

Hanging of the Greens

READERS, please come to the service at 4:40 to talk through the service or email me with any questions. You can sit with your family and come forward at the specific moment. Before the service, the Sanctuary will be completely decorated save the last of everything, which will be placed during the service. There will be a table in the front with a white table cloth. Laid out on the table, will be the decorations and the Chrismons, which will be placed during the service. They will be laid out in order, from first to last, left to right. There will be a microphone set up for you. The service currently has roles for 21 Readers.

Except for Allison Lee, everyone else will move to the front pew during the last verse of the HYMN preceding your speaking part. For example, during the first hymn, Amy and Sandra will come forward. Amy can go directly to the microphone, while Sandra sits on the front pew. This will allow you to move quickly to the microphone.

4:55PM – Introit/Prelude

5:00PM – Welcome by the Pastor

Christmas is coming. Presents are coming. Family is coming. Turkey and stuffing, Santa and elves. Snowmen and magic hats. The Griswalds and Ralphie Parker are coming. Rudolph and Buddy the Elf. Ben Crosby and Mariah Carey are coming. Christmas is coming.

But Mashiach is also coming. The Messiah is Coming. The Savior is coming. The God of the Universe is coming. Prepare ye the way.

We as Americans and Christians have packed so much into the four weeks between Thanksgiving and December 25, that there seldom seems to be enough time or energy to attend to the Messiah that is coming. Honestly, I don't think it is because we have taken Christ out of Christmas, I think we've left Christ in Christmas, we've just buried him under layers of other things we're also trying to celebrate like snow and family and presents and decorations and family traditions. I don't know about you, but sometimes Christmas feels like trying to put 5lbs of fun into a 3lb bag, griping all the way. My Christmas schedule fills like a takeout container at Golden Corral, so full it won't close, and Jesus somewhere buried at the bottom.

Tonight our goal is not so much to decorate the Sanctuary, we could do that any ol' way. Nor is our goal to put Christ back into Christmas along side all of the other important or seemingly important aspects of Christmas celebrations. Our goal is to show you how to find Christ already present in Christmas. Already speaking and calling and beckoning all around us.

Christians have rarely tried to remove every cultural, non-Christian symbol from Christmas. From Christmas trees to candles to wreaths to the date of Christmas on December 25, each of these was initially used by pagan Celts, Druids, and Romans before Christians. But Christians did not ignore or obliterate the non-Christian, pagan, cultural symbols around them. Instead, they reimagined them, appropriated them, giving each of them a Christian meaning. Christians could then point to these symbols and tell their neighbors the truth - that the joy and peace and security you seek from the Winter Solstice or from the God Saturn or in toys from the Toys R Us cannot be found there. Real light and life and joy and salvation can only be found in the Child born in a manger in Bethlehem.

So our goal tonight is not to strip Christmas of all that might somehow be tainted by idolatry or paganism. Even these non-Christian objects express the deep longings of human hearts. So instead, our goal is to saturate Christmas with symbols and images and reminders of Jesus, so that everywhere we look, everything we do reminds us visually and spiritually of the Messiah that is coming. Our goal is to marinate Christmas in Jesus, so that every wreath, Christmas light, every candle, every tree, holly bush, every ornament, every stocking, every gift, and every meal smacks of God's goodness, so that whether we're riding through the Christmas light show down in Meadow or we're listening to Handel's Messiah in Duke Chapel, we cannot help but say, "Glory to God in the highest" "Oh, Come, O Come Emmanuel" "Joy to the World." We don't want to put Jesus back into Christmas, just to let him fall to the side or the bottom, but we want to learn to see Jesus in the ordinary and extraordinary parts of Christmas, so that for the next 4 weeks we will constantly remind ourselves that Jesus is the light of the world, Jesus is the unchanging one, Jesus is the baby born to die so that we might live.

Come and see that God is good and learn how all of these ordinary cultural things can remind us of Jesus.

Let us worship God. Let us Hang the Greens.

Opening Prayer (Allison Lee):

Our Father, we long for the simple beauty of Christmas – for all the old familiar melodies, words, and symbols that remind us of that great miracle when He who had made all things came one night as a babe, to lie in the crook of a woman's arm. But in that longing, let us even more yearn for your renewed presence among us even as we celebrate and expect the Coming of your Son.

Before such mystery we kneel, as we follow the shepherds and Wise Men to bring You the gift of our love – a love we confess has not always been as warm or sincere or real as it should have been. Now, as we enter into this Advent Season, we pray that love would find its Beloved, and from You receive the grace to make it pure again, warm and real.

Good Lord, by your mercy guide our outward actions in such ways that our inward being is formed in faith, hope, and love. May the decorations we offer engage our senses during the days of Advent and enliven our praise and worship, in the name of the child of Bethlehem, our risen and coming savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Hymn (*During this hymn, Amy Corbett and Sandra Bjorling should come forward. Amy can be at the microphone as the hymn ends, with Sandra waiting on the front pew.*)

Candles on the Table (Amy Corbett, read your part first into the microphone. Then after reading it, take the lighter and walk up to the Communion table where you will light the two big candles there, and return to the front pew. You can return to your seat during the next hymn.):

Candles have been used as religious worship for centuries. The ancient Tabernacle and Temple of God held lamps that burned continually in God's presence to remind the Israelites that God spoke to Moses in a burning bush and lead them through the desert with a pillar of fire. Isaiah 9 prophesies of a day when light will come not just to Moses on the mountain or the priests in the temple, but to all people who wander lost in darkness.

Isaiah 9 says, “9 [a]Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.”

So, whenever you see candles this Advent, remember that the long awaited day has come. Light was born in darkness, when Jesus was born in a manger.

Wreaths on the Doors: (Sandra Bjorling. *As Amy finishes lighting the candles, you can go grab your wreath and head towards the microphone. There will be a door wreath on the table. Pick it up and hold it as you read your part into the microphone. After reading it, you can walk down the center isle and into the vestibule, as if to hang it on the front doors, though you don’t need to actually do so during the service. The hymn will begin as you walk down the aisle. You can return to your seat during the hymn.)*

Almost all of us put evergreen wreaths on our doors at Christmas, and as a church we also hang wreaths on the doors as a sign of welcome. These wreaths originated as signs of unending life and of victory in pagan celebrations, but Christians eventually realized that Christ is the ultimate victor and the doorway to eternal, unending life.

Psalms 24 says, “Lift up your heads, O gates! and be lifted up, O ancient doors! that the Ruler of glory may come in. Who is the Ruler of glory? The Lord, strong and mighty, the Lord, mighty in battle!”

So this Christmas, As you pass through doors with wreaths, may you again remember that Jesus Christ won your salvation, and now invites you to pass through the narrow gate and live forever. May every wreathed door be an opportunity to recommit your life to Jesus.

Hymn *(During this Hymn, Amy and Sandra will return to their families, while RUDY BAKER and KITTY NAPPEN come forward. RUDY can be at the microphone as the hymn ends, and KITTY can wait on the front pew.*

Holly and Evergreen Garlands: (Rudy Baker, *you can be at the microphone as the preceding hymn finishes. There will be some evergreen for you to hold as you read your part. After you read it, you can take the evergreen and place it in the window sill. Then you can wait on the front pew, while Kitty talks about Poinsettias. Return to your seat during the next hymn.)*

The most striking and the most universal feature of Christmas is the use of evergreens in churches and homes. Still, many traditions involving greenery originated in Druid, Celt, Norse, and Roman civilizations, which celebrated the winter solstice around December 21. The color green represented eternal life, and so plants that remained green throughout the year played an important role in these celebrations. Because the use of greenery had pagan origins, early church leaders often objected to its use, but as these people groups converted to Christianity and learned to worship Yahweh, the Triune God, evergreens were used to teach God’s unchanging character.

Malachi 3:6 says, "I the LORD do not change." Hebrews 13:8 says, "Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever."

From now on when you see greenery, remember that you can trust God and God's promises. We can celebrate Christmas, because we know that Jesus is not going to change his mind about saving us and giving us eternal life.

Poinsettias (Kitty Nappen, Kitty you can wait on the front pew while Rudy does his thing. As he places the evergreen you can pick the poinsettia up off the table and be at the microphone. Read your part, then place the poinsettia, before returning to your seat during the hymn.)

Most of our Christmas traditions are European in origin and mutation, but the Christmas Poinsettia originated on this continent. Poinsettias are native to Mexico, and Catholic missionary priests in Mexico and Central America used their December, star-shaped blooms to illustrate the Flaming Star over Bethlehem, which announced the Bright and Morning Star of Revelation.

So when you see these foreign plants this Christmas remember the Star and the foreign Magi and remember we were foreigners to Israel when our ancestors converted to Christianity. Then remember Christians around the world and those countries that still have not heard about the baby born in Bethlehem.

HYMN (During this hymn, RUDY and KITTY will be seated, while JOSH WILLIFORD comes forward. Josh can take the microphone over to the Advent Wreath to read his part. After reading it, he can go back to his seat during the hymn.)

Advent Wreath: (Josh Williford)

Early on in the Church's life, people realized they couldn't show up to Christmas cold, but it took time to prepare our hearts and minds to welcome and celebrate Jesus' arrival. So they established a season of the church year called, "Advent," which spans the 4 Sundays before Christmas. The word, *Advent*, means Coming, and so we remind each other that Messiah is Coming. Rescue is Coming.

This is an Advent Wreath. There are 5 candles in the Advent Wreath – 3 purple candles remind us that Jesus is the Royal King, an arbitrary pink candle reminds us to be Joyful, and the large white candle represents Jesus' purity. The light comes and grows as we light a candle on successive Sundays leading up to Christmas Eve, when we finally light the central white Christ Candle. Advent is a time of expectation, and so the flame of each new candle reminds us, that something is happening, and something more is still to come.

Jesus said in John 8, "I am the Light of the World, Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." But else where, he declares, "This my verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light, because their deeds were evil."

May the Advent Wreath and its candles work like an appetizer that makes us salivate with expectation for God's awesome, better future, as the light grows until finally, "your kingdom comes on earth as it is in heaven."

Hymn (*During this hymn, JOSH will be seated, while CLAIRE RUTH, LINDA WINSLOW, KATIE DULMAINE, JAKE DULMAINE, INGRID WRIGHT, REGINA WRIGHT, and CRAIG HAMER come forward. As the hymn ends, Claire should be at the microphone.*)

The Christmas/Chrismon Tree: (Claire Ruth, *You can read your part from the microphone or take the microphone over to the tree, which will already be set up. After reading it you sit on the front pew until you can go to your seat during the next hymn.*)

Today, the Christmas tree is the center of our festivities. Glittering with lights and ornaments, it is a part of the beauty and meaning of Christmas. BUT, Ancient peoples including non-Jewish people in the Old Testament, decorated trees with gold and lights to worship false gods and celebrate prosperity or fertility. Jeremiah 10:2-5 says, “For the practices of the peoples are worthless; they cut a tree out of the forest, and a craftsman shapes it with his chisel. They adorn it with silver and gold; they fasten it with hammer and nails so it will not totter. Like a scarecrow in a cucumber field, their idols cannot speak; they must be carried because they cannot walk. Do not fear them; they can do no harm nor can they do any good.” Likewise, the Greeks and Romans decorated trees to worship Zeus and Saturn respectively. So the Christmas Tree more than any other symbol should remind us of the danger of idolatry. You and I are constantly prone to worship other gods like materialism, the American dream, or even our own children and families. So this year, whenever you look at a Christmas tree ask yourself, “What God do I worship?” Am I putting family or presents or decorations first in my Christmas? NO, I worship the God who died on a tree.

The Chrismons: (Linda Winslow) – (*Linda and the First 5 Chrismon Readers (Katie Dulmaine, Jake Dulmaine, Ingrid Wright, Regina Wright, and Craig Hamer) come forward together; then during the hymn, the next group of Chrismon Readers (Reese Braswell, Jamie Williford, Norma Blackmon, Edward Leonard, Sarah Leonard, Kayla Moore) come forward. The Readers will go one after another, not waiting for the ornaments to be hung before continuing. Just pick up your ornament, and hold it up over your head and read your part. Then walk to the tree and hang it. The next reader will begin reading as you hang your ornament. After hanging your Chrismon you can wait on the front pew until the next hymn, when you can go back to your seat.*)

On these Christmas Trees, we place all kinds of decorations, some with sentimental value and others with spiritual import. Tonight we will hang a series of decorations, commonly called Chrismons. Chrismons are not that old. They were invented in 1957 by a woman named Francis Spencer. While hand making decorations for her church’s Christmas tree, Mrs. Spencer based her designs on the ancient symbols of the Church to constantly remind us that Christmas is not about us. These ancient symbols remind us that we are part of the holy, Catholic church, which exists across time and space; and these ancient symbols keep Jesus front and center in his multi-faceted glory.

Even if you forget what the individual symbols mean, let them remind you that you are not alone in following Jesus, that there are 2000 years of older brothers and sisters to guide you on the way towards our Father in Heaven.

1. The Borromeo (Pronounced Borrow-Me-Ann) Rings (Katie Dulmaine)

This symbol is called the Borromean Rings. Since the 13th century, these three interlocking rings, have been used to explain the mystery of the Trinity. Circles have no beginning and no end and so represent Eternity. These three circles remind us that the One True God is and has always existed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. At Christmas we specifically celebrate that the Father sent the Son, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit. Jesus was a man born 2000 years ago, but he is also the Second person of the Trinity that has existed for eternity.

2. The Star of David (Jacob Dulmaine)

This is the star of David, an ancient symbol used by Christians and Jews. It reminds us that this poor Jewish boy, Jesus, who is announced by a star, is in fact, the long awaited Son of David, the Jewish Messiah. When we see the Star, we remember what Ephesians 2 tells us, “remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ.” The Star reminds us that we worship a Jewish Messiah as outsiders invited into God’s promises to Israel.

3. Icthus (pronounced ick-thoose) – The Fish – John 11:25-27 (Ingrid Wright)

Jesus said to Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?" "Yes, Lord," she told him, "I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world."

During the persecution of the early Christians, our ancestors adopted the coded symbol of the Fish. This symbol was selected because, the letters in the Greek word for fish, ICTHUS, make a perfect acronym for the phrase: Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior. This phrase, Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior is a short summary of what Christians believe and why they were killed. These early Christians used the symbol in the catacombs to guide believers to secret places for worship.

4. Chi-Rho (Regina Wright)

Jesus asked Peter at one point, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter responded, “You are the Christ, the Anointed One, the Son of the Living God.”

This symbol is a combination of the two Greek letters, Chi, which is the X shape, and Rho which is the P Shape. Chi and Rho are the first 2 letters in the word Christos or Christ. Christ is not Jesus’ name, but his title. He is the Anointed one – anointed as our Savior and Lord. This particular symbol was popularized by Emperor Constantine around 312AD, when he painted it on all of his soldiers’ armor and flags.

5. The Alpha and Omega (Craig Hamer)

In Revelation 22, Jesus says, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last, the Beginning and the End.” This A shape is a Greek Alpha and this Horse shoe shape is an Omega.

Alpha and omega are Greek equivalents of A and Z, and as such they symbolize Christ as the beginning and the end of all things. Jesus is the source and the goal of human history.

Hymn (*During this hymn, CLAIRE, LINDA, KATIE, JAKE, INGRID, REGINA, and CRAIG will go to their seats, while REESE BRASWELL, JAMIE WILLIFORD, NORMA BLACKMON, SARAH LEONARD, EDWARD LEONARD, AND KAYLA MOORE come forward. As the hymn ends, REESE should be at the microphone.*)

6. The Latin Cross (Reese Braswell)

The cross is an ancient execution method like the electric chair or the hangman's noose, and so is an odd symbol for Christmas trees. Crosses in Jesus' day came in many shapes, just like now, but this plain cross is called a Latin Cross, and reminds us simply, that the Baby born in a manger would soon die on a tree. When you see this cross or a Christmas tree, remember Galatians 3:13, "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree."

7. The Crown of Thorns (Jamie Williford)

This cross encircled by the crown of thorns summarizes much of Jesus' human life. Jesus was not born in a palace or even a stable nation; Jesus was born into a violent world, grew up as refugee, was mocked and scorned by the religious leaders, disowned by his family, and betrayed by his closest friends. May this cross with thorns remind us of the Suffering Servant prophesied in Isaiah 53. Surely Jesus "took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all."

8. The Butterfly (Norma Blackmon)

In the Apostles Creed, we declare that Jesus "suffered under Pontius Pilate, died and was buried. He descended into Hell, the third day he rose again and ascended to Heaven, where he sits on the right hand of God." The butterfly reminds us that Jesus did not stay dead, but was resurrected in an immortal, imperishable glorious body. He defeated death and the Devil, and so we too will be resurrected and transformed.

9. The Cross with a Crown (Sarah Leonard)

Philippians 2 says that Jesus humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

This cross with a royal crown, reminds us that because Jesus submitted to the cross and the crown of thorns, he was given the name above every name, and is worshiped forever as the King of King and Lord of Lords. He is king forever more.

10. The Anchor Cross (Edward Leonard)

The Anchor Cross is another ancient symbol, used extensively for the first 300 years of the church. It was a secret symbol used by persecuted Christians because the anchor shape effectively disguised the cross, while the shape served as a reminder to Christians that no matter what they are going through, Hebrews 6 tells us that Jesus is our forerunner in the inner sanctuary of heaven, and “an anchor for the soul, firm and secure” so that we will not be set adrift in this life.

11. The Cross on top of the World (Kayla Moore)

This symbol with a Cross on top of the World, reminds us of Jesus’ final command, “*Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.*” And so we look at this ornament and remember all the work left to be done.

12. The Cross with Cup and Bread

This symbol incorporates the Cross, Wine, and Bread, to remind us that Jesus is still Coming into the World through the preaching and the Sacraments of the Church. Every time we listen to the preaching of the Word, witness a Baptism, or eat the Lord’s Supper, Christmas happens again in a real way, as Jesus is made personally present to us.

Hymn (*During this hymn, ALL CHRISMON readers will return to their seats.*)

The Lighting of the Tree (

Small white lights are used on our tree. Jesus said at one point, “I am the Light of the World,” but at another, Jesus says, “You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.” While candles remind us that Jesus is the one true light, let each of these lights represent each person who makes up the Body of Christ at Oakland Presbyterian Church. Each bulb emits only a small light and is ineffective alone, but together they dazzle in the darkness and overwhelm the senses.

Hymn

Conclusion

Benediction