you remember that Christmas is about the birth of Jesus.

This year at Living Word we are using another tree - known as "The Jesse Tree" to help us celebrate the birth of Christ. Come on Sunday, December 17 at 4:00 p.m. to hear the Sunday School students tell what a Jesse Tree is and how it tells the story of Jesus. Make sure you stay for the Christmas Ham Dinner after the program.

Thanks for asking,
Pastor David

Send your questions to pastor@livingwordlutheran.net