

# Like Never Before: The Tree

Preached by

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December 13, 2020

**Hebrew Scripture Reading:** Isaiah 11.6-11a

6 The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. 7The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. 8The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. 9They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. 10On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious. 11On that day the Lord will extend his hand yet a second time to recover the remnant that is left of his people.

**Gospel Reading:** John 1:6-28

6There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. 8He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. 9The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. 10He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. 11He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. 12But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, 13who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. 14And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. 16From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. 17The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. 18No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

**Message:** *Like Never Before: The Tree*

Once upon a time, there was a family living through a pandemic, pretty much like any other family and, of course, unique in their own way. Let's listen as the story is told of another week in the life of Jess, Brian, Lexi and Shawn.

Brian was facing the tree, while everyone else was sprawled around the living room going through boxes of decorations when they weren't supervising him putting the lights on the tree. He was pretty sure they couldn't see his face, although Jess might be able to see the nervous tic starting in his left eye.

Everything had started out well enough this weekend. Yesterday morning at breakfast, Lexi had looked up and said, "Let's get a real Christmas tree this year." He and Jess had made a few comments about their lovely artificial tree that looked real and was the only tree they had ever had. Lexi's brown eyes filled with tears. "Don't you see? That is exactly why we need a real tree this year. We have virtual school and you have virtual work and we had virtual Thanksgiving dinner with Grammom and PopPop and we have virtual worship. We need something real."

Brian and Jess's eyes met, and they nodded to one another. After a few phone calls, they found a tree farm, where they could choose their own and cut it down. It had been a lovely afternoon, cool and crisp and they all agreed on a tree pretty quickly. They had a lot of fun. All they needed was snow and a sleigh to make a holiday TV movie.

They left the tree in a bucket of water overnight and this morning he had wrangled it into a tree stand. He had lots of guidance about getting it straight—move it this way or that, until as an experiment, he held the tree steady and just kept asking, “How about now?” until they all agreed. He hadn't actually moved it for the last five minutes, but he doubted anyone wanted to hear there was a little kink in the trunk of their real tree.

Then came the lights. He wouldn't be surprised if someone told him a marriage or two had foundered on stringing lights on a tree. He didn't think it was dropping needles, or needing to water a live tree or traveling that kept people from getting one. He thought the pre-lit feature of an artificial tree was the draw. Besides managing the coiled strings of lights, the truth was that real trees weren't perfectly symmetrical like artificial ones. With limbs of different thickness and growing randomly on the trunk, the easy regular lighting of an artificial tree wasn't possible—which didn't stop anyone from pointing out that the light garlands' length and height didn't match. After the fourth time someone told him two lights of the same color (blue this time) were too close together, he suddenly understood the appeal of all white lights—something that had eluded him before. He offered up a silent prayer of thanksgiving that strings of tinsel were no longer in the picture.

Eventually everyone was satisfied with the angle and the lighting and they had spent a wonderful few hours, unpacking ornaments, telling stories about who made them or where they came from. They always bought an ornament when on vacation and the decorations inspired memories and stories of those times. There was minor tweaking to accommodate branches too close together or too far apart to hold particular ornaments, but it was a lovely tree. And the smell was heavenly. It was dusk by the time they finished, so as always, they turned out all the lights and just sat enjoying the tree for a while.

Then Jess went and put a cold supper on the table and called them into the dining room. It was Brian's turn to light the candles and say the prayer. He hadn't really prepared much in advance, but realized that for the last two days, he had been doing a lot of thinking between what was real and what was artificial. After the prayer and candle lighting, he started talking about what he had been thinking.

Despite some of the frustrations of dealing with an imperfect real tree, ultimately, he liked it better than manufactured perfection. It turned out Lexi wasn't the only one with a longing for the real and touchable. True—the real needed coaxing and assistance to reveal its best self, but that was true of far more than Christmas trees. That applied to many things and people. He and Jess tried to bring out one another's true and best selves and it was the way they parented too. It wasn't about asking or hoping for or demanding perfection; it was about appreciating people in all their glory and wonder and limits. It was about learning to trust and build relationships; moving ahead together, celebrating gifts, accommodating weaknesses or foibles; growing and learning and loving.

Everyone listened carefully, because Brian didn't often speak of these kinds of thoughts, although he was always open to listening to others and had a great big heart.

Then Brian said, “Maybe that is why God sent Jesus, a flesh and blood Savior—because God was longing to be closer to people and people were longing to be closer to God. People needed someone flesh and blood, real and true, to touch, and listen to and eat with and to follow, so that they could grow into who God wanted them to be and who they wanted to be for God's sake—not perfect, but fully human.

And so it was, that for the rest of the evening and even for the whole next week, Jess, Brian, Lexi and Shawn shared what they loved and appreciated, and how they had learned from and been encouraged by all the real people in their lives, including one another and how they would tell that to others. They talked about who God might want each of them to be and how they might grow into that. It was a conversation that continued ever after, even beyond the season of Advent.

### **Prayer for Others and Ourselves**

O Promised One: We do wait in expectancy and hope to see your will unfold in our lives. We wait for babies to arrive, for invitations to come, for answers about jobs and the future. We wait for love to grow, for reconciliation to seem possible, for grief to fade. We wait for wedding days, for guests to come, for the phone to ring. We wait for purpose, for peace, for possibility. We wait for the end of a pandemic and restoration to more normal lives. We wait for your Son, for You. We hold our breaths waiting for the breath of Your Spirit.

Grant us your Spirit, God, that our waiting might indeed be urgent and hopeful. That we might be partners with you and with one another, in seeing, in discovering, in hearing and in bringing about the very things we wait for. For you have planted the seeds of those things in us. Help us to nurture possibilities within ourselves and one another that they might grow and have life.

In this holy season, as we are sensitive to preparing ourselves for your Son's coming, let us be tuned as well to all those around us who are also waiting. Waiting for You and waiting for us. Let us be generous with the giving of our presence and grace, that those who are lonely might find a welcome in our eyes, that those who are guilty or ashamed might find forgiveness in our hearts. By the power of your Spirit, may those who are hungry eat the food we prepare, those who are poor enjoy the gifts we share, those who are hopeless feel your Son's love as we offer it in the world, those who yearn for peace and safety see us work for those things for others.

Help us to make room in our own hearts and in the world for your Son to be born anew – he who taught us to pray together...

### **The Lord's Prayer**

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day, our daily bread.  
Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors  
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,  
for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.