

“The Holly of Hope on Christmas Day”

Sermon – by Robert Lee Hill

Community Christian Church, Kansas City, Missouri

Sunday, December 25, 2005

Texts: Matthew 1:18-25 and Luke 2: 1-20

On Christmas Day, we are still speaking of trees. During Advent’s approach to the Christmas crèche we’ve been talking about “*The Jesse Tree*,” “*The Forest of Peace*,” “*The Family Christmas Tree*,” and, last night on Christmas Eve, “*Three Trees of Love*.” Before we proceed through the twelve days of Christmas, we have to give a nod to the Holly, *Ilex aquifolium*.

The Holly tree’s very name connotes sacredness. Holly, holy. For as long as people have been paying attention to trees, the Holly has been associated with mystery and holy power, both within Christian tradition and outside of it.

In Scandinavian countries, the Holly has been believed to have the capacity to ward off evil. For instance, because of its crooked branches, the Holly has been associated with an ability to protect people from lightning strikes. Interestingly enough, the Holly tree does conduct lightning into the ground better than most trees, with the least injury to the tree.” (www.paghat.com).

In Celtic culture, the Holly was believed to be the sentinel of winter, and its powers were translated eventually into the mythology of the “Holly King.” Eventually, the “Holly King” found its way into the legends of King Arthur and the Green Knight who would do battle with Sir Gawain at a Yuletide feast, bearing a weapon of a “solitary branch of holly.” (www.paghat.com).

In Christian tradition there is an association between the Holly and protection. Holly trees were believed to have been at one time deciduous trees -- that is seasonally shedding their leaves – until Herod’s minions set out on the mission of slaying all the young born of Bethlehem, including baby Jesus. At Mary’s request, so the story goes, the Holly tree grew its leaves back so it could hide the Christ within its branches.

Let the Holly tree be a symbol for us this morning of the hope that is given to the world because of Jesus’ birth. Because Jesus was protected from Herod – with or without the assistance of the Holly tree – he would grow up and live out his mission of love, grace, mercy and strong compassion. And thus we can have hope that these gifts will be ours as well – to receive and to share with a world much in need.

Let us pause to consider the words of the carol *What Child Is This*, set to the tune of “*Greensleeves*.”

*What Child is this who, laid to rest
On Mary’s lap is sleeping?
Whom angels greet with anthems sweet,
While shepherds watch are keeping?*

*This, this is Christ the King,
Whom shepherds guard and angels sing;
Haste, haste, to bring Him laud,
The Babe, the Son of Mary.*

*So bring Him incense, gold and myrrh,
Come peasant, king to own Him;
The King of kings salvation brings,
Let loving hearts enthrone Him.*

*Raise, raise a song on high,
The virgin sings her lullaby.
Joy, joy for Christ is born,
The Babe, the Son of Mary.*

Another Christian legend has it that the Holly tree was present not only at Jesus' birth but also at the end of his human journey when he dies upon the cross. The berries of the Holly tree, so the legend has it, were once white, until they were touched by the blood of Jesus when a Holly wreath served as Jesus' crown. None of which is actually, factually verifiable, so far as science has ever been able to determine, But the Holly tree – once again as a symbol of hope – can represent the power of God to transform the world – if not white berries into red, then at least a death into a resurrection, aimlessness into purpose, despair into joy, loneliness into belonging isolation into community.

So, this morning, let the Holly tree remind us that there is hope for us, even when we know neither our own way nor the ways of God in the world. Even though we didn't know who he was, the Christ child would prove eventually that there is always cause for hope. And this is so, even when we can hardly understand why or what we are singing. Let us hear then, with new ears this Christmas morning, *"Sweet Little Jesus Boy."*

*Sweet little Jesus Boy,
they made you be born in a manger.
Sweet little Holy Child,
didn't know who You were.*

*Didn't know you come to save us, Lord;
to take our sins away.
Our eyes was blind, we couldn't see,
we didn't know who You were.*

*Long time ago, you were born.
Born in a manger low,
Sweet little Jesus Boy.*

*The world treats You mean, Lord;
treats me mean, too.
But that's how things is down here,
we didn't know t'was You.*

*You have showed us how,
we are trying.
Master, You have showed us how,
even when you were dying.*

*Just seems like we can't do right,
look how we treated You.
But please, sir, forgive us Lord,
we didn't know 'twas You.*

*Sweet little Jesus Boy,
born long time ago.
Sweet little Holy Child,
and we didn't know who You were.*

At the end of Christmas Day rituals experienced by the boy narrator in Dylan Thomas' *"A Child's Christmas in Wales,"* there is the following reflection:

"... and then I went to bed. Looking through my bedroom window, out onto the moonlight and the unending smoke-colored snow, I could see the lights in the windows of all the other houses on our hill and hear the music rising from them up the long, steadily falling night. I turned the light [gas] down, I got into bed. I said some words to the close and holy darkness, and then I slept."

<http://www.bfsmmedia.com/MAS/Dylan/Christmas.html>

Tonight, Christmas night, as you go to bed, say a prayer of wonder and awe in the presence of the *Sweet Little Jesus Boy*, the One about whom we sing *What Child Is This*, who did in fact come - in love, in generosity and grace and, of course, in loving hope for you and for all the world. Be sure to offer your thanks for his coming. And then after greeting the close and holy darkness with your thanks, sleep with exceeding hope and comforting peace. And offer a "Merry Christmas" to the world once more!