

Lessons from Trees

“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away” Mark 13:31.

With Thanksgiving behind us and Advent begun, the Christmas season is upon us. For many, this means it's time to put up Christmas decorations, and most importantly, the Christmas tree! In fact, that's what Emmanuel did, as you can see from the wonderful tree and decorations here in the sanctuary. As you take in the beauty of the decorations around us, I want you to close your eyes and picture your own Christmas tree. Maybe it's the one you just put up, perhaps you're envisioning the one you will put up soon, or maybe you're thinking of one from your past from your childhood, or a family friend's tree, or even one you saw in your community years ago.

Whatever Christmas tree you're picturing, I want you to ponder these questions: what lessons do you learn from that tree? As you think of what is on the tree that you're picturing, what do those decorations teach you or even remind you of? If a guest saw the tree you have in mind, what would they learn from it? Would they learn something about your family, about your personality, about your interests? (*You can go ahead and open your eyes.*) It's amazing the lessons that can be learned from a Christmas tree! There's often quite a story being told with every ornament on every branch.

It's not just the decorations on the Christmas Tree that teach either. The color and the leaves of the tree can often be a lesson by themselves. That's actually what that classic Christmas song, *O Tannenbaum*, shares. You might remember this song, maybe sung by that distinct voice of Nat King Cole. *O Tannenbaum, O Tannenbaum, wie treu sind deine Blättern!* (We often hear the English go something like this: O Christmas Tree, O Christmas Tree, how loving are your branches.) And depending on the version you know or look up, there are other verses which further emphasize the lessons from the tree. One version even talks about the tree teaching hope and durability, providing comfort and strength for anytime.¹

In this time of year, with Christmas trees and their lessons all around us, it's fitting to hear Jesus also use a tree to teach a lesson in our Gospel reading for this weekend. I don't know if you caught it earlier when the Gospel reading was read, but just in case you didn't, let me remind you. Jesus said, **“From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts out its leaves, you know that summer is near”** (*Mark 13:28*). While the fig tree is far different from today's typical Christmas tree, the fig tree played even greater significance in the Israelite culture.

Fig trees are native to that Mediterranean area where Israel is located and provide two different crops of figs throughout the year, an early crop and a late crop. Fruit production begins with the tree producing new leaf buds on its branches, typically in the months of March or April. The first crop produces on top of the previous year's yield, which results in some figs falling off early and the rest remaining on the tree until June. The second comes from the new shoots begun in March and April, which produce the late crop usually in August.²

Fig trees were an important part of Israelite society and as such, they were a great object lesson for Jesus during His earthly ministry. Here in our reading from Mark's Gospel, Jesus highlights the fig tree's production of new leaf buds, which indicated the coming of warmer weather, to be a lesson about the inevitable coming destruction of the temple and His eventual second coming.

Jesus' object lesson served as an answer to the disciples' question from earlier in Mark 13. Prior to our reading, Jesus had shared with the disciples that the beautiful stones of the temple, which the disciples were marveling at, would eventually be thrown down and overturned. Hearing this shocking news, the disciples asked Jesus when these things would take place. After going through numerous signs, Jesus wraps

¹ [“O Tannenbaum” – Lyrics | The German Way & More \(german-way.com\)](https://www.german-way.com/)

² Myers, A. C. (1987). In *The Eerdmans Bible dictionary* (pp. 381–382). Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

up His teaching with the lesson from the fig tree, urging the disciples to realize that just as they were sure and certain about the coming of warmer weather when the fig trees sprouted new buds, so also they could be sure and certain about the coming destruction of the temple and the eventual destruction of the world when the signs Jesus had mentioned began to happen.

Shortly thereafter, with Jesus' death, resurrection and ascension, the disciples and the whole world were ushered into the end times. The events of Pentecost where the disciples were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to proclaim the gospel to all nations started the beginning of the end, and the certainty of Jesus' prophecy in Mark 13 began to be fulfilled. Some 40 years later, just as Jesus had told them, within the disciples' own generation, the temple was destroyed by the Romans. With the temple destroyed, the disciples' anticipation turned to Christ's return.

Still today, we carry forward those disciples' anticipation of Christ's second coming. Like those disciples, our anticipation is guarded and guided by the same thing that Jesus had told them, **“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away”** (*Mark 13:31*). The lesson from the fig tree remains. We can be certain that the end will come. The change and decay that we see around us, the withering of the grass, the fading of the flowers, all remind us that heaven and earth are passing away. The effects of the Fall and our own sinfulness don't allow us to forget this reality, Christ is returning soon, and this coming is for the final judgement of the whole world, both the living and the dead.

Yet as we anticipate this unavoidable truth, we, like Christ's disciples before us, cling even more so to the second half of what He promised. **“Heaven and earth will pass away, BUT my words will not pass away”** (*Mark 13:31*). It's Christ's eternal words that point us to another tree, the cross. And from that tree we learn an even greater lesson—that we can be sure and certain of our forgiveness of our sins, our salvation from this vale of tears, and our life eternal with Christ in heaven someday.

Right now, Christ's eternal words through the Apostle Paul, first to the Corinthian Christians and now to us this day, clearly make known to us the lesson of the cross, the lesson of Christ's death and resurrection. Listen again to the lesson of the cross that Paul shares with you: **“I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge—even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you—so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of the Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord”** (*1 Corinthians 1:4-9*).

Even as Jesus prophesied the coming of the end of this age with such great certainty, with even greater certainty, through His servant Paul, He proclaims your future at the end of this age. You are His and He will sustain you guiltless at the end by His grace and mercy. Worry not, for God is faithful and He has brought you into this fellowship here at Emmanuel so that you might be sustained until He returns or calls you home.

And so, with great anticipation for our reunion with Christ at His second coming, I invite you to join with me as I pray for our Advent journey this year and until He returns. We pray: Heavenly Father, we hear Your call in the Gospel of Your Son, Jesus Christ. Keep us to the end. (*TLSB, pg 1947*) For “Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day; Earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away; Change and decay in all around we see; O Thou who changest not, abide with us” (*LSB 878:4*). So daily we ask that you would “Hold your cross before our closing eyes; Shine through the gloom, and point us to the skies. Heav'n's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee; In life, in death, O Lord, abide with us” (*878:6*). Amen.

In Christ,

Pastor Sheaffer